

Women's Mission to Poland and Israel Making the Connections: Holocaust Memories and the Land of Israel

By Resa Goldberg

There is a street in the Polish city of Krakow where you can see three synagogues; four more are within walking distance. Only one, Nozyck, holds services on Shabbat.

Krakow recently celebrated its 18th annual Jewish Culture Festival, which attracts thousands of people who come to enjoy the art exhibitions, cooking demonstrations, lectures and Klezmer music concerts.

"They pack in every day, morning until night, for a whole week with as much as you can think of to educate the community on the religion, culture, past, present, and future of the Jewish people, as well as on what happened specifically in Krakow," says Sarah Kaplan, Community Relations and Israel Affairs Coordinator for the Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte. "Thousands were at their main concert when I was there in 2005 and 2006... so I can only imagine the total sum of people that (the festival) affects - it has to be huge."

The organizers of this celebration of everything Jewish are not Jews.

The Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow houses a stunning photography exhibit featuring gravesites of Jews who were murdered outside the death camps. The Jewish community in Poland at its height was 3,474,000—the largest percentage in the world; today there



The American and Israeli participants.

are only around 1,000 Jews living in the entire country.

Poland is indeed experiencing a resurgence of interest in Judaism due to Poles rediscovering their Jewish roots, Catholics who have converted to Judaism, and members of the population who simply want to bring back Jewish culture to a land that holds so much sorrow.

It is the provocative dichotomy between the horror of what happened in the region's death camps and the anticipation that Judaism will survive—here of all places—that brought 13 Charlotte women and 12 women from the Israeli city of Hadera together on a first-of-its-kind mission to Poland in July. It was an ambitious experiment born out of Partnership 2000 (P2K), a "living bridge" relationship between Israelis and Jews in the Diaspora—in this case, our two communities - Hadera and Charlotte.

The American participants were: Tess Berger, Adriana Epstein, Resa Goldberg, Nadine Gordon, Amy Gould, Julia Greenfield, Renee Hammel, Alison Lerner, Penny Lipsitz, Lisa Strause, Julie Weiser, Liz Winer and Sue Worrel.

The journey began on July 9 when we left Charlotte for Atlanta. From there we flew to Tel Aviv, where we enjoyed a fabulous meal while watching the sunset over the Mediterranean. A few short hours later, we were back at Ben Gurion Airport, where we met the Israeli group. After hugs and kisses all around, it seemed as if we were already friends.

"After the first few minutes, I hardly remembered that they were Israeli and we were American," says Penny Lipsitz. "It's as if we were sisters, members of the same Jewish family."

Before the sun rose the next morning, we departed for Warsaw, nervous and excited about what awaited us in Poland. While all of us had all heard Holocaust survivors speak prior to the trip and listened to lectures by author Deborah Lipstadt and a righteous gentile—both in Poland—but nothing could have prepared us for our arrival at

Majdanek, a concentration turned death camp located near Lublin. Beyond the massive stone monument were rows of barracks—some original—separated by double barbed-wire fences. We thought entering the dismal buildings would bring relief from the blistering heat, but the air inside was thick with dust and humidity and despair. We wanted to complain that we were hot and hungry, but dared not interrupt our scintillating tour guide Shoshanna Klieman, who helped us understand some of the pain that the prisoners there must have felt using historical facts and passages written by survivors.

"The most horrible place was saved for last, and I had no idea it was coming," remembers Alison Lerner. "I didn't expect to see an



Lisa Strause and Resa Goldberg at the Kotel.

actual crematorium — I thought the Nazis destroyed all of them. But not here — apparently there was not time. So we walked through the gas chamber, saw the room where dead bodies were piled on top of each other waiting to be put into the ovens, and we walked into the crematorium. I can still feel how I felt then, and tears are coming back while writing this. The idea that human beings could do this to other human beings is so beyond my comprehension, and knowing that it happened, standing in the place where it happened, was beyond overwhelming. Six million lives were taken, mostly Jewish lives,



The shul in Krakow.

— and as Shoshanna kept reminding us — each of them was an individual with a life and a story and potential."

The most unbelievable sight at Majdanek is the mausoleum, an imposing structure surrounded by

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