

The Butterflies That Flew to Poland

Two summers ago, Wilma Asrael, one of the originators of the Levine JCC's Butterfly Project, hurriedly organized a special butterfly painting session that was attended by Holocaust survivors, liberators, and family members.

Cheryl Price, the founder of the Butterfly Project in San Diego, was returning to Krakow, where she had started a Butterfly Project. She was willing to take our butterflies with her provided she could get them before her imminent departure.

Rushing against time, the butterflies were glazed and fired, then carefully and lovingly packed and shipped off to San Diego. Within days the 23 Charlottean butterflies, all signed on the back by those who painted them, were flying over the ocean on their way to Poland.

Krakow's Jewish History

Krakow is the second largest city in Poland and Jewish pres-



The butterfly display on the Krakow JCC.

ence there dates back to the 15th century and up to the time the community was systematically destroyed during World War II.

In October of 1939, the Nazis registered 88,482 Jews in Krakow, a quarter of the city's population. By 1940, approximately 52,000 were deported to hard labor camps in the East. The rest of the Jewish population, about 16,000, was forcibly resettled into what would become known as the "Krakow Ghetto." Unbeknownst to the ghetto inmates at the time, the Plazlow Labor Camp was under construction nearby, and only some 40 miles away loomed in waiting the Auschwitz Death Camp.

As in all the ghettos established by the Nazis, the Krakow Ghetto was overcrowded, there was very little food, and no one was safe from deportation. Over the two years of its existence, several thousand inmates were either killed or died from hunger. Then, in three waves spanning from late October 1942 to mid-March 1943, the ghetto was liquidated. The last wave of brutality and death perpetrated on March 13, 1943, is well described and painfully depicted in Thomas Kenneally's renowned book and Steven Spielberg's famous film "Schindler's List." The city of Krakow, which had been a cultural Jewish center for centuries, became, as intended by the Nazis, "Juden Frei."

Krakow Today
Fast forward seventy years later



to the present. Very little has remained of the Krakow Ghetto, only fragments of its walls. But right across the river is Kazimierz; the beautiful, pre-war, hundreds-of-years-old Jewish district is now a major tourist attraction for the numerous visitors to the city. It is there, on the site of a garden, to the rear of the Temple Synagogue that a recently built structure, the Jewish Community Centre of Krakow, proudly stands.

In 2002, the Prince of Wales visited Krakow and the district of Kazimierz made a strong impression on him. He met with representatives of the Jewish religious community and learned that that the community lacked a place where its members could meet outside of the synagogue. The Prince promised to help and together with World Jewish Relief and the American Jewish Joint Distribution, secured funding for this purpose. It took years and a lot of effort, but on April 29, 2008, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall came to Krakow to formally open its Jewish Community Centre.

Besides it being a place of cultural events and a place where the local Jewish community meets, it is also a place for tourists. The Krakow JCC is listed in every website that deals with travel to Krakow and featured among places of interest to visit in the city. The building contains offices, conference halls, and a restaurant. It has also adopted, thanks to Cheryl, an ongoing Butterfly Workshop.


This is the place our travelling butterflies now call home. Our 23 butterflies have joined up with the ones painted by the survivors of Krakow and their families. Together, perched on one of the outer walls of the JCC that faces the street, they serve as a memorial to the 1.5 million children who perished during the Holocaust, many of them murdered right across the river, behind the broken pieces of the ghetto walls. The wall of butterflies also serves as a reminder of the anthem of the Vilna Ghetto: "The hour we have been yearning for is near. Our marching steps will thunder: We are here!" That day has come. Krakow is no longer "Jew Free." It is now alive with Jews that are free. We all are, and yes, we are here! ☆

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- Heinrich Heine, Ludwig Borne