

# **POLAND EXPERIENCE - A MEMORABLE JOURNEY**

**by Hilton Share**

On April 27th, my wife Rosalind and I joined a group on a week-long AACI trip to Poland. The group comprised thirty people, seven of whom were from Netanya AACI, the rest from National AACI: seven of them were British, the rest American or Canadian. We also had Carole Kremer as the National AACI representative on the trip, and Rabbi Yitzchak Rubenstein, originally from South Africa a guide and educator who has led over forty of these trips. There was also a local Polish guide, Monika, who acted as facilitator to ensure smooth organisation.

This was not in any way a holiday but more of a pilgrimage, which I recommend that every Jewish person takes at least once in a lifetime. It was memorable for a number of reasons, most notably our guide, Reb Yitzchak, who was such an inspiration throughout the journey, with his readings and stories, an outstanding raconteur, fired by passion for the subject - making it seem as fresh as if this were one of his first trips.

I do not want this to seem like a travelogue, so I will not present it in chronological order, rather in sections, the camps we visited, ghettos, cemeteries, the people we met.

We visited four camps, Treblinka, Majdanek, Auschwitz and Birkenau, and Chelmno. Treblinka and Chelmno were pure death camps, extremely harrowing, as there was nothing to see, as there were never any barracks or other trappings of concentration camps. The Jews were transported in, undressed, shaved, gassed in gas chambers (which were destroyed by the Nazis towards the end of the war), then transported into the local forest for mass burial. 900,000 people were murdered in Treblinka, 250,000 in Chelmno. The mass graves of all those murdered in the forest near Chelmno, where the bodies were exhumed towards the end of the war, burned and the bones pulverised, then reburied, were chilling, as pebbles have in the past year been put over the graves, since the ash and bone fragments were coming through the surface. Majdanek was not only a death camp, but also a concentration camp, where the inmates endured unspeakable horrors at the hands of the Nazis and kapos. How anyone survived the starvation, beatings, personal indignities, is unbelievable. The gas chamber was not destroyed and walking through the building, its walls tinged green from the effects of Zyklon B, was terrifying. The brick buildings of Auschwitz I, both a concentration camp and death camp, are now a museum displaying, amongst

countless other things, the shocking collections of human hair, shoes, personal effects - those are what hit home. Auschwitz II, Birkenau, was primarily a death camp, but also acted as a concentration camp, where prisoners were forced to dispose of the bodies and sort the personal effects. This camp is vast, at least half a mile front to back and side to side, with the now familiar row upon row of barracks, where the inmates were treated in a similar fashion to Majdanek, absolutely traumatic. There is little remaining of the gas chambers there, as they were destroyed by the Nazis towards the end of the war.

At the camps, and the burial sites, we prayed, recited kaddish, and sang songs such as Vehi She'amda and Am Yisrael Chai, affirming that the Jewish people continue to live on and prosper, despite the death and destruction that was wrought on us during the war.

We visited a number of contrasting ghettos, in Warsaw, Lublin, Krakow and Lodz. In Warsaw, we saw a remaining section of the ghetto wall, but the rest comprises buildings in an area of the city where people are currently living. In Lublin, there is very little left. Krakow ghetto still exists, a square plus various narrow streets into which the Jews were contained. Lodz had a different history, whereby the ghetto was run by someone who was effectively a Jewish dictator, who determined which Jews would survive, and who would be sent off in the transports to the concentration camps.

Whilst in Lodz we went to the railway station, from where transports of Jews were sent to Auschwitz, and we went into one of the box cars used. Again absolutely chilling, but here we sang Ani Ma'amin, just as one transport of these Jews had done, an amazing assertion of spiritual belief, which we supported in memorial.

We went to a number of cemeteries, some easier to visit than others. The Jewish cemetery in Warsaw is huge, and our guide pointed out a number of graves of people, some renowned in history, going back to the early 18th century. I have already mentioned the mass graves in the forests near Treblinka and Chelmno. There were other forests where we saw mass graves of Jews including one especially pitiful where 800 children had been shot to death.

The most memorable cemetery we visited was in Lodz. Their community leaders had decided that, rather than bury those who died in the ghetto in mass graves (as happened in several other ghettos, on account of the high daily death rate from starvation and disease), everyone who died would be recorded and buried individually, with dignity and respect, their names recorded on head stones. This was

a difficult decision as it delayed burials, and led to bodies being left on the streets for days.

However, as a result, records are still available and survivor families can find where their relatives are buried, if indeed they died in Lodz. We were able to perform two mitzvot in the Lodz cemetery, which we visited on our last day in Poland, a fitting tribute to our time there. One of our group had carried out research into a relative who was buried there. Going ahead of the rest of the group, she and her husband went to the office in the cemetery, and they found the overgrown location where the relative was buried. When we arrived at the point, they had removed many twigs and leaves, and had uncovered the top part of a gravestone. She was therefore able to say kaddish there and receive closure, a deeply emotional moment for all of us.

The second mitzva was an amazing coincidence. A man from Bayit Vegan was there with his wife. They had been aware that one of his relations, originally from Holland, had been transported to the Lodz ghetto and had died there. He had also done the relevant research, found the grave, and wished to consecrate a head stone. And there were we, able to provide a minyan for him. He told us the story of his family and how this particular relative came to be in Lodz and when he died. He was able to say kaddish, with a minyan, which he was so pleased to do. Also a very emotional moment for all of us.

Along with all the depressing parts of the trip, which we obviously expected, we also had a number of uplifting times (as well as the two encounters in the Lodz cemetery).

We were in Warsaw for the first two days, and at the evening meals we were able to hear from Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the chief Rabbi of Poland, and from Konstany Gebert, who is heading the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland. At the same time we also met a number of local young professionals and were able to discuss with them what they are doing to try and rejuvenate Jewish culture in Warsaw.

In addition, we visited the Lauder Morasha Jewish Day School, for children for 5 to 16 years of age, and we heard about how the school was founded and how it has become such a success. We also visited the vast and spectacular Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which has only been open for a few months, where a local guide led us round a comprehensive display showing the history of the Jewish people in Poland over the past thousand years - sometimes good and successful, sometimes dreadful, with pogroms. The exhibits concluded with the post war period, initially under communist rule and latterly under democratic rule.

On Shabbat, we were in Krakow and we were able to daven in three synagogues, at two of them with an Israeli Bnei Akiva group who were also visiting Krakow. There were vibrant services as would be expected. At the Shabbat lunch, we had an opportunity to talk with non-Jewish students and academics about their research into Polish-Jewish relations. We also had a talk from a remarkable righteous gentile, Paulina, a short lady, most unassuming, now in her 90s. She told her story of how she, with her parents, helped to feed and hide Jews during the war. When asked why she and her family did this, she replied, self-deprecatingly, "what else were we supposed to do". An amazing story.

One other facet of the trip is worth mentioning. We were shown three films on our bus journeys: The Pianist, The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler and Schindler's List - films which we had seen many times. However, seeing them when in the country where they were set, and in places we had visited, gave them much more significance.

There were so many other features of the journey, but I have selected those events which I found most memorable, some really depressing, some uplifting, and it is impossible to include absolutely everything that occurred. We were a very cohesive and friendly group, always supportive and at no stage were there any complaints or criticisms of the trip, largely due to the meticulous attention to detail and the exemplary organisation of the trip by the AACI.

However, my final comment must go to our superb guide, Reb Yitzchak, who deserves the highest accolade. He elevated the journey to a level that none of the group will ever forget. Though other guides would undoubtedly have done a good job, Reb Yitzchak was quite definitely the best leader that one could have on such a momentous trip.

Yes, there were tears every day, but Reb Yitzchak made them so meaningful.