

Mending Poland's Jewish Past

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Forget the Euro 2012 scaremongering. Poland's Jewish revival is thriving.

By [KAMIL TCHOREK](#)

Seventy years ago, my Polish Jewish great-uncle Hejnoch Glowiczower bribed the Germans who ran the Warsaw Ghetto, and fled. Out in the city he was taken in by a network of Poles, who risked the German death penalty to house him, feed him and give him the cover identity that saved his life.

Bearing a perfectly forged German Kennkarte, stamped with a swastika, Hejnoch was moved by his Polish compatriots to a safe house just outside Warsaw. It was the home of Romuald Spasowski, the devout communist who in 1981, as Polish ambassador to the United States, defected and became a Catholic.

After the war, Hejnoch felt at home in Poland. Unlike over half the Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust, he decided not to use his right to emigrate to Israel or elsewhere. Still under a false identity, he started a family and had a successful academic career until 1968, when the Soviet-backed regime alleged Jews were a pro-American fifth column and forced most of them to leave (the secret police knew who was Jewish, even if nobody else did).



Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image

The market off Dzielna Street in the Jewish area of Warsaw, 1938.

Nevertheless, Hejnoch's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren today lead happy lives in Poland, all under that false surname to which they owe their lives. One of them has considered changing it back to Glowiczower. There are countless other such Poles with Jewish roots like this—roots that some are now rediscovering.

Last month, during the Euro 2012 soccer championship and amid media scaremongering about intolerance in Poland and Ukraine, BBC journalist David Shukman wrote of a trip to his ancestral Poland with his daughter Kitty. They went to Baranow, the village from which his Jewish grandfather emigrated to England a century ago. It was one of the most-read articles on the BBC website.

In Baranow, Mr. Shukman interviewed an old man named Stanislaw Stefaniak, who would have been 28 in 1945. "He describes how . . . one day the Jews were ordered to gather in the main square before being marched to the nearest railway station," Mr. Shukman writes.

"A few, he says, were hidden by Poles. What happened to them? He hesitates. The easiest narrative here is that it was only the Nazis who killed the Jews. But Stanislaw admits an uncomfortable truth. After the war, he says, the Jews who came out of hiding were robbed and killed by Poles."

The implication is that all of the survivors of the Holocaust in Baranow were murdered by Poles after the war. But historians tend to agree that of the some 210,000 Jews in Poland at the time, about 2,000 (less than 1%) were killed in the anti-Jewish violence that followed the end of the war. So although possible, it would be extraordinary for Mr. Shukman's ancestral village to have been the site of such a killing.

According to Jewish resistance hero Marek Edelman and academics including Jan Gross, most killings with Jewish victims were not in fact a consequence of anti-Semitism. They were the result of the lawlessness, insurgency and violent suppression in the first postwar years of the Soviet occupation—this killed tens of thousands of Poles, a small fraction of whom were Jewish.

Still, there was widespread anti-Semitism, normally bound up with a stereotype of "Jewish Communism." The most awful consequence was a mass murder at Kielce, where at least 40 Jews died, helping to spur a mass exodus to Israel.

Mr. Shukman's portrayal of the prewar divisions between the Jewish and gentile communities also needs further comment. Poland's anti-Semitic political movements, such as National Democracy, were at least as sinister as, for example, the British Union of Fascists. It received support from a section of the Polish Catholic Church, organized boycotts of Jewish businesses, and lobbied for discrimination against Jews in universities and some professions. Between 1935 and 1939, dozens of Poles were murdered for being Jewish.

But Polish Jews did not live under some kind of apartheid. The Polish officer elite included a proportional number of Jews, including the army's chief rabbi, Boruch Steinberg. Some 100,000 Jews fought against Germany in Polish uniform. Krystyna Skarbek, the Polish secret agent who was the inspiration for Ian Fleming's Vesper Lynd, had a Jewish mother and aristocratic Catholic father.

The wartime Polish government in exile, based in London, included two Jewish members—possibly the most senior Jewish politicians in the world at the time. It was this Polish government that alerted the United Nations to the Holocaust, and that then had to face American and British allegations that it was fearmongering. Polish envoy Jan Karski was sent to describe the plight of his country's Jews to U.S. President Roosevelt, who replied, infamously: "What happened to those lovely Polish horses after the Germans took over?"

Mr. Shukman asks, perhaps rhetorically, whether the motivation of the Polish state to preserve the memory of the German death camps extends to ordinary Polish people and their commemoration of Jewish life. To answer that question Mr. Shukman and his daughter Kitty could come back to Poland for a longer stay, to see and hear much more about where they come from.

In the small countryside town of Dabrowa Tarnowska, the old synagogue has been excellently restored and a few weeks ago was re-opened in a ceremony at which rabbis and priests stood side-by-side. Throughout Poland, moss is being cleaned out of Hebrew texts that are carved in stone. Ever more local communities are caring for their Jewish past.

This is not to suggest that anti-Semitism is less of a problem in Poland than it is in Britain or the U.S. But there is good news here if you want it. Last week, the annual Jewish Cultural Festival began in Krakow, where traditional klezmer and Hebrew hip-hop is performed live in euphoric street parties every summer. The new Museum of the History of Polish Jews in central Warsaw will put the five-year German occupation into the context of 1,000 years of Jewish life in Poland, once home to 80% of world Jewry. This week, after winning more funds from the U.S.-based Taube and Koret Foundations, the center received the largest-ever donation from an individual in Poland: a \$6 million completion grant from Poland's richest man, Jan Kulczyk.

Poland's Jewish revival has been growing for years, and is now thriving. It is led not by the Polish government but by Poland's Jewish community itself. The movement has been helped along by a section of the Polish Catholic Church; Pope John Paul II, who was Polish, decreed that anti-Semitism is a sin.

Polish academics have shone light on a World War II pogrom and continue to expose other violent incidents. Jewish food is fashionable, and cantorial recitals sell out. Many Poles who, like Mr. Shukman, are of mixed heritage are talking up the Jewish part of their identity and even converting. Some older Jews find the trend irritatingly kitschy, but few see it as particularly bad.

If you go into the past looking for death and hatred, you will find it. If you go into the past looking for life and love, you will find it, too. Perhaps that can be best shown to us by the generation of Hejnoch Glowiczower's great-grandchildren, the generation of Kitty Shukman. I hope she revisits Poland, and that she will bring her father with her.

—Mr. Tchorek is a freelance journalist in Warsaw.