Family and Roots

The Poland Connection

Memoir and Reminiscence of a Trip

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Introduction[1]

This memoir tells of a trip that my wife, Diane, and I made to Poland in July 2006. It was scheduled so that we could meet my cousin, Ernest (Ernie) Lowey, in Warsaw; his daughter, Eileen, and his son, Elliott, and his family, also planned to join us. The trip was not a homecoming. For Ernie and me, it was a pilgrimage to the original home of our mothers; it would also honor our relatives killed in the Holocaust.

We had various objectives for this trip, and different experiences in this forgotten and forbidding land of our family. I do not think our parents would have approved, since they left under difficult circumstances; besides the horrendous tragedy of the Holocaust barred any fond memories for them or for us.

Our families had rarely discussed their lives in Poland, except to emphasize how fortunate they were to emigrate. They often talked about the factors that drove them from Poland: escape from anti-Semitism was the foremost motivation; but poverty and lack of economic opportunity were also very important. Economic factors continue to spur Poles to leave their country. Well over one million young Poles have emigrated in the past year or two—for Ireland, England, Sweden, and even the U.S., or anywhere they can settle legally.

Nonetheless, we are not the only sons and relatives seeking information on our Polish family members. It has become a regular stop for many Israelis, whose grandparents were born or were killed in Poland. Many Americans are involved in projects to memorialize their parents and other relatives there; they are also contributing to restoration of the cemeteries and Jewish cultural and religious sites.

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[1] I dedicate this memoir to my relatives who perished in the Holocaust. I also prepared it for my fellow travelers, including Ernie and his family, and my wife, Diane. I am especially grateful to Diane, who tolerated this trip to Poland, when alternative places were more appealing. Neil Evans, a long-time friend, read the account critically and made many helpful suggestions. Robert Stupay gave me informed comments on the draft and designed the cover. Diane and I took most of the pictures.

Travel broadens one's outlook and expands and sharpens perceptions. In Poland, we gained insights into the country's culture and cuisine. But it can also be disheartening, when historic sites, which are meaningful to us, are ignored or even despised by the local people. Many Poles want to change the West's perceptions of them and seek to engage with foreigners in their midst; they strongly support tolerance and democracy as practiced in the West. Sadly a minority remains who are unremorseful about their country's tragic relations with Jews.

Warsaw Meeting

On July 11, 2006, Diane and I met Ernie Lowey, and his family in Poland; his entourage included two Eileen Lowey's, one of whom is his daughter and the other his daughter-in-law. Also, Eileen and Elliott brought their two daughters, Erin and Thea. The trip was hastily arranged and poorly coordinated, perhaps on the unspoken assumption that it was unlikely to take place. After all, why would you meet your American family in Poland?

We all came on the trip with different objectives and expectations. Ernie's included a sentimental journey to his mother's home town of Gostynin and Gombin, he also wanted to visit the German town where he lived during his service in the U.S. Army in the 1950s. Later, he hoped to locate his father's neighborhood in Vienna. Elliott and Eileen, after meeting us in Poland, planned to take a long car trip to visit friends. Daughter Eileen wanted some time with Ernie and her brother, Elliott. She eventually left the group and ended up in Paris for a few days.

My agenda was different. One goal was to further my genealogical research on the Stupay family, hoping for a breakthrough on family names and dates, and possibly finding a cache of new material. I also had appointments to meet people with whom I had been corresponding in Warsaw, Lodz and Gombin. Finally, I wanted to make some progress in understanding the dynamics of the recent Polish experience with capitalism for my course at John Cabot University, which will be used in a book that I have been writing on the subject of comparative economic systems.

With so many different agendas and schedules, it was a miracle that we could all gather at a designated time and place, Tuesday evening, July 11, 2006, in Warsaw. A lot could have gone wrong and prevented it. For instance, Ernie and Eileen had to pick up a large camper van and drive it from Frankfurt to Warsaw, along unfamiliar roads.[2] There were numerous opportunities for error, accident, disabling fatigue and delay. Also, Ernie is no longer a spring chicken at 77 years and I was concerned about his stamina to drive the long

[2] While the roads in Germany are well designed and marked, Polish roads are narrow, just double lanes (one in each direction), and have only limited shoulder room on the curb lane. They are usually choked with traffic, with large speeding trucks trying to keep to schedule.

Gathering at the Gombin Jewish Cemetery
(L to R): Eileen, Elliott, Ernie, Mrs. Maria Kaminska, the author, Thea and Eileen

distance from Frankfurt. As it turned out, Eileen did most of the driving and they arrived safely and on time.

While the Lowey's opted to stay in a camper, Diane and I chose a golden oldie hotel called the Bristol, on the recommendation of a friend in Cleveland, who stayed there two years earlier. Fortunately, it turned out to be a gem, from a much earlier period of Polish history, having opened in 1899. Right on the Royal Way, called ul. Marcinkowskiego, we felt that if we had to encounter the tragedies of the past, what better way to deal with them than from the vantage point of an elegant hotel. We have encountered other tragic cities, such as Havana and Buenos Aires, in less elegant digs. In both of these cities, we saw some of the slums and examples of Communist or Fascist "progress." Here, we consciously chose to go first class to help us deal with unforeseen problems that we might face.

I also liked it because it might have been the hotel where my uncle, Dr. Jacob Stupay, stayed in the 1930s, when he visited Warsaw. Possibly, my maternal uncle, Jacob Gombiner, or even his father and my grandfather, Isaac Gombiner, used it as a hotel or meeting place. Government leaders also stayed here in the good days after Independence in 1918 and in the disastrous days of the Right Wing and Fascist rule of the 1930s. Surely Paderewski knew it, since he lived next door when he was president. Also, Witold Gombrowicz, a recently rediscovered writer, noted in his diaries of the 1930s that the Bristol was the power hotel.

For the Lowey's, the camper was convenient. It could transport the family over thousands miles, on the driver's schedule, and sleep six people. In Poland, driving is both expensive and uncomfortable and the camper helped them (and us when we were traveled together) negotiate the bumpy roads and deal with lack of roadside facilities. Also, the confined quarters enabled us to interact in ways that would have been more difficult if we had separate cars. One serious problem of our trip was the heat. Warsaw experienced one of the hottest summers on record. The temperature on the morning of July 12, the day following our arrival, was nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit. For a time, the camper's air conditioner could not keep up with heat generated by the occupants, which made us all sweaty and uncomfortable.

Family Gathering in Warsaw

Diane and I checked into the hotel to rest after the torture class ride on Czech Air's new jet that passes for twenty-first century progress. Afterward, we took a walk around the neighborhood of the hotel to get our bearings. We also needed to stretch our legs and assess what we had gotten ourselves into this time. We walked to Old Town and admired the major palaces along the main street. They were in beautiful shape and the first impression was very positive. Warsaw, however, had been completely destroyed by the Nazi vindictiveness and Russian hatred of the Poles. What we saw was a reconstructed Warsaw.

The Warsaw Uprising of August 1944, or Rising as it is now called, was undertaken to liberate Warsaw from the Nazis, just before they planned to evacuate it and before the Russians arrived.[3] This premature action by the Polish Underground resulted in the deaths of an estimated 200,000 Poles, including many Jews who lived on the Aryan side to which they had they escaped from the Ghetto in the early 1940s. In retribution, the Nazis systematically destroyed every building of consequence, including Old Town, the Royal Castle and most of the churches. They also obliterated the synagogues, except for one of the main synagogues, the Nozyk, which they used as a stable.

In the process, the Germans annihilated the leaders and intelligentsia of Poland, the loss of whom impacted the society for more than a generation. After the Nazi slaughter of the Poles, the Russians entered Warsaw as "liberators," and were able to control the destiny of the conquered territory, which was Stalin's aim.

The Poles have become well-respected internationally for rebuilding Warsaw. They faced enormous challenges in reconstructing these revered and historical buildings and monuments; in most cases, they either rebuilt the buildings according to the original plans or succeeded in approximating the original style. The town looks impressive, except for the decadent architecture that the Soviets introduced.

On returning to the hotel, we wondered how to get in touch with Ernie and his family. Fortunately, a few minutes before we returned, Ernie had called the

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[3] Davies, Norman, *Rising 1944: the Battle for Warsaw*. London, England: Reprint, Penguin, 1999; original 1979. It is the definitive work on the Rising.

Ernie and me in Warsaw

hotel and left a message. I half expected the call to come from Germany or elsewhere, telling us about some delay or problem with the camper. But, no, there they were, in Warsaw, near the airport. We made arrangements to meet at our hotel and have dinner. After gathering, we walked over to Old Town to find a restaurant, with seating out-of-doors.

At dinner, I expected a typical Polish meal, including pirogues, sausage, kasha, kishka, potatoes and boiled meat. The menu was nothing like that. The first course selections included soups, such as borscht. I think that several of us had cold borscht; the Polish style is served with a hard boiled egg and tasted much better than my mother's rendition.

The main course choices consisted of both meat and fish. Diane and I had grilled trout, which was excellent and unexpected. I do not recall my parents ever talking about Polish cuisine. It was a surprise to find that fish was very popular, and the cooks prepared it extremely well; it was grilled and not breaded or greasy. At some point, we had pirogues, which are a cross between a blintz and a crepe. I thought they might have the consistency of a hockey puck, but in most places, they were light and flavorful, and served either as a snack or main dish.

The unrelenting heat was a continuous problem. We dealt with it by eliminating our city clothes. We were a sight, since we were all dressed in rumpled shorts and tee shirts of various colors and decorations. We were not alone. All Varsavians had to dress down to cope with the heat.

Cousin Ernie looked out of place in shorts held up by suspenders, which were losing the battle with his expanding girth. Fortunately, he is unflappable and able to bear life's inevitable disappointments with courage, including his weight. His couture reflects his disinterest in the superficialities of life; what you see of him is what you get, direct and without embellishment. He was surrounded by two of his four children or, better described, adults who are still his children. They are tall, muscular and American-looking, although Elliott is now Canadian. Elliott's wife and children are great fun and their humor and verve added to the group's dynamics.

We all knew that our trip had deep meaning; our mothers, Esther and Gertie, probably suspected that we would visit Poland someday. We were also here to

From the left: Eileen, Erin and Elliott, Warsaw

pay homage to Isaac Gombiner, our tall, powerfully built grandfather, who lived in nearby Gombin and Gostynin, as well as our maternal great grandfather, Israel Mordechai Zajac (after whom my mother added Mayer as my middle name). Partly because of Isaac's early death, and the country's depression and inflation, three of his daughters and wife eventually joined two other children in America, leaving four remaining siblings in Poland. Our emotions were palpable and we all hugged each other when we met; all commented on the anomaly of Grandfather Isaac's descendants meeting here, near Gombin, almost a century after his death and the immigration of our parents. The emotion of it all still remains with me today as I write these lines.

On the Road to Gombin

We, as descendants of Isaac Gombiner, embarked on a trek into Western Poland on the morning of Wednesday, July 12. It was a land reviled by our parents and betrayed by the Poles. Nevertheless, some primordial genetic or cultural force drew us to this backwater. Would our parents have approved this trip to a place they tried to erase from their memories and their thoughts? Would they have criticized us for trying to pry into a hated past that they may have been ashamed of? On the later question, I think so. They might have claimed that we were making an unauthorized search of their past. It would be like looking at their bank accounts and payroll checks while they were alive—or maybe the dirty laundry.

But this trip was not really about them or about Poland. It was about us as adults, Ernie and me, and the two Eileen's and Elliott; the Lowey's and the Stupay's had all grown up in the same milieu, with similar values. It was about coming together in family reconciliation and family unity. In an important sense, it was also an attempt to reproduce the closeness and trust that marked our parents' relationships with one another. It did not matter if we never reached Gombin and Gostynin. As it turned out, we did get to these places, but we did not find anything that could instill new pride in place and family or give us new insight into our parents' behavior or personality. They fled from these communities. They had no remorse about leaving; they had no affection for them. After all, their siblings who stayed had perished in the Holocaust.

Gombin In 2006

The Polish countryside to the west of Warsaw is flat and uninteresting. There is more dramatic geography to the North, at the sea, and the south, near the Carpathian Mountains. There are surprisingly few lakes in this German borderland. From the roadside, the land appears to be unfarmed, except in certain sections as you approach the small towns. Also, there is little industry along the stretch of road leading to Gombin. The trip should have taken only 90 minutes or so, since it is only 70 to 80 miles from Warsaw. In fact, it took over three hours to reach our destination, even without making any major wrong turns. While the road immediately west of Warsaw had four lanes for a few miles, most of the trip was on two lane roads, which were poorly surfaced.

Mrs. Kaminska and me at the Jewish Cemetery in Gombin

Also, there were no gas stations or restaurants for food or drink. Fortunately, the camper came equipped with a bathroom and refrigerator, and it served as a floating rest stop for all of us.

Eventually, we saw signs to Gombin and Gostynin, at which point we went north. The land did not appear to be intensively used. There were small farms, but few people and even fewer vehicles. The area seemed abandoned. However, as soon as we got to Gombin, now called Gabin, since the Russian occupation in the nineteenth century, our spirits were lifted. First, there was the excitement of encountering the land of our mothers. More importantly, we needed to disembark from the hot box on wheels, stretch our limbs and get a cold drink. My clothes were drenched by the heat and I drank a quart or more of water when we stopped. The confined space in the van also began to wear on everyone, although the kids bore up better than the adults.

There is no similarity between Gabin and a small American town. There are no restaurants or large modern supermarkets. There are no special shops featuring work by local artisans. In Gabin, the malaise and depressed atmosphere was reinforced by the run-down condition of the houses, sidewalks and streets.

Of course, the town's personality depends on the people. We had only limited contacts. We could not really understand what the people did there and how they felt about their city—or their past. Nor did we care. After all, we have no direct bond with it now. Indeed, we have as much connection with it as we may have to Africa, where our primordial forebears lived before they trekked to Europe. Nevertheless, whether we like it or not, recognize it or not, we have an uncomfortable relationship with it. This is not a matter of logic, but pure emotion.

Gombin is where our Aunt Hannah lived; she ran a pensione there when her husband's business failed. It was a place that her daughters, Helenka and Fela, often visited; they also helped her during school holidays. I presume that her brother, Jacob Gombiner and his family, from Wloclawek, visited occasionally. She lived off the main street at Plac F(P)ierackiego 4. Also, my grandfather, Solomon Stupaj, and several of his children were born in Gombin, although his wife grew up in Wloclawek. It is likely that Solomon's parents, Szlama Stupaj and Perla Cuik, were also born in Gombin, around 1830 or so.[4]

[4] My Stupay grandparents lived in Gombin for several years before they moved with their young family to the largest town in the district, Wloclawek.

In the nineteenth century, when my Stupay grandparents and Gombiner relatives lived there, Gombin had an estimated Jewish population of 2,500 people (or somewhat less than 500 families), approximately 40 percent of the total; its Jewish population remained fairly steady until the 1920s, when it rose. The Stupay's were tradesmen, possibly artisans, as their son attested to in a document written in 1950; perhaps they designed and made jewelry for weddings and special occasions. I am sure that they were also watchmakers, since my father and his youngest brother knew the trade. Also, other Stupay and Gombiner relatives bought and sold wood or agricultural produce; there was a Stupay family who was listed in the business directory of 1929 as being in the fuel and transportation business. (This Stupay family may not be directly related.) These connections made me sensitive to the atmosphere of the town.

Many questions arose in my mind as I walked around the old square. Did our parents spur us on so that we could get beyond their modest beginnings in Gombin and Gostynin? Did the provincialism of this town ever impact us or our family? Does an adult get beyond his or her family background? Of course, our life in America is completely different from the Polish experience. Surely, our material resources are greater, but are we better people?

After mid-day, we looked up a contact I made through the Gombin Society. This person is a heroine, since she aided her brother in shielding two Jewish women from certain death in Warsaw.[5] She spends the summer and winter holidays in Gabin with her son. She was trained in medicine and has the presence and refinement of an educated person. She also stood out in society, because of her enormous courage.

Life of the Town

A century ago, Gombin was a shtetl, but had a thriving Jewish communal life; most towns in Poland were small and the overwhelming proportion of the Poles were farmers and peasants. Most of the Jews lived in the town and domi-

[5] Mrs. Kaminska and her brother, Wojciech Maciejko, saved two Jewish women, the Wolfowicz sisters, in Warsaw. This story is recorded in the Encyclopedia of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. These sisters now live in Israel; their names are Elizabeth Bates and Ada Rakotz. As a result, Advocate Maciejko was the recipient of a medal given by the Israeli Government; he was designated, "Righteous Among The Nations," He died many years ago and Mrs. Kaminska has the medal displayed in the picture below.

Houses and apartments in Gombin, near town center

nated its business section. Both groups were very poor, with the city dwellers only slightly better off than the farmers. Currently, there are fewer people in Gombin than 75 years earlier and it is *judenrein*; it is ethnically cleansed—no Jews, no Germans, no Gypsies (Roma), and no Protestants.

As you enter Gombin, you see a large, newly built church on the left and a small town square on the right, on which City Hall is located. At first sight, it seems to have an old time grace; if it were an elderly person, you might say that it has a faded refinement. I am not sure what gives it that impression—maybe the sidewalks or maybe the park opposite the town square. The buildings off the square are surprisingly substantial.

Jacob Rothbart, who wrote, Monograph of the Shtetl Gombin (in the Gombin Yizkor Book), provided some visualization of the town as he remembered it in the 1930s.[6] He wrote after the war, "At the center of town was the market square. This was a large rectangular expanse converged on from all sides by principal thoroughfares and side streets." This layout still exists. He continued, "At the eastern corner was the Polish Catholic Church." When we were there, we noticed a newly built or rebuilt building that had replaced it. "To the left on the other corner was the city administration building…attached to it was the jail-house." Most of these buildings remain. "After that came the market square annex, also rectangular, fronting on the main square and lined by a row of 'yatkes,' Jewish butcher shops."

Rothbart also described the thriving market days. "There were regular market days twice a week and frequent 'yariddim' (market fairs) at irregular intervals. On these events, the entire large market square and annex were spread with Polish and German peasants who came by horse-drawn carts...to vend farm products." He continued, "To the west of the square…was the Plotsker Gass (street to Plock) and from the left was the 'Kutner Gass."

He added, "On the days of the fairs…there were canvas vending booths covered by over-hanging canopies each with its own special wares displayed on hooks and tables. There were booths operated by Jewish woman selling bread and rolls, fruits and vegetables; then a section of Polish butchers offering kolbassi, sausages and ham." He then listed clothing vended in the square, including "peltz" (sheepskin coats), pants, cheap cloth coats with cotton-quilted liners, and hats and caps.

[6] Written in 1970.

Eileen Lowey displaying medal received by Mrs. Kaminska, Gombin cemetery

He detailed the variety of products sold in the market: "On the main square was to be found glazed pottery, dishes, and tinware; 'potcherkes' or cheap custom jewelry; crosses and other religious items; balls and toys for children; 'tashmes' or women's headscarves...and everything else that could be sold at the fair." He takes us down the square: "On all sides there were elegant buildings of wood and brick residences of two stories…One *kaminitze* or mansion (five stories high) was the most beautiful building in the town, owned by a Jewish family named Posnansky." (A family with a similar name owned the largest textile mill in Lodz, a major city.)

There was also a second market. Dr. Henry Greenbaum also provided his reminiscences of Gombin for the Yizkor Book.[7] He wrote: "About four blocks to the west was the New Market where my parents and grandparents lived. It was a huge, rectangular place, paved with cobblestones, a water pump in the center…The streets were narrow and lined on both sides with one-story wooden houses, devoid of beauty or any ornament…There was no running water and until the end of World War One, no electricity." We did not find this market area.

Most of the stores around the two town squares were owned by Jews. Greenbaum wrote that most of the grocers were Jewish. "Of the nine bakeries, seven were Jewish. The Jews were shoemakers, tailors, hatters, rope-makers, blacksmiths, barbers, roofers…Haberdashery, dry goods, hardware, leather, book and stationery stores were owned by Jews. The seltzer and oil factories and one of two tanneries were run by Jews." Also, doctors and dentists in the region were mainly Jews. Only a few Jews were farmers living in the country.

None of this variety of business activity exists in 2006. While the buildings on the main square remain silent as empty shells, the people and activity are gone. Most of the Jews were taken to Chelmno, west of Warsaw, and gassed in specially designed air tight vans. Some survivors may have returned after the war, but the madness of Poland in 1946 and 1967-68 forced the Jews to flee again; Jews were charged with being collaborators with the Communists in subjugating Poland.[8] This was complete nonsense, since there were few Jews

[7] At the time of publication of the Yizkor Book in 1970, he was Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at NYU.

[8] The earlier pogrom happened in Kielce, when "42 Jews were killed by soldiers and a mob, which gathered when rumors of a ritual murder had been circulated." See marvelous book on Polish Jewry by Stanislaw Krajewski, *Poland and the Jews, Reflections of a Polish Polish Jew.* Krakow, Poland: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2005.

who remained in Poland after the war, and most of them were poor, fearful and not politically active.[9]

The Shul

One of the distressing parts of our visit in Gabin was the stop at the site of the Old Temple. Mrs. Kaminska took us there. The Temple was built in 1710 and repaired over the centuries, it was burned in September 1939, soon after the Germans entered the town. Following the fire, the area was presumably cleared and flattened. The site is now occupied by a grocery or convenience store, with a sign painted in a garish color.

There was also a second Shul, for the followers of the Gerer Rabbi, the Hassidic leader. Mrs. Kaminska did not identify the site of this Shul. There is no plaque or recognition that Hasidic Jews lived here. It is certain that the locals have little interest in those strange people who were part of their community for at least two centuries and had as much entitlement to the land as they did. Polish communities like Gombin are reluctant to recognize the prior occupants. After all, what did happen to all the property, jewelry, art, musical instruments, as well as the deeds to the land? Poland has not enacted a Law of Restitution like Germany. Poles remain fearful that the Jewish land they occupy may be reclaimed. When they see Jews or strangers in their midst, they become very nervous. I am told by Poles that restitution is a constant worry for many people in small towns like Gombin.

Near the center of town is a stream. Rothbart said that the Jews called it the *bach,* a German word. He added, "The widest part of it was at the base of hill and at the top of the hill was the Shul. Across the way to the left, going down the hill, was the Beth Hamedresh (House of Learning) and below that the Mikvah (ritual bath)." We did not examine this part of the land, partly because of our fatigue brought on by the intense heat, but also because our disgust at encountering a convenience store on the site of the great temple. Have these townspeople no memory or sympathy for the Jews who shared their land? Not a trace of this rich, traditional life remains, except maybe for the few head stones, mostly broken, in the Jewish Cemetery.

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[9] The Six Day War in Israel in 1967 gave rise to an anti-Zionist campaign in Poland in 1968, which became anti-Semitic and resulted in riots and injury. Shortly thereafter, another Jewish exodus occurred. See Krajewski, op.cit, 168.

Above: Site of the Old Temple of Gombin; now a mini-super-market.
Below: Grand Temple of Gombin, built in 1710, restored in 1893, destroyed by the Nazis in September 1939. From the photo collection of Thomasz Wiseniewski

Dr. Greenbaum wrote about the temple: "About one block from the Old Market was the Jewish religious complex of the Shul, Besmedresh and the Mikvah." (It appears to me to be a few blocks away.) "The Shul was a charming old wooden structure about three or four stories high with tall windows, a copper roof and two copper onion-shaped cupolas. The outside walls were quite weather-beaten." (This is apparent from photographs). "Inside, the walls were covered with natural wood boards with no ornamentation except around the Ark...There, at the eastern wall, were the beautifully carved tablets with the Ten Commandants inscribed in Hebrew. In the middle of the Shul was the bimah, an elevated platform, where the Torah was read, the shofar blown and speeches made. From the high ceiling, dozens of brass chandeliers were hung. In the rear, was a balcony where the women prayed."

From the religious center, Mrs. Kaminska took us to the nearly abandoned Jewish Cemetery. Because of the great work of our confreres of the Gombin Society, the boundaries of the cemetery have been fenced in and an impressive gate constructed. In addition, broken gravestones have been put into a well-designed, arched Memorial Wall. What remains after three centuries of Jewish settlement, was perhaps two dozen fully intact gravestones!

After this brief tour of the Jewish sites, we accompanied Mrs. Kaminska to her home at ulica Plocka 18, six or seven full blocks from the town square. It was hard to say farewell to a fragment of the past. She serves as a reminder of what courageous Poles could have done in impossible circumstances. At that point, we were near the northern limit of Gabin and headed to Gostynin, in the direction of the major town of Plock.[10]

How do I feel about revisiting sites of a vanished community and the home-town of long gone grandparents? Did it make me feel closer to our parents and rekindle my connections with family and the Jewish community? I do not think so, since I started with a strong bond to Judaism and my family. What the visit demonstrated to me was the immensity of the loss suffered by the Jewish Community at the hands of the Nazis; it gave me a direct connection to the Holocaust.

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[10] It is the home town of Louis Bomson, husband of Aunt Esther Gomberg, and father of our twin cousins, Gloria Weisbrot and Harriet Bomson, and Sanford Bomson.

Restored Jewish cemetery in Gombin, Diane Stupay in background

That it was directed mainly at Jews, for simply being Jews, is unfathomable. That some Poles killed Jews and maybe some relatives in the riots of 1946 and 1968, was incredible! That there was no restitution after the war, is unacceptable! That there was virtually no recognition of Jewish settlement in towns like Gabin, is unconscionable. Of course, Jewish organizations, such as the Gombin Society are refurbishing cemeteries and other Jewish sites. There are young Poles who care and are writing about the Jewish presence. Also, survivors are now discussing their experiences in these Polish towns.

Gostynin, the Motherland

It is likely that our Gombiner grandparents were reared in Plock or Gombin and then moved to Gostynin in the nineteenth century. Gostynin is a newer Jewish settlement and Jews likely settled there from elsewhere. The town is 45 minutes north of Gombin, along a two lane highway; it is also 15 miles south of Plock and about 60 miles west of Warsaw. Again, there were only a limited number of farms and little activity along the road. The trip to Gostynin was dull, and we were beginning to look for food and drink before we started back to Warsaw. We saw signs to Gostynin and then within minutes we entered the city.

The road proceeds under a railroad overpass and within a block or two, we found stores and some cars. A few blocks further brought us to the town square. I recognized it from a picture postcard of Gostynin that my mother kept. We parked on the square and walked slowly around it. It had some clothing stores and other shops, and at least one restaurant. City Hall was at the other end of the square. And there was a monument dealing with the war—memorializing the death and destruction of its citizens.

There were few people on the square in the mid-afternoon, and we had no contacts. Also, few Poles in small towns can either understand or speak English. Until 1989, Poland was under the heel of the Soviet Communists. They restricted any contacts with America and with the West; most people could not get books and publications in English. Poland became a Soviet backwater, but the plucky Poles, aided by the "Polish" Pope, continuously provoked the Soviets; they eventually loosened the rigid controls, but restricted contact with the West.

What is surprising about Gostynin is that there are few third generation children, who have taken much interest in this town. Of course, there are some survivors in Israel. There is a Yizkor Book, but there is no strong Gostynin Society in the U.S. Why the lack of interest? After all, it was a thriving community, close to Gombin and the major town in the region, Plock; it is not far from Warsaw. Clearly, the current residents are equally fearful of strangers and do not want to be reminded of the 500 Jewish families that once lived here. It

Gostynin, town center, with directions to Plock and Wloclawek

was a group that dominated their local market and shared their problems and poverty. Many Jews connected with this town seemed to have abandoned it, and maybe for good reason!

Several uncles and their families lived in Gostynin in the 1920s and 1930s, including Gedalia (Dalush or Dolek in Polish or Daniel in English), his wife Renia and their child, Izio or Isaac, born in 1929; he is named after Gedalia's deceased father (our grandfather). Renia's parents lived nearby and frequently cared for the child. Uncle Romek (Roman) also stayed with them while he was alive; he wrote that he loved to play with his new nephew. In the letters that I published, Jacob Gombiner, the oldest brother, liked to visit Dolek and Renia in Gostynin, traveling from his home in Wloclawek. Aunt Hanna and her husband, Shlomo, originally lived in Gostynin, where he had a tannery.

As I noted in my earlier book,[11] Dolek was a very entrepreneurial person. He started as a bookkeeper in the Bank of Lodowy, which was on the main square. After a few years, he went into business as an independent bookkeeper working from his home; later he opened a grain and products trading company, which failed with the rest of the economy just before the war started. His company, Ch. Bagno G. Gombiner i S-ka, was located on Tr. Bierzewicki. The Zychlinski's (Aunt Hannah and her husband, Shlomo) lived on Kowater Str, 12 (probably the German name). Dolek and his family lived on Chuhlencocy #5 (spelling hard to read) and later in the ghetto at Judengasse #13 (renamed during the occupation). Many of the buildings and the streets survived the war. Only the Jewish part—the cemetery, Shul, community facilities and the vitality of the town are gone.

We found one restaurant on the square, but it only served pizza. While it was not a memorable place, at least it had excellent, cold Polish beer. For Ernie and me, the family feast in the middle of this backwater had a surreal aspect. After all, this was our mothers' home town and there was no one to welcome us. No one spoke English; nor could we find the Jewish sites or places where our family lived. Was this experience necessary? Did it justify our journey?

Travel is sometimes like that; it is not always rewarding at every turn. There are downers and disappointments. We brought to the trip some stereotypes about the Poles, especially their anti-Semitism and attitudes towards Jews and

[11] Stupay, Arthur M., *Memory and Understanding.* Cleveland Ohio: Wicklow Press, 2005

other minorities. This was apparent when we encountered unfamiliar places like Gostynin, and its people. Maybe, ethnic travel requires more preparation and better contacts. The past was tragic, and the travel frustrating. Nevertheless, we can learn and grow from the experience.

Gostynin in History

There was a Jewish settlement in Gostynin as early as 1765, when it was a private town, established by the landowner. There were 1,831 Jews in the town in the 1920s, representing about one-quarter of the population; according to Ada Holtzman's web-site, zchor.org, the Jewish population exceeded 2,200 in 1939.

Jews began to settle there in the 1820s, when a ghetto was established; a Russian decree of the 1860s allowed Jews to live anywhere, if they dressed in "modern" clothing and spoke Polish. Nevertheless, many Jews continued to live close to the "Jewish Lane," near the old temple. This section was located north of the market, where the train station now stands.

Gostynin with 400-500 Jewish families was nearly the same size as Gombin. Most of the Jewish residents were in trade and dominated the business section, tending to shops and workrooms. There were no large factories, but there were woodworking shops, small metal working operations and tanneries; there were also tailors, and garment workers and people in the fur business. The tradesman served the peasants and farmers who lived in the country-side. The Bank of Ludowy, which employed our Uncle Dolek, was probably owned by a Jewish family, since few Jews worked for Gentiles. There were other banks located there, which were branches of Warsaw banks. There were no doctors in the early 1920s. Gostyniners went to Plock for medical treatment, which was about 15 miles away. Both our grandfather, Isaac, and Uncle Romek went there for an initial assessment of their illnesses. There was a thriving Hasidic community, with several schools and prayer houses.

World War II in Gostynin

The Germans were especially brutal in Gostynin and began a reign of terror as soon as they entered it in September 1939. One of their first acts was to order

City Hall, Gostynin, 2006

the destruction of the temple, as they did in Gabin; they required the Jews to deliver the wood to the Germans, who were resettled there. (An old synagogue in Plock on ul. Kwiatka survived.) The cemetery was desecrated and the tombstones became paving stones for the streets. It is likely that both the Nazis and the Poles used them for this unintended purpose. There were two Jewish cemeteries in Gostynin, the "old" and the "new," and both were obliterated.[12]

In early 1940, the Jews were herded into a ghetto, which the German and Poles guarded. The ghetto was established around the area of Plocka, Buczka, Wojska Polskiego and Bagnista Streets. According to zchor.org it was an open ghetto, but it was later enclosed with barbed wire and sealed off from the rest of the town. The Jews in the ghetto hoped to survive by creating laundry and tailoring workshops. Jews from nearby towns and villages were also herded into this ghetto and conditions deteriorated quickly.

The final liquidation of the Jews of Gostynin occurred on April 16-17, 1942, when nearly all of the 2,500 Jews in the ghetto (there is some uncertainty about the exact numbers) were murdered at Chelmno, including many in our family.[13]

There were very few survivors and none of them returned to Gostynin; only one family member survived, Zonvel Zajac. There is an active Gostynin Society in Israel, composed of survivors and their children. There was a society in New York, which my mother and aunts belonged to, but it no longer exists. It is surprising that the Nazis even bothered to brutalize Gostynin, since it had no strategic value. It is likely that the ethnic Germans in the town benefited from the plunder of the Jews.[14]

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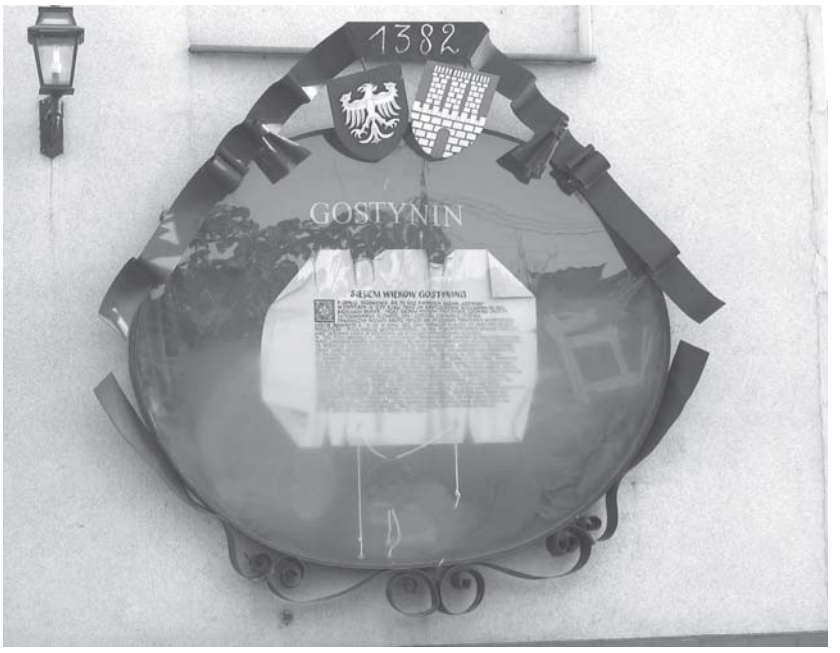
[12] According to Ada Holtzman's research, there are no traces of the cemetery that survived the war. This is not a unique situation. Jerzy Ficowski wrote in his introduction to Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, that nothing remains of the cemetery in Drogobych, Poland in which Schulz was buried in 1942. The site of the "New" Jewish cemetery, on Goscinna Street, is now owned by the Gostynin municipality.

[13] Among the victims were Aunt Hannah, Uncle Shlomo, and cousins, Helenka and Fela. Also, the family of Gedalia Gombiner, including Dolek, his wife, Renia, and their son, Izio, were killed in that slaughter of innocents. Uncle Jacob Gombiner and his family of nearby Wloclawek may also have been killed at Chelmno.

[14] See Gotz, Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries, Plunder, Racial War and the Nazi Welfare State*. New York, NY: Holt & Company, 2007. Gotz shows how the Nazis used the plunder from the Jews to get compliance and support from the German settlers and some Poles.

Above, old style wooden residence n Gostynin, near the town center.
Below, town memorial



What was the role of the church and the town leaders in either abetting the plunder and murder or in helping the victims? Perhaps another visit is warranted to elicit this history.

The issue of restitution of property and artifacts resurfaces again and again. Property, vehicles, jewelry were owned by the former Jewish residents, who did not leave of their own accord; they were murdered and the property stolen and in some cases given to townspeople as bribes. How much of this plunder survives in the town? There is silence about it here and in the rest of Poland.

Izio Gombiner, Gostynin, circa 1935
(Holocaust victim)

Warsaw Experience

After the trip to Gostynin, Ernie and his family headed south in their camper, while Diane and I stayed in Warsaw for a few days. Warsaw was closer to what I can cope with; it is the biggest city in Poland and has a lively culture, with art galleries and museums; there are also some interesting shops and cafes. Concerts abound, featuring Chopin's music. Although Chopin died in France, his heart is buried in Warsaw, and he is considered a national treasure. He and Mme. Marie Curie, an early Nobel laureate, continue to inspire many Polish students.

Warsaw is the center of business and political life in Poland. It is the literary capital and the home of the major university. Theoretically, it should have had a positive resonance. But it is no New York; in fact it has the same population as Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland—about 1.5 million people. Some streets look like parade grounds in the Soviet model, especially in the city center, near the Palace of Culture and Science. Large parts of the city were destroyed; after the rubble was cleared, the Poles replaced some of the buildings and converted the rest into parks and wide boulevards.

Warsaw is still trying to overthrow the remnants of the Communist era. The Palace of Culture and Science, neighboring the rebuilt main railroad station, is the tallest building in town and dominates the city center.[15] The residents hate the building, since it was unwanted and the Soviets left the debt for the Poles to pay. The "Palace" like the housing built by the Communists, is appalling in design and layout and the building material is deteriorating. There is a tell-tale grey grime that has enveloped the Soviet-style buildings, and is a sure sign of their origins.

Finally, a crime wave has plagued the city. One person with whom I corresponded, a journalist, could not pick us by car, because it had been stolen recently. The guidebook, Lonely Planet for Poland (2006), suggested caution in exploring certain neighborhoods.

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[15] This building is a copy of the main tower at the University of Moscow.

Jewish Sites in Warsaw

Our first stop in Warsaw was the Ronald Lauder section of the Jewish Historical Institute on Tlomackie Street. There we met Ania Przybyszewska Drozd and Yale Reisner, with whom I have been corresponding about genealogical sources and archives. This Institute was the library of the Great Synagogue, which was located across the street. The synagogue, in the form of a Greek Temple, was built in 1878 and was the largest one in Warsaw; there were 450 Jewish temples and prayer houses in Warsaw before the war. The Nazis blew up the temple building in May 1943 during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and it was replaced some thirty years later by a modern office building without much character. The impressive library building, which houses the Institute, gives a hint of the grandeur of the temple that was located across the alley. It also contains material from the Warsaw Ghetto.

We did not receive a particularly warm welcome at the Institute. It is obvious that the staff of two was extremely busy responding to inquiries world-wide, mostly from Jews, on family roots. It is amazing that only two people are engaged in this activity, using only aging computers and their phenomenal collective memories. After a while, the discussion became more cordial and I was given information on data sources and archives that might help me find new information on my uncles and aunts, about whom I knew precious little, except their names.

This unit needs staff and funding to increase its data base and search capabilities. However, like many Poles (although Yale is an American), the staff seemed somewhat secretive or shy in dealing with the insistent Jewish public, which seeks information on lost relatives. Maybe this hesitancy is a defensive reaction for emotional encounters with victims and their families; maybe they try to avoid getting enmeshed with the restitution issue; maybe they are overwhelmed by the work schedule. Nevertheless, they are remarkable people, dedicated to helping Jews in their quest for information on the lost generation of Polish Jewry. I am sure that no one in this type of research can escape the devastating emotional impact of the Holocaust.

At the Institute, Ania told me about the main archival sources in Poland that I might contact. She said that there is a State Archive in Krakow that contains information on Jewish doctors. I hoped it might contain a curriculum vitae filed by Jacob Stupay, which the Nazis required of all Jewish doctors. I asked

Gesia Street Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw

why a Jewish doctor would file this document, since he or she might expect to be contacted by the Nazis. Ania responded that the Nazis required that all Jewish doctors fill it out; if they demurred, they could be arrested. She added that the Holocaust occurred in several stages; extermination started two to three years after the Nazi invasion of Poland. In 1940, when this law was posted, Polish Jews had no inkling of the disaster that was in the planning stage; many Jews felt that by complying with the Nazi laws they might survive.

Ania and Yale also told me about a recent book that mentioned Jacob Stupay. The author was Agata Tusynska, who wrote a touching biography of Isaac Bashevis Singer; her new book deals with her experience in coming to terms with her Jewish heritage, which was kept from her.[16]

The next day we visited the Jewish institutions in Warsaw, including the one remaining temple, the Nozyk Synagogue, where services are held on Fridays. This synagogue was named after its benefactor, Zalman Nozyk and his wife; he was a wealthy merchant. We were told that the Nozyk Synagogue survived because the Nazis used it as a stable and barn for the horses of officers. Could the Nazi occupiers have really gotten satisfaction from using a major Jewish institution as a stable?

Near the Nozyk Synagogue is the Yiddish State Theatre complex and its Kaminska Theatre, named after its late director, Ida Kaminska. The theatre presents regular performances of Yiddish plays; strangely, there are few Jewish actors who perform in the theatre and few Jews in the audience. Several other Jewish organizations have offices in this complex, including the Jewish newspaper.

We also visited the impressive Jewish Cemetery, on Gesia Street, with most gravestones intact. In fact, there were 250,000 tombstones, and many have survived. Many of the leading Jewish literary and cultural figures of Poland are buried here.

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[16] I have emailed her and we have maintained contact; she is related to Jacob's wife, Flora Herman. Her book on Isaac Bashevis Singer is, *Lost Landscapes, In Search of Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Jews of Poland*. New York, N.Y: William Morrow and Co, 1998; it is a wonderful read.

Above, Lazienski Gardens, taken from the overlook at Museum of Contemporary Art, Warsaw
Below, Diane Stupay on the patio of the same museum

Finally, we spent the rest of our time in the Warsaw Ghetto—in fact, there were two Ghettos. There are even some buildings that survived the war or were rebuilt. Most of the area of the Ghetto was left in rubble and subsequently flattened. There are parks and monuments commemorating the tragedy, including a fragment of the original wall, which is about ten feet high. One of the most dramatic places is the site memorializing the bunker of Mordechai Anielewicz, who, at 24 years, was the leader of the Jewish Fighters Organization (ZOB), which was the main resistance movement. His bunker was on ul. Mila 18. Jacob Stupay lived nearby on ul. Leszno in 1941. The Poles also recognize Anielewicz as an important hero of the war. In the Ghetto Uprising, his location was disclosed and the Nazis blew the building to bits; Anielewicz and many of his compatriots were buried in the rubble.

The most emotionally searing site was Umschlagplatz at ul. Stawki. This is the transfer point from which over 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were transported to Treblinka in 1942 and 1943. Nearby are buildings still extant where the Nazis organized train schedules for the transfer. These sites seem sterile, but in their sterility they pre-ordain the horror of the final movement of Jews to Treblinka and certain death. In our present complacency and circumstances, it is impossible to imagine the terror and horror of starving humans, including men, women and children, being sent to death, some of whom were related to us.

For many Americans (including me), the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising seemed like a minor skirmish in a war that involved tens of millions of combatants spread across a battlefield of three thousand miles. What it really signifies is the indomitable effort by the remaining Jews of the Ghetto to prevent a third deportation to Treblinka and certain death, after 275,000 Jews had already been deported and killed.[17] The Jewish combatants had few weapons; they obtained more weapons, ammunition and grenades during the battle. Additional weapons were provided by the Polish Underground, although there is some controversy about how supportive the Underground was in the Jewish uprising; some historians claim that it gave minimal help.

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[17] Among these victims were several family members, including the mother, wife and children of Jacob Stupay as well as Abram Stupay and his wife and two children. (One of them, Azriel Stupay, survived and settled in Israel.)

Nozyk Synagogue, Warsaw

The ZOB (ghetto fighters) developed an intricate network of tunnels, bunkers and fortifications, which enabled them to hold out and tie down the Nazis in Warsaw for two months—from April 19, 1943 to June 1943. The ZOB fought 2,000 well-armed German soldiers. They killed 400 soldiers and wounded several hundred more. Jewish losses in the Ghetto were enormous, but some fled to the Aryan side and they continued to fight the Nazis. This act of bravery is now recognized in several monuments in the Ghetto; it should be memorialized by all Jews.[18]

There were also many Jews who escaped from the Warsaw Ghetto between 1940 and 1942. It was possible to bribe both Polish and German guards. There are varying estimates of the number of Jews who escaped, ranging from 20,000 to 50,000.[19] It is likely that my uncle, Jacob Stupay, escaped from the Ghetto, where he lived; he was later sheltered on the Aryan side. He was helped by a relative of his wife, Flora Herman Stupay; his savior was Aleksander Majewski; also, the Jewish aid organization, Zegota, undoubtedly assisted. Zegota was partly funded by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Polish Exile Government in London; my parents as well as many Jews in the States actively supported the Joint Distribution.

For the rest of our time in Warsaw, Diane and I visited museums, monuments and historical sites, including the Chopin Museum. We also walked around the summer palace of King Jan III Sobiesky and the surrounding Royal Park, now called the Lazienski Gardens; it adjoins the Museum of Contemporary Art. This gave us a chance to relax a bit from the intensity of meeting schedules and confronting the tragedies of our family. We could also enjoy the interesting cuisine and the many pubs, coffee bars, restaurants, and shops in the vicinity of the university and our hotel.

[18] See Tushnet, Leonard, *To Die With Honor*, *the Uprising of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.* New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1965. It is a vital source on the Warsaw ghetto uprising.
[19] See Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2002.

Polish Economy

I wanted to gain new insights about the Polish economy, its problems and prospects. I made two contacts that I hoped would provide a better understanding of business life. One contact was the head of a mid-size public relations (PR) firm in Warsaw; the other was the director of an economic consultancy. Both are sophisticated businessmen and observers with wide contacts in government and industry.

The PR executive runs a firm of about 60 people, which deals with a variety of communications issues faced by local business. We discussed the Polish business environment, about which he was cautious, despite the impressive recent growth. For one thing, he is concerned that the right wing politics of the current government might impact civil rights. I also asked about the high unemployment rate and the exodus of young workers, both of which he attributed to high employment taxes.

The second contact runs an economic consulting firm. Most of his clients are in the business sector; he also counsels some government agencies. I asked him about the unemployment rate, which is reported to be over 20 percent. He said that the actual rate is lower, but many firms do not report all of their full-time workers, due to extremely high employment taxes. He indicated that these taxes can account for over fifty percent of the payroll. As a result, there is a flourishing "grey" market, with employers hiring workers "off-the-payroll" and paying them in cash. He puts the unemployment rate in the low teens, still considerably higher than it is in the main EU countries.

For him, the main problem in Poland is that students are poorly prepared for work, and jobs are scarce. Part of the reason is that Poland is still largely agricultural, with many small farms and processing facilities; there are few opportunities for jobs in the cities. Most people live in small towns and work in state enterprises, which provide only limited advancement opportunities.[20] The schools are not adequately preparing students for work in technology-based sectors; also, students are not performing well. According to him, only 7 percent of the workforce is highly educated, with another 20 percent just

[20] The three major cities, Warsaw. Lodz and Krakow, together account for only 10 percent of the Poland's total population of 35 million.

Monument od the Heroes of the Ghetto, dedicated to the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, near ul. Zamenhofa and Anielewicz, designed by Marek Suzin, erected in 1948

below that category. The remainder or 73 percent have not gone beyond 12th grade and many have quit after 16 years of age. Even in school, grades are low; 20 percent of second graders did not pass minimum standards tests.

Poland also has a growing teenage population, leading to a surfeit of young workers. The growing number kept a lid on wages in entry level jobs; it has also resulted in high unemployment rates. Low wages have attracted foreign investment to supply the European market and Russia; it is safer for businesses to make the product in Poland than in Russia. Unemployment has also fueled high emigration rates, which is the natural safety valve when jobs are scarce.

Polish economic problems stem from the legacy of socialism and rigid state controls under communism. Under this regime, major industry, banks and transportation facilities were nationalized; they were rigidly controlled by bureaucrats, who set prices and wages, and determined production quotas. This was bound to fail, since no authority can micro manage all economic decisions. Nevertheless, many Poles still believe that government controls are necessary, and support politicians who seek to delay privatization.

After the fall of communism, the new government went to the other extreme, eliminating government subsidies and implementing privatization. It sought the help of outside experts to counsel it on how to become a capitalist state and spur economic growth. Jeffrey Sachs, then professor of economics at Harvard (now at Columbia), was hired. Sachs was and remains a forceful advocate of the "cold turkey" approach, which involves implementing a strictly laissez faire economic policy, without a phase-in period.

The immediate aftermath of this program was chaos. Prices of bread, other foods, fuel and electricity, all formerly subsidized by the government, soared, and the average worker's real income plummeted; poverty rates jumped. Farmers were the only ones who favored it, but when their fuel, chemicals, food, clothing and everything else inflated, they also complained. The key Polish figure in this disastrous policy was Leszek Balcerowicz, then the young president of the Polish Central Bank and a trained economist. The policy was reinforced by "experts" of the World Bank and the IMF. Both institutions promised assistance if Poland embraced immediate elimination of subsidies and privatized industry. The economic hardships in Poland in the 1990s gave opponents of globalization support in criticizing the IMF and the World Bank. So

much for "rational" economic policy that does not consider the welfare of the average worker!

Poland then retrenched, brought back subsidies and slowed privatization. Finally, ten years after the initial experiment with capitalism, the private economy is growing. Yet, unemployment is high and many young workers are discouraged. Currently, the banks, insurance companies, and steel producers are privately owned. But there are still many state-owned enterprises, including energy distribution, large scale manufacturing and mining in "strategic" sectors, and even smaller businesses.

The right wing support for growing privatization and the left wing opposition to it still dominate the current economic debate. A further complication is that the current right wing government of the "twins," Lech Kaczynski, the president, and his brother, Jaroslav Kaczynski, the Prime Minister, are now against further privatization, creating even more confusion. They recently forced the resignation of the Finance Minister, Mr. Balcerowicz, now twenty years older; he still remains a leading supporter of "cold turkey" and privatization policies.

Also, the ruling Law and Justice Party, controlled by the "twins," promoted policies that were markedly nationalistic, and anti-Gay, banning parades and demonstrations. This puts it into conflict with the EU Constitution, which requires member states to protect civil rights. A key party leader urged state prosecutors to investigate whether homosexuals are involved in pedophilia. Intolerance leads to further intolerance; unfairly targeting minorities allows some Poles to make wild charges—the usual ones. This spate of madness resulted in some maniac punching Poland's Chief Rabbi, Michael Schudrich, in the chest, in 2005, shouting "Poland for the Poles."[21] There were other episodes of intolerance and Poland is fighting the image of becoming anti-foreign. The past prejudices and fears still influence the behavior of many Poles. After the incident, Poland's President Kaczynski apologized to the Chief Rabbi.

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[21] I met Rabbi Schudrich when he visited Cleveland in the 1990s. I promised to visit him in Warsaw. At that time, he split his time between New York and Warsaw, but now spends most of his time in Poland.

Above: Warsaw Ghetto Wall
Below: Map of Ghetto

Lodz Visit

On Sunday morning, July 16, we begin the second leg of the trip and that was a visit to Lodz, the home of my uncle, Dr. Jacob Stupay, when he was alive. Also, we had a date with our friend, who is now a City Councilman and a political leader. We hosted him and a delegation of Polish city officials when they visited Cleveland several years earlier.

The train ride from the capital of Poland to the second largest city, about 120 miles apart, took three hours. The trains were old and the road bed needed work. Similar trains were used by our aunts and uncles when they made this trip in the 1930s. It is possible that these trains were provided by the Soviets as a "friendship" gesture. There is nothing like them in Europe or America. (I understand that the trains will be replaced with funds provided by the EU.)

Our friend met us on arrival and took us to our hotel, The Grand. We thought that it might rival the Bristol, since it was on the main street, ulica Piotrkowska. We were dead wrong. It was an old White Elephant that had not been renovated in 50 years or more. The mattresses sagged and the furniture was old and decaying; they were ratty. But it was one block from Jacob's former home. It is in the heart of town and on an impressive wide street. In the evening, the neighborhood comes alive with students from the University of Lodz; couples hang out in the many pubs and restaurants along the street.

We were given a room in back of the hotel facing an alley with noisy equipment. We asked for a room closer to the desk, one facing the avenue; it was given to us. This room had a sitting area with old decaying chairs and couches, which were decidedly ugly. But it had better air circulation, which was important, since there was no air conditioning anywhere in the hotel. We decided that we could rough it for one night, which we did. As it turned out, it was not as unpleasant as expected.

Piotrkowska is the Fifth Avenue of Lodz. It is four kilometers long and is the grandest street in town. It is a museum of late nineteenth century architecture, designed by the best architects of the time to house the industrial elite. The Grand Hotel was once a factory that was converted into a hotel in 1887-1888. It was further enlarged by the well-known local architect, Dawid Lande, who also designed some of the large homes in Lodz. It has an interesting His

Above: Piotrkowska Street, Lodz
Below: Defaced wall on Piotrkowska, 2007

front with columns and gargoyles, and a Mansard roof. It is regarded by the locals as a wonderful example of "Neo-Renaissance" design, borrowed from the great mansions of Renaissance France. Many of the leading visitors to the town stayed there, including Paderewski, Rubinstein, who grew up in the next block, Roman Polanski and Jean Cocteau, among other great performers and artists. (Lodz is the film capital of Poland and has the best film school.) The rest of the street has many buildings of similar vintage. The fronts have been renovated and cleaned, but the interiors still look shabby.

Jewish Sites in Lodz

Our friend took us on a tour of Jewish and civic sites of Lodz. The first stop was the Jewish cemetery at the edge of town. This cemetery, on Bracka and Zmienna Streets, was acquired by the Jewish Community in 1892 and contains over 50,000 gravestones and markers. It is located down a bumpy dirt road bereft of any markers. The street reminded me of Tobacco Road, where poor southerners lived. After we parked, we came upon the cemetery entrance, which has an impressive gate structure. As we entered it, I saw gravel, stones and construction refuse. Further on, we encountered the mortuary, where the deceased was prepared for burial. This building now contains a photography exhibition dealing with the Jews of Lodz.

At that point, I asked our friend if he could find out if my uncle was buried here. He contacted the director of the exhibition, who volunteered to search the files. I was skeptical that we could find any record of his burial. As it turned out, the director called and told us that he is buried there, giving us the number of site. (There is now a web-site for the cemetery that lists deceased persons buried in the cemetery.) I did not ask about my maternal grandfather, Israel Mordechai Zajac, who is also buried there.[22]

On Monday, before we left Lodz for Krakow, we were driven to the cemetery so that we could visit Jacob's grave. We located the cemetery manager; after checking his register, he took us to the site. We eventually found his grave, but it was overgrown with thick vines. The gravestone reads, "Stupaj, Jakub Aron, son of Solomon Lajb, died September 19, 1955, buried by friends." (It is located in Quarter N, right side, number 201A.) Surprisingly there is no mention of his wife, Flora (Florentine), or his children, Theodore and Eugenia, all of whom were murdered by the Nazis in 1941 or 1942.

[22] The information on Isaac M. Zajac comes from my cousin, Alex Arbel, of Israel. His relationship is discussed in my earlier book on the Gombiner family.

Above, Honor Guard, Tomb of the Unknown Soldier
Below, Jewish Cemetery, Lodz

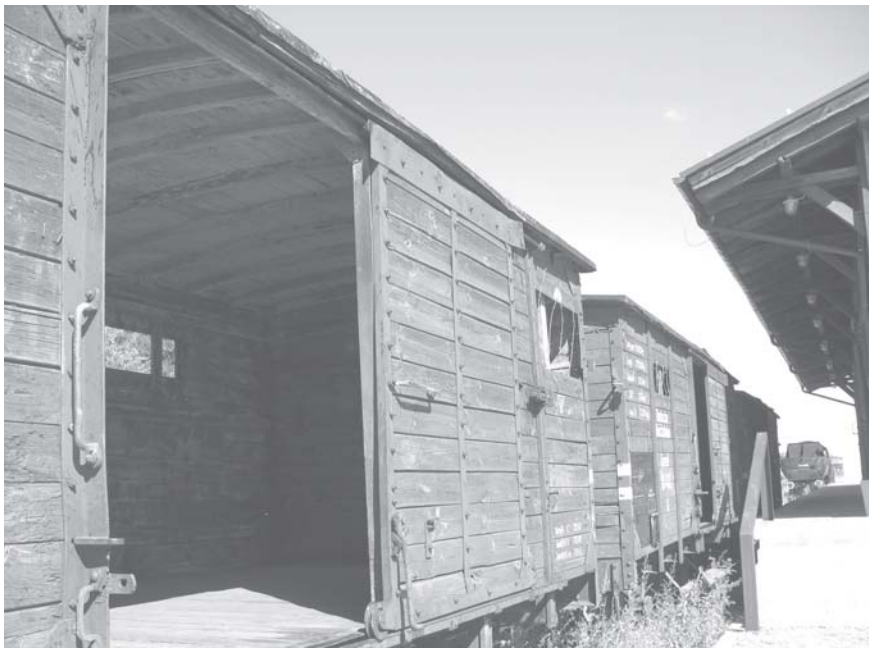
His gravestone is impressive and tasteful; it is located close to the mausoleum monuments of wealthy Jewish industrialists, like Israel Poznanski. Diane and I said a prayer and placed stones on the grave as a sign of our visit. There is a second Stupay, Szlama Stupay, who is buried in the cemetery, but I cannot determine our family relationship. It is possible that he died elsewhere, but was interred here in the late 1950s.

This was an unexpected discovery and I began to raise more questions about Jacob than there were answers. Why did his friends not list his wife and children killed in the Holocaust on his gravestone? Why did he stay in Lodz after the war? Why did he insist on writing us only on postcards? Why did he not leave us more material about his family so we could appreciate and mourn them? Why? Why? Why? Our friend was very pleased that he could help us locate Jacob's grave and was genuinely moved by our emotions.

After the first cemetery visit, we made inquiries about Jacob in several archives in town and was told that it was unlikely that we would find any material about him. Nevertheless, we made an official inquiry and we were told that material would be forwarded to us if anything was found. We later received two letters, which provided the date of his death and his address in Lodz; they did not provide any personal information about him, his wife or children.

I wanted to speak with anyone who knew him or was helped by him, but realized that after all these years the prospect was very limited. Why did I not embark on this quest sooner, when some of his friends or relatives were still alive? While I corresponded with Jacob after my father died, he was reticent to talk about the war and did not disclose any details about his family or his life, or how he managed to survive. At least, I was there to memorialize his death and walk in his footsteps. I hoped that I would be more successful in Krakow's State Archive.

Later, we saw some civic highlights of Lodz, including Poznanski Park; it functions as civic center, museum complex, shopping center and place to hang out with the family. It was very crowded and had a large area filled with sand like a beach, where Lodzers played beach ball and volley ball in swimsuits. There was a rock band and dance floor as well. Surrounding the facility were the looming textile mills, once owned by the prominent Jewish industrialist, Israel Poznanski, and his family. This was one of the largest mill sites in Eu-



Above: Boxcars used to transport Jews to labor camps and death camps
Below: Lodz Memorial to the Holocaust

rope and included looms, dyeing rooms, design shops and offices. There were a dozen buildings in the complex, and they are now "owned" by the city.

Adjoining this park and shopping center is the Israel (and Leonia, his wife) Poznanski Palace, which survived and now serves as the Lodz City Museum. There are several palaces of the Poznanski's, including Maurycy Poznanski's at Wieckowskeigo 36, which is now the home of the Museum of Art, featuring a well-regarded modern collection. There were other impressive residences in the vicinity. I also wanted to see the main Catholic Church, St. Stanislaw. It is unexpectedly in the Gothic style and very impressive. There were many Jewish synagogues and literally dozens of prayer houses in Lodz. Not one has survived. The first one was built on Wolborska Street at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[23] They were impressive institutions, but it may be impossible to know which one Jacob Stupay belonged to, though there is little question that he was an active member (as he was in Wloclawek).

After this tour in the heat of the day, we decided to rest up a bit and meet for dinner later. Our friend recommended a restaurant near the hotel, called Fiddler on the Roof, a "Jewish" restaurant. As the name connotes, the restaurant features a young violinist playing at the top of an artificial tree trunk near the ceiling of the restaurant. I had to pinch myself to prove that I was not dreaming.

The following day was a blur of activity, including a quick trip to the cemetery to revisit Jacob's grave, and to complete some research in the archives. We finished our tasks and dashed to the second train station at the other end of town for the trip to Krakow. Like many European towns, Lodz has two stations: one for trains east and the other for trains south.

I left reluctantly, since I did not find the material I sought. I was fascinated by the town. Diane had negative reactions to the visit: the poverty of the landscape and deterioration of the town depressed her, especially in the overwhelming heat. I felt that I had to return and do some serious archival research.

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[23] Professor Jacek Walicki, University of Lodz, wrote a book entitled, *Synagogues and Prayer Houses of Lodz.* Lodz, Poland: Druk Publishers, 2000. This effort was a labor of love and provides new material on the architecture of the buildings, none of which survived the war, not even a wall or building foundation.

Artificial “Beach” at Poznanski Park, Lodz

Some Historical Notes on Lodz

Lodz is situated close to the western border of Poland. Historically, it had settlers from Russian Poland and Prussia. The Russians decided to make Lodz a textile center by attracting weavers from the German states. It soon became the second largest city, which it still is, and an industrial center, which it is no longer. Its entrepreneurial talent created major cotton and textile mills; other manufacturing companies and banks were also established to support them. The leading industrial tycoons included Poznanski, Geyer, Grohman and Scheibler, among others.

By the First World War, the number of textile factories grew to over 200, most of which were Jewish owned. Also, Jews owned the transport, petroleum and chemical suppliers. Close to the mills were wholesalers and retailers of textile products, which were also largely owned or controlled by Jews. Some of these enterprises became public joint stock companies.

Most of the workers in the large mills were either German or Polish. The Jewish workers in Lodz were employed in small factories or in commerce. The textile industry also attracted service professionals, including lawyers and doctors, many of whom were Jews. There were also successful and prominent Jewish bankers and financiers, who contributed to this growth. One source estimated that there were 37 financial institutions in 1914, and 11 were owned by Jews; most of the rest had Jewish partners. Jews also joined with German bankers to form Bank Handlowy and Bank Kupiecki.

Wealth and job opportunities attracted a growing number of new workers, both Jew and Gentile. The town grew to 600,000, with Jews accounting for close to forty percent of the urban population; they also became important in political and municipal affairs, dominating the City Council for a time.

While there were many dedicated Jews in Lodz, I have the feeling that some of the wealthy Jews assimilated to Christianity. First, it was close to the German border and some wealthy Jews found it expedient to convert in order to socialize and inter-marry with German peers. Also, with many German Protestants in the town, it was easier for Jews to convert to some benign form of Protestantism than to Catholicism. Also, wealthy Jews sought to enhance their social status and political position, both of which were often boosted by conversion. The Jewish Community may have established a Reformed Jewish Temple, probably using the German model, for liberal-minded Jews.

Jacob and Flora Herman Stupay, early 1930's, Lodz

This wealth and education brought support for theatre and the arts. There were several Yiddish theatres, and musical groups performed regularly. There were numerous writers in Lodz and several literary journals were published. Jacob Tuwin, a major Polish poet, lived on ul. Piotrkowska. There were many Jewish cultural groups and institutions in Lodz, including the Jewish Music and Literary Society, Jewish Sports and Gymnastics Society, Jewish Scouting, and a Jewish hospital. There were many active literary groups. It was a "happening" town.

All this development and affluence was brought to an abrupt end, when the Nazis entered Lodz in early September 1939. Soon thereafter, the Jews were herded into a Ghetto, in the Baluty area, at the northern end of the town. Baluty was always an impoverished area and was not incorporated into Lodz until the 1930s; it had a poor infrastructure of sanitation and sewers; housing was sub-standard, even by Polish standards. At the outset, 160,000 people were herded into Ghetto, with several families assigned to one room. In addition, Jews were brought from surrounding towns (and from Hungary and Czechoslovakia), which made conditions even more tragic and deadly. It is estimated that at least 45,000 Jews died within the Ghetto walls. Most of the Ghetto inhabitants were murdered at Chelmno by September 1942.[24]

Some 10,000 Jewish Lodzers survived the war, and about 40,000 Jews returned to the city after liberation, including my uncle Jacob.[25] Jewish life immediately started to revive and schools and theatres were reestablished. This proved to be a false safe haven, since the infamous Kielce pogrom of 1946 convinced many Jews that they could not settle safely in Lodz or in Poland. Currently, there are about 500 or so Jewish residents, who still consider themselves Jews. There are many more people who have simply given up any Jewish affiliation; they valued their family life and professional standing more than their Jewish identity. Who can blame them? After all, in order to remain in this anti-Semitic environment, you had to shed any vestige of Jewish roots. The Jews who remain are courageous; they deserve our admiration and collegial support.

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[24] Some of the material on the Lodz Ghetto was saved by a relative of my aunt, Frymet Zonabend Stupay, wife of Abram Stupay of Kolo, before it was liquidated, in September 1942. This relative, Nachman (Natek) Zonabend, saved the ghetto documents and records of the Eldest of the Jews in Lodz, Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski. He hid them in a dry well until liberation. He survived the war, and until his recent death, lived in Stockholm. Many of the documents he saved are housed at YIVO in New York and at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. There are several Zonabend relatives in Stockholm and I have established a relationship with Artur Zonabend, who is nephew of Natek. Also see Dobroszycki, Lucjan, editor. *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto,* New Haven, CN: Yale University, 1984

[25] I speculate that Jacob and his family left Lodz, with many others, soon after the Germans arrived. He then fled to Warsaw.

Crypto or Silent Jews

From the number of contacts that we made in Poland, it appeared to us that there are many more people with Jewish roots than are indicated in Polish statistics. The official number is around 25,000. However, in a private survey completed some years earlier, the number was several times larger. Obviously, there was considerable emigration after 1968, during and after the anti-Jewish riots in Poland.[26]

Nevertheless, there is a large group of "former" Jews, who have given up any affiliation with the Jewish community; they never attend Jewish services and have denied their Jewish roots even to their children. This result is not surprising, since to remain in Poland is to avoid any relationship to a group that is reviled. It is the price of survival and maybe sanity. Many Jews married Polish Christians, either before the war or afterwards, and avoided further contact with Jews.

Of course, Jewish history is replete with examples of this survival tool, notably the period of the Spanish Inquisition. Jews were tortured and later expelled for their beliefs.[27] In Western Europe and in the U.S., Jews have not had to contend with this murderous treatment. Only in Poland and in the Moslem countries have there been major societal pressures to conform; you have three choices: remain silent about family roots, convert or emigrate.

Will these former Jews reunite with their co-religionists? My guess is, no. However, there is a reawakening among the children of these "silent" Jews, who are attracted to our culture. Some seek a connection to the underdog or non-conformist, which Jewish-ness represented; others are proud of Jewish culture and accomplishment; some are appalled at the weakness of their parents. The children of "silent" Jews may well be a vital new force in Judaism.

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[26] Many Poles among the intelligentsia were and are appalled at this outbreak of intolerance and violence against a decimated people. As I recall it, there was little outcry in the West.
[27] Partly because of Christian intolerance and expulsions of Jews, Spain went into a long decline, although there were other factors that contributed to it.

Jacob's gravestone, Lodz Jewish Cemetery

Research in Krakow

Diane and I spent three days in Krakow, which is hardly enough time to get one's bearings there. It has a rich heritage for Jews and Poles. It was where the great Polish kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth century lived. It was part of the Austrian empire since 1792, when it was annexed by the Hapsburgs, without any cause whatsoever; it was taken because the Polish king, who had a small army, was powerless to prevent it.

The Jewish population was very large, partly because the Austrians were tolerant and permitted them to settle and build temples and schools.[27] By 1939, there were 56,000 Jews living in Krakow, out of a population of 300,000. Today, total population has doubled to 600,000 and some Jews continue to live there, especially in the old Jewish neighborhood of Kasimierz.

The town is a beautiful example of a well-preserved and prosperous Middle European city, not unlike Prague, with an enormous square that was largely spared by the Nazis. It has a royal castle and people like to drive around the square and the castle by a fancy coach and horses. Visitors and students at nearby Jagielonian University, one of the oldest in Europe, eat and drink in the many pubs and outdoor cafes around the square. Many Jews lived in Kazimierz, across the river from the square. The Schindler factories (of Schindler's List fame) are located here, which we also visited.

Diane and I met our eleven year old granddaughter, Elisa, who accompanied her friend, Sarah, to visit her grandmother in Gliwice, an hour or so from Krakow.[28] The plan was to call her grandmother and have her bring Elisa to Krakow for the return trip to Rome with us. When they arrived, Diane arranged a private city tour of Krakow for them in three languages (English Italian and Polish), while I headed for the State Archive, where I spent the day.

The State Archive is an impressive old building near the Market Square. I entered it with great hopes. Soon I realized that few people spoke English and

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[27] An early king of Poland, Kasimierz, was tolerant of the Jews and gave them a charter so that they could govern their own affairs; supposedly he was also enamored by the legendary Jewish heroine, Esther.

[28] Elisa is the daughter of Ann Stupay and her husband, Loris Grossi, who live in Rome, Italy.

it would take more time and effort than I could devote to my research. Nevertheless, I found the right room in the Archive and the librarian understood my request for an index of material on Jewish doctors. The index was typed on plain paper and put in a plastic folder; the document appeared to be fraying from frequent use. The index was hard for me to use, since it was in Polish and there was no one to translate. The Librarian sensing my frustration gave me a Polish-to-English dictionary; this helped only slightly, since I had to translate every word and some words were not in the dictionary.

Out of desperation, I used my Yankee nerve and asked my research neighbor if he could help me. He said he knew some English, but could not translate. Then I asked another person and got the same answer. Other people moved as soon as they saw me coming. One fellow dropped a note on my desk, with a name, "J. Walicki, University of Lodz;" he jabbed his finger at it, indicating that I should contact him.

I eventually got some files on physicians, but they were not in alphabetical order and they were a jumble. I stayed there for several hours searching the files that were given me. I had no luck. There is a happy ending, since I later contacted Dr. Jacek Walicki, head of the Jewish Institute of the University of Lodz. He and a student, Michal Trebacz, and a research assistant, Ewa Wiatr, located several important files on Jacob in Lodz. These files answered many of my questions about him, including his university education, professional credentials, and details about his wife, son and daughter.[29] I could not have uncovered these files without Dr. Walicki's help; my frustrating trip to Krakow turned out very positively.

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[29] Jacob's wife was Florentine or Flora Herman. His son, Theodore, was born in 1929, and his daughter, Eugenia, was born in 1934. Jacob completed medical school at the University of Berlin in 1917, then one of the leading centers of science in Europe; Einstein was in residence there at the time. He remained at the University for three additional years of post-graduate training in ophthalmology.

Summary

This was my first trip to Poland. I have been to Europe many times and feel comfortable in London, Paris and Rome. Warsaw and Poland are different; they are off the beaten path for many Americans, who know little about Eastern Europe and care less, even though many have family roots there. Maybe the turmoil that engulfed the region, two world wars and the Holocaust, have made Americans nervous about traveling there

I found it eye-opening. I was impressed with the reconstruction from the devastation. Poles have also made remarkable strides in resurrecting Polish culture after the Nazis and Communists tried to obliterate it. I liked the Poles whom we met. They were cognizant of the tragic history of Jews in Poland and wanted to engage with us and discuss the war and its impact.

I was surprised by the number of "Silent Jews," who survived the war and who have become part of the fabric of the society, avoiding contact with institutional Judaism. While this strategy helped them negotiate a vicious anti-Semitic environment, their children have become curious and even interested in Jewish life and culture. It is equally astonishing that a Yiddish theatre in Warsaw thrives, even though there is only a small Jewish population.

Poland is a land of daunting problems. Its economy has not recovered from the devastation of both the Nazis and the Communists. Unemployment is high and young people are not able to find jobs; many leave when they are old enough to work. The roads and rail systems are well behind the standards of Western Europe; the education system has not been effective in the early grades; local industry and entrepreneurship lag.

Poland has made an enormous effort to become part of the European Union, though it is not yet part of the Euro system. Poland's help to the U.S. in Iraq and the War on Terror has been notable and it seeks even closer ties to Western Europe. Nevertheless, it is super sensitive to any verbal slights or threats from Germany and Russia, and for good reason.

After ten centuries of settlement, there are virtually no minorities in Poland. There are few Poles who identify themselves as Jews—less than 25,000. There are limited efforts to engage with Jews at the national level and no effort to

make restitution. Previous Polish Governments have avoided creating a "Truth Commission" to uncover Polish collaboration with the Nazis; they have refused to investigate Polish murder of Jews during the war.

Maybe it is too late to seek justice for the victims and their families. Maybe Poland will continue to be known for the emigration of its people. The Poles have been resilient and may learn from their past failures, especially from their negative attitudes towards minorities. Also, they have to overcome the bitter legacy of Communism. Yet the growing relationship with the EU is the strongest evidence that they want to embrace change and become a tolerant society.