

scenes from a KRAKOW CAFE

KAZIMIERZ, THE CITY'S JEWISH DISTRICT, WAS ONCE A PLACE OF TRAGEDY. NOW ITS HIP CAFE CULTURE TELLS THE STORY OF POST-COMMUNIST POLAND'S JEWISH REVIVAL

STORY BY RUTH ELLEN GRUBER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOLIMAN LAWRENCE

It's a sunny morning in early July, and I'm having breakfast at an outdoor cafe table in Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter of Krakow. I have been sitting at cafes in and around Szeroka Street, the main square of Kazimierz, for nearly 20 years, watching the paradoxical Jewish components of post-communist Poland unfold, and Kazimierz itself evolve from a deserted district of decrepit buildings—some with grooves on their doorposts from missing mezuzahs—into one of Europe's premier Jewish tourist attractions, a fashionable boom town of Jewish-style cafes, trendy pubs, kitschy souvenirs and nostalgic shtetl chic.

As Poland's historic royal capital, Krakow is one of central Europe's most beautiful cities and was one of the few major Polish metropolises to escape wholesale destruction in World War II. Once Kazimierz was a center of Jewish life and learning, but after the Holocaust only its architectural skeleton remained: Krakow's 64,000 Jews (among three million of pre-war Poland's 3.5 million Jews) perished, but seven synagogues

and a score of former prayer houses, stores, homes and cemeteries survived. After the war, under the communists, Kazimierz slid into ruin, and only in the early 1990s did the neighborhood begin to take on new life. Even before Steven Spielberg came here to shoot his 1993 film *Schindler's List*, set in the wartime Krakow Ghetto and the city's concentration camp, Plaszow, Kazimierz was beginning to rediscover its Jewish soul.

Although Krakow is now home to just a few hundred Jews at most (Poland itself has maybe 5,000 to 15,000 out of a population of 30 million), the streets beyond my cafe are crowded with people here for the annual nine-day extravaganza known as the Festival of Jewish Culture. There are Jews from within Poland and from outside: Rabbis, tourists, earnest seekers of family history, writers, filmmakers, bureaucrats, philanthropists, academics, musicians and artists wander the square and surrounding cobbled streets. The vast majority of visitors, however, are non-Jewish Poles who have come to celebrate both

(Top) The Ariel is one of several Jewish-themed restaurants in Kazimierz. (Middle) Kazimierz is one of the hippest parts of Krakow. (Bottom) Szeroka square was once the center of the Jewish community in Kazimierz. Today it is the heart of the Jewish revival.



the Polish Jewish life that once was and the contemporary Jewish culture that is still very much alive around the world. Some of them have helped bring about the renaissance of Kazimierz and a revival of public interest in Jewish culture throughout the country. Newcomers and regulars, Jews and non-Jews, come together at the cafes that line Szeroka and other streets and squares, turning Kazimierz into a moveable feast of drink, food and conversation that migrates from cafe table to cafe table.

I am waiting for Stanislaw and Monika Krajewski, among my oldest friends in Poland, who live in Warsaw and whom I met on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1980. Back then, I was a young American reporter, in Warsaw to cover the birth of *Solidarnosc*—Solidarity, the anti-communist labor movement that spawned a peaceful revolution and was the harbinger of the collapse of communism. I am not a religious Jew, and I rarely go to services. But in Warsaw, on that *erev* Yom Kippur, I looked for a shul. The only one to be found of what once were hundreds, was the Nozyk synagogue, built in 1902 and used by the Nazis as a stable.

In 1980, the synagogue stood dilapidated and empty. My search took me to a shabby room nearby where paint was peeling from the walls but Jews were gathered for prayers. There was no rabbi: there was not one in Poland at the time. Perhaps three dozen people, almost all men, almost all elderly, stood



Critics love to hate Szeroka for its COMMERCIAL EXPLOITATION OF JEWISH HERITAGE

swaying over well-worn prayerbooks. Among them was a sprinkling of people my own age, and a couple of toddlers running about and making noise. Some of the elderly congregants shushed them—loudly—and I remember thinking, “How can you shut them up? You should encourage them; be happy that there are children here among you.”

After the prayers, a young married couple came up to me, eager to know who I was and why I was there. “It’s simple,” I told them, “I’m an American reporter covering Solidarity; I’m Jewish; it’s Yom Kippur, so I came to synagogue. It’s normal.” But “simple” and “normal” had different meanings in their lexicon. They came closer. “Oh, you’re a real Jew!” they exclaimed. This put me on the spot. A “real Jew”? After all, I don’t speak Hebrew, I don’t go to synagogue, I don’t keep kosher... “No,” they insisted. “You’re a real Jew; you’ve known all your life that you are Jewish. We are just learning. Come back home with us and tell us what to do.”

That couple was Staszek, as Stanislaw is known, and Monika. They were among the organizers of the “Jewish Flying University,” a semi-clandestine study group of Jews and non-Jews in communist Warsaw who met informally to teach themselves what they could about Judaism. This meant the rituals, customs, traditions and history but also the memories and inflections that are often innate in even the most secular of Jews who grew up in freedom.

Monika, an artist and teacher, and Staszek, a writer and professor, wend their way around tables through the cafe garden of my hotel, the Klezmer Hois, a rambling, peak-roofed building that used to house a mikvah. We greet each other with hugs. Monika, as usual, wears a flowing skirt and distinctive earrings. A deeply religious man, Staszek is active in interfaith relations and is the Poland consultant for the American Jewish Committee. His

books range from commentaries on the Torah to scholarly works on mathematics and logic, his academic field, to essays on Jewish life in contemporary Poland, where every step toward the future can feel weighted down by the memory of the past.

The Krajewskis and I catch up on news, and I ask about their sons. Both children celebrated their bar mitzvahs in the Nozyk synagogue, the synagogue that was too dilapidated to be used when we first met but is now fully restored and functioning. The bar mitzvah of their younger son, in 2004, was particularly moving. Daniel, who has Down syndrome, carried the Torah, but instead of giving a speech, he showed pictures he had painted: Jacob’s blessing to Joseph’s sons; the burning bush; the parting of the sea; the golden calf; the breaking of the tablets. The last picture showed his entire family at the Sabbath table, a scene he has known all his life.

Other friends come by and we chat. Then Monika and Staszek are off. Both of them are giving talks or teaching workshops in the festival this year.

In a way, the struggle for the soul of Kazimierz can be seen in the differences among the cafes on Szeroka Street. Venues drawing on Krakow’s Jewish history were the first to open on the square. But on Szeroka today things are different. There is an Indian restaurant and an Italian one, as well as chic new bars blaring hip hop. Still, critics love to hate Szeroka for its commercial exploitation of Jewish heritage as a saleable commodity and for what some call the “Disneylandization” of Jewish culture and tradition through an emphasis on stereotype and artifice.

The Klezmer Hois, where I often stay, is my favorite Jewish-style venue. Located at one end of Szeroka, it has the bygone coziness of an old world family parlor, with doilies and tablecloths

(Top) A man sells books on Jewish history, figurines and paintings of Jews in the vestibule of the Ariel. (Middle) Diners listen to klezmer music at the Ariel. (Bottom) Antiques are often sold at New Square—or “Jewish Square” as locals call it, because it was a Jewish meat market before World War II.



covering mismatched tables, chairs and sofas. It was opened by my friends Wojtek and Malgosia Ornat. Though both have Jewish roots, neither was raised Jewish or with any awareness of Jewish family connections: Malgosia, a petite woman with wide eyes and short-cropped blonde hair, was 19 when she learned that her maternal grandmother was Jewish, a story that is not unusual in Poland.

Now in their 40s, the Ornats opened the first Jewish-style cafe in Kazimierz, the Ariel, in 1992. Then the only cafe on Szeroka Street, the Ariel was a lonely outpost amid a grimy wasteland of vacant lots and empty buildings. I vividly remember how Wojtek and I, sitting at an umbrella-shaded wicker table, fantasized that some day people would come. And they have. The Ariel touched a nerve that somehow connected commerce with commemoration and spearheaded the creation of a Jewish-style cafe culture which by now has spread far beyond Krakow. As the first to evoke (and capitalize on) a literary image of a lost Jewish world in their cafe decor, the Ornats' visual and atmospheric take on what is “Jewish” has been important in shaping the experience and expectations of locals and tourists, Jews and non-Jews. Like a sepia-tinted memory, “Jewish” is now a brand that symbolizes a time and



“Nobody alive today has a memory of Kazimierz WHEN IT WAS BETTER THAN IT IS NOW”

place that is bygone but fondly remembered. This idea plays on nostalgia but also on the imagination: It represents what some people wish the Jewish world was really once like.

Today, half a dozen venues on Szeroka Street present a Jewish theme or make reference to Kazimierz's Jewish heritage, in their name or signs, which are sometimes written in Hebrew-style letters, or in their menus, which feature foods like gefilte fish. There's the Ester hotel and the Noah's Ark restaurant. The Crocodile Street Cafe is named for a short story by the writer Bruno Schulz, who was killed in the Holocaust. The Rubinstein hotel reflects the fact that the cosmetics queen, Helena Rubinstein, was born here. The exterior of the Once Upon a Time in Kazimierz restaurant is mocked up to look like a row of pre-war shops, with weathered-looking signs fronting the street announcing Benjamin Holcer's carpentry shop and Chajim Cohen's general store.

One reason I like Klezmer Hois is that it is low key. There is klezmer music but no kitschy curios for sale or on display, no garish commercial exploitation of a neighborhood whose Jewish population was murdered. Instead, the Ornats use the profits from the Klezmer Hois to run a Jewish publishing house, Austeria, which issues books by Polish and foreign authors. They also run a Jewish bookstore on the ground floor of one of the old Kazimierz synagogues, now used for Jewish art exhibits.

Klezmer Hois is a sharp contrast to the Ariel, which still operates on Szeroka—much expanded and under different management. With dramatic signage depicting big plaster lions flanking a giant menorah, the Ariel is the most conspicuous landmark on the square, aside from the gothic Old Synagogue, which is now a Jewish museum. Catering largely to tour groups, it sells an off-the-shelf, cookie-cutter “Jewish” experience the way a sushi bar sells Japan or a folk-style

restaurant uses hokey traditional music to sell ethnicity. Dozens of paintings of rabbis cover the walls: bearded and sad-eyed, with yarmulkes and sidecurls, they read, lay tefillin, pray and count money. There are also refrigerator magnets: Stars of David, menorahs and disembodied Jewish heads, some of them with exaggerated features right out of Nazi caricature. I once asked an Ariel waiter why these were on sale. He shrugged. “They're Jewish,” he replied.

For many people, tourists and locals alike, Kazimierz became a major destination with the Festival of Jewish Culture, which was founded in 1988, one year before the ouster of communist rule. By 1992 the Festival had already grown so much that some called it a “Jewish Woodstock.” Performers over the years have included Theodore Bikel, Shlomo Carlebach, Chava Alberstein and the Klezmatics. One local entertainer who takes part, and whom I often see at the Klezmer Hois, is the Polish Jewish pianist Leopold Kozłowski, now nearing 90, who was the subject of the movie *The Last Klezmer*. Nowadays, the Festival features more than 200 concerts, lectures, art exhibits, workshops, guided tours, performances, film-showings and street happenings. Most of the events are sold out, and the final concert, called “Shalom on Szeroka,” draws upwards of 15,000 people, most of them Catholic Poles.

The festival's founders were two non-Jewish intellectuals, Janusz Makuch and Krzysztof Gierat. Like many other young Poles in the waning decades of communism, Makuch and Gierat became fascinated with Jewish history and culture. Delving into the Holocaust and other Jewish topics was a means of both seeking the truth of their country's past and helping inform their own identities. Like members of the Jewish Flying University in Warsaw, they sought to fill in the blanks left by communist-era taboos

Performers at the final concert of the annual Festival of Jewish Culture. The grand finale, "Shalom on Szeroka" draws upwards of 15,000 people, most of them Catholic Poles.



that prevented an objective public analysis of history itself, including the thousand-year history of Jews in Poland.

“It was like a discovery of Atlantis that people lived here and created their own original culture and had such a deep influence on Polish culture,” Makuch, who still directs the festival, once told me over coffee at the Klezmer Hois. An intense man with deep eyes, a full, dark beard and a perpetually troubled-looking brow, Makuch peppers his speech with Hebrew and Yiddish words such as “shalom” and “meshuga;” he has been asked more times than he can remember what it means for a non-Jew to run a Jewish festival for an audience mainly composed of other non-Jews. His reply is often to describe himself as a Shabbos goy, keeping alive the torch of Jewish culture.

Since 1998, non-Jews like Makuch, who preserve and promote Jewish culture and heritage, are honored each year at an awards ceremony during the Festival, presided over by the Israeli ambassador. So far more than 150 people all over the country have received the award. Some, like Makuch, run Jewish cultural events; others cut the grass and clean up cemeteries, teach classes, rescue tombstones, organize little museums. Some have the support of their communities; others work in isolation or even encounter hostility.

Until recently, Jews were largely ab-



sent from the enthusiastic crowds who throng Festival events. “Many Jewish people come to Poland, fly into Warsaw, go straight to Auschwitz, then want to get out,” the Krakow-born American philanthropist Ted Taube told me once. “But until the war, Poland had the most prolific, culturally diverse, creative Jewish population anywhere, ever. We can’t afford to relegate those people to a post-script in history.” Although they are still a minority, more and more Jewish fans and tourists have been turning up in recent years, in part because of special tours run by organizations such as the Taube Foundation and the American Jewish Committee.

“I love it here,” Cantor Benzion Miller, a Bobover Hasid who lives in Borough Park, Brooklyn, tells me. We are ensconced in armchairs in the crowded little lounge of the Hotel Eden, a kosher establishment opened in the 1990s by an American, Allen Haberberg, in a restored 15th century building in the heart of Kazimierz. The Eden has a mezuzah on every door, both a pub and a private mikvah in the basement, free WiFi Internet and an umbrella-shaded outdoor “Garden of Eden.”

A roly-poly man with a full white beard, Miller has been a fixture of the Festival of Jewish Culture for the past 15 years, both performing and holding workshops on topics ranging from Hasidic chanting to ritual slaughter. Miller was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany where his parents met after World War II. His father, who had lost his first wife and children in the Holocaust, came from Oswiecim—the town nearly 40 miles from Krakow outside of which the Nazis built Auschwitz. Before World War II, Oswiecim was home to about 12,000 people, more than half of them Jews. Miller’s grandfather was a hazan, a cantor, there.

Miller always participates in a sometimes riotous public Havdalah ceremony, held in the grandiose Tem-

pel Synagogue, the only 19th-century synagogue in Poland to survive the Holocaust intact. Used by the Nazis as a stable and warehouse, it languished in sad repair until the 1990s, when, with funding from the state and sponsorship from the World Monuments Fund, it underwent a full restoration and is now used for concerts as well on religious occasions. It is filled to capacity, mainly with local Poles, for the Festival Havdalah, which features a mix of hazanut, klezmer and tisch singing that has rabbis in streimels and spectators in summer attire dancing together in the aisles. “I see what is going on here as a continuation of what once was; you try to continue,” Miller says.

Over the past 20 years, most attention has been paid in Krakow to rediscovering the city’s “lost” Jewish culture and promoting it to a non-Jewish public, through tourism and entertainment or through various educational institutions such as the Center for Jewish Culture or the Galicia Jewish Museum. But contemporary Jewish life in the city is now also getting a boost.

Over tea in the garden of the Eden, I talk with Rabbi Edgar Gluck, who, in black hat and long wispy beard, can often be seen walking Kazimierz streets like a pre-war patriarch. A politically savvy, German-born Orthodox rabbi in his 70s, he divides his time between Brooklyn and Poland. In New York City, he is known as the co-founder of the orthodox Hatzolah Volunteer Ambulance Corps. “I was in the World Trade Center, taking people out, as the building was coming down,” he tells me, recalling the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Here he is the Chief Rabbi of Galicia, a symbolic honorific given to him by Krakow’s Jewish community, whom he serves on occasion as hazan. He spends much of his time, though, work-

ing toward the preservation of Jewish cemeteries and Holocaust mass graves. But Gluck has rabbinic company and lots of it. “In Krakow now,” goes one joke, “there are now five rabbis—for three Jews and 20 opinions.” One rabbi, brought in by Shavei Israel, a Jerusalem-based group that works with “lost Jews” around the world, is the “official” Jewish community rabbi. Then there is a rabbi who runs the Chabad operation and an American female rabbi who operates a small, offshoot Reform group.

There’s also the new JCC, financed by Britain’s World Jewish Relief and the Joint Distribution Committee, which occupies a sleek five-story building on the grounds of the Tempel Synagogue. Like so much else in Krakow’s Jewish universe, the initiative for the JCC came from a non-Jewish source—Britain’s Prince Charles, who was moved by the plight of the poor and aging Jews of the city during a 2002 visit. Charles returned to Krakow in 2008 for the JCC’s inauguration: Wearing a kippah, he helped affix a mezuzah to the door.

“Jewish life is more open and safer here than anywhere else I’ve been in Europe,” says Jonathan Ornstein, the director of the JCC. I meet Ornstein, a 39-year-old self-described “atheist Jewish vegetarian” for a cappuccino at a cafe on the hip Plac Nowy, the pre-war Jewish market square whose central building was a kosher poultry slaughterhouse. Plac Nowy, now a booming center of nightlife, is full of music clubs and trendy bars, which Ornstein prefers to the “Jewish-style” cafes on Szeroka. “We have kids from the Sunday school playing in the courtyard with the gate open; we feel no danger, no fear.”

Born in New York, Ornstein moved to Israel as a young man and relocated to Krakow seven years ago, teaching Hebrew at the Jagiellonian University. The Jagiellonian has a Jewish studies program that was launched in the 1980s; its outgrowth, the Center for

(Top) Zdzislaw Les was a pioneer when he opened Jarden Jewish bookstore in 1992. (Middle) Participants in a Jewish cooking workshop. (Bottom) Jewish Studies students from Jagiellonian University at a student fair.

Jewish Culture, opened in 1992 in a renovated former prayer house off Plac Nowy. Ornstein rejects nostalgia for the city's past and focuses on stimulating contemporary Jewish expression. The bulletin boards in the JCC's lobby flutter with announcements for clubs and social events: a Hanukkah party this year lasted until dawn, and the JCC's Facebook group boasts more than 360 members. "People talk about Kazimierz as being the 'former' Jewish quarter of Krakow. But I say, why former?" says Ornstein. "It is the *present* Jewish quarter of Krakow. You can't measure it in numbers but in feeling. Jews live freely; people know things about Judaism and Jewish traditions; there's a Jewish studies program at the university; there's the Festival." As he sees it, "Nobody alive today has a memory of Kazimierz when it was better than it is now."

Back at the cafe at the Klezmer Hois, I spot my friend Konstanty (Kostek) Gebert. "This is where I hold court," jokes Gebert, an award-winning author and a veteran of the Jewish Flying University. As an underground Solidarity activist, he deliberately chose a Jewish-sounding pen name—Dawid Warszawski—to write in the dissident press. In 1989, Gebert was at the Round Table talks between the communist authorities and Solidarity that facilitated the peaceful ouster of the old regime. He was the founding editor of *Midrasz*, a Jewish cul-





(Top) Tourists visit the restored Izaak Synagogue that is decorated with life-sized cutouts of pre-war Jews. **(Bottom)** Also restored is the High Synagogue, which is used for exhibitions and other events.



tural and intellectual monthly, and today he heads the Warsaw-based Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Culture in Poland.

In addition to Krakow, small active Jewish communities are found in Warsaw, Lodz, Wroclaw and several other Polish cities. I'm far from sure that there is a solid enough critical mass to ensure their long-term survival. Nonetheless, in many senses, to be Jewish here and to accept Jewishness as a positive identity choice now is increasingly normal. Or at least much more normal than it was 10, 20 and certainly 30 years ago. "Today's Jewish children in Poland, whatever else the future holds in store for them, will never grow up knowing, as their parents did, that to be Jewish means to be alone and vulnerable," Gebert wrote in his 2008 memoir *Living in the Land of Ashes*. "Hopes have been successfully built on much more shaky foundations."

He was not always this certain. He likes to joke about how, in the mid-1980s, he told a pair of Polish journalists that he didn't think Jews in Poland could survive. The journalists—writer Malgorzata Niezabitowska and photographer Tomasz Tomaszewski—were working on an article for *National Geographic* that eventually became a book called *Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland*. They asked Gebert how he saw the future for Jews in the country. "I believe we are the last ones," he replied. "Definitely." Today, he puffs his pipe and straightens his kippah. "Ugh. Never talk to the media!" he says laughing. And Krakow's moveable Jewish feast of drink and food and conversation goes on. ♡