



'Never Better' in Krakow?

By Ruth Ellen Gruber · June 15, 2011

KRAKOW, Poland (JTA) -- Jews in Krakow have a new slogan -- "Never Better."

The catchphrase is deliberately provocative, a blatant rejoinder to "Never Again," the slogan long associated with Holocaust memory and the fight against anti-Semitic prejudice.

It may be counterintuitive, acknowledges Jonathan Ornstein, the American-born director of Krakow's Jewish community center who helped come up with the slogan.

But it's aimed at rebranding Jewish Poland, or at least Jewish Krakow, shaking up conventional perceptions and radically shifting the focus of how the Jewish experience here is viewed.

"Because the Holocaust isn't subtle, then the rebranding, as a way to get people to understand the situation here now, also can't be subtle," Ornstein explained.

Only a few hundred Jews live in Krakow, but the community has been rebuilding in the past two decades, particularly since the JCC opened three years ago.

"When we say 'Never Better,' it's not in terms of numbers, or the amount of things in Jewish life, or the synagogues that are functioning and all that," Ornstein said.

However, he went on, "in terms of the way the Jewish community interacts with the non-Jewish community and the direction that things are going, I think that there's never been a more optimistic time to be Jewish in Krakow than there is now."

I spoke with Ornstein on a Sunday in June, the morning after an unprecedented event that in a way had been a public affirmation of the new Jewish spirit he described.

Organized by the JCC, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Krakow Jewish communal organization, it was called 7@Night -- Seven at Night or the Night of the Synagogues.

Night of the Living synagogues may have been a better description.

From 10:30 p.m. until 2 a.m., all seven of the historic synagogues in Krakow's old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, were open to the public.

It was part festival, part celebration and part didactic exercise. The aim was to foster Jewish pride, but also to educate non-Jewish Poles about contemporary Jewish life and culture.

An astonishing 5,000 or more people turned out, a constant flow of people that trooped from one synagogue to the next and patiently braved long, slow lines and bottlenecks at doorways. Almost all were young Cracovians.

Each synagogue hosted an exhibit, concert, talk or other activity that was produced by Jews and highlighted Jewish life and culture as lived today in Poland, Israel and elsewhere.

Events ranged from talks by Krakow Rabbi Boaz Pash on "the ABCs of Judaism" to a live concert by an Israeli rock band to a DJ sampling new Jewish music from a console set up on the bimah of the gothic Old Synagogue, now a Jewish museum, to a panel discussion about the role of women in Judaism.

All the events were free -- and all were full.

"It far, far exceeded our expectations," said Ornstein.

I've never seen anything quite like it, even though I've followed the development of Kazimierz for more than 20 years -- from the time when it was an empty, rundown slum to its position now as one of the liveliest spots in the city.

I've witnessed -- and chronicled -- the development of Jewish-themed tourism, retail, entertainment and educational infrastructure in Krakow, including the Jewish Culture Festival that draws thousands of people each summer. And I've written extensively about the interest of non-Jews in Jewish culture.

But Seven at Night was something different. For one thing, nostalgia seemed to play no role. And also, unlike many of the Jewish events and attractions in Kazimierz, this one was organized and promoted by Jews themselves.

It was their show, kicking off with a public Havdalah ceremony celebrated by Rabbi Pash that saw hundreds of people singing and dancing in the JCC courtyard.

"Never Better" was a prominent theme.

Most explicitly, it was the title of a multimedia presentation that ran throughout the night, projected on the vaulted ceiling of the 16th century High Synagogue, which today is used as an exhibition hall. The presentation featured interviews with local Jews young and old, religious and secular, all expressing a confidence in their identity and future.

It's still anybody's guess whether or not demographic realities will enable the long-term survival of a Jewish community in Krakow. But Ornstein said that may not be the point.

A key message of the current activism, he said, was to help frame the context of Polish Jewish history and hammer home that however small their numbers, Jews in Poland are not a separate, exotic entity but part and parcel of 21st century Polish society.

"The powerful message is that Judaism isn't just an idea, it's not just something that belongs to the Polish past, but there are Jews living here," Ornstein said. "We're trying to say that you can be a Jewish Pole, not just a Jew in Poland, to turn 'Jew' into an adjective instead of a noun."

I hope he's right.

(Ruth Ellen Gruber's books include "National Geographic Jewish Heritage Travel: A Guide to Eastern Europe," and "Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe." She blogs on Jewish heritage issues at <http://jewish-heritage-travel.blogspot.com>. This winter she was scholar in residence at the Hadassah Brandeis Institute.)