Poland – August 2012 – Joseph G. Rosenstein

What follows is an account of my trip to Poland in August 2012. I have tried to organize my recollections and my reflections. But what may be missing from the details is the big picture. So let me start with that. I was reluctant to go on this trip because, when I saw the itinerary, it seemed to me that the tour consisted of going from one place to another where Jews once lived or where Jews were killed.

That didn't appeal to me because I already knew a lot about the Holocaust – my parents managed to escape at the last minute (they left Germany and arrived in England on August 31, 1939, the day before Hitler invaded Poland), my mother's relatives were all killed, my father's brother and sisters were in labor camps, I met many survivors in the late 1940s because my parents organized a "new Americans" organization to support the transition of survivors into American society, and I have read many books and viewed many films on the subject. I also have thought a great deal about the Holocaust – particularly as I was translating and commenting on the prayers in my siddur and machzor – and the critical questions of where was God during the Holocaust and what does that imply about prayer.

And yet I decided to go – several friends had already signed up for the tour, an interesting speaker had been engaged as guide, and this would probably be my last opportunity to go there. However, when people asked me why I was going, I didn't have a ready answer. When I mentioned this to my wife Judy, she told me that I was going to say Kaddish, and that was true. I went to say Kaddish, and I did say Kaddish … many times.

Once I realized that I was going to be saying Kaddish, I wrote a prologue to the Kaddish, which I felt was needed because the text of the Kaddish is basically praise of God, and that does not correspond to the feelings I expected to have when faced with the enormity of the Holocaust.

In my siddur, I follow the perspective of Rabbi Harold Kushner in "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" that, when faced with the contradiction between God as all good and God as all powerful, it is better to abandon the latter than to abandon the former – that is, to assume that God has withdrawn from direct intervention in the world in order to allow nature and humans to exercise their free will. Thus God weeps with us over the tragedies that we suffer and, from that perspective, the Kaddish becomes a prayer to lift God's spirits, as it were, in the face of the evil that has been perpetrated as an outcome of God's withdrawal. My prologue to the Kaddish is appended to this document.

Beyond providing me an opportunity to say Kaddish for the members of my family who were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators, the trip enabled me to understand the richness and diversity of the Jewish presence in Poland before the Holocaust, and to experience the enormity of the destruction that the Nazis carried out throughout Poland. I learned what it was like at this place, and what happened here, what it was like at that place, and what happened there. I walked on the same streets where my people walked, and marched along the same paths to which they were marched to their deaths. I could not even imagine the terror that they felt as they faced their destruction, but I was in some of those terrible places. I was a witness to what happened to my people in Poland, and a witness that my people again outlived its oppressors.

I didn't expect to find answers to my questions, and I didn't; indeed I now have many more questions to which I have no answers, as the account that follows will demonstrate. But I am very grateful to have had this opportunity, and very glad that I went.

We left for Poland on Monday evening August 6 and arrived at the Warsaw airport on Tuesday morning August 7. We stayed in Warsaw for two nights, then spent one night in Lublin and four nights in Krakow, and left Krakow early in the morning of Tuesday August 14, returning home that evening. Along the way we visited other towns and sites. There were 36 people on the trip, including my daughter Nessa.

Our guide for the trip was Shalmi Bar-Mor, an Israeli whose parents were from Poland and who had great knowledge of the Jews in Poland and, particularly, about the period of the Holocaust. Most of the factual information in this memoir was based on Shalmi's presentations to our group. Also serving as a guide for the trip was a Pole called Chris who was a retired army officer who also knew a great deal about Polish history and the Holocaust.

At the end of the first day, I started what I intended to be a daily diary. However, there was not enough down-time in the program for me to continue writing each day. Thus the initial paragraphs discussing Warsaw were drafted (handwritten) at the end of the first day (Wednesday), but the next opportunity I had to write was several days later when I skipped the scheduled program and used the laptop that I recovered from Nessa to record my observations, recollections, and reflections of the previous days. Although I took some notes during the remaining days of the tour, I didn't collect them together and complete this report until several days after our return from Poland. This report is intended to be thematic, and not necessarily chronological.

Since much of this report is written from memory, there will undoubtedly be errors and omissions, which I hope that others will bring to my attention.

Although I found the trip to be very worthwhile and very informative, and I am very glad that I went, the trip did not resolve any questions that I had about the Holocaust and indeed raised many new questions. I also found the tour very challenging physically, and felt that we were always on the go. There should have been more "down time" and also opportunities for the participants to debrief, to discuss and process the day's events; as it was, there was only one all-too-brief debriefing session after our visit to Auschwitz.

From the airport we went directly to the Warsaw cemetery, at which Shalmi's focus was on countering the myth created by the famous photographs of Roman Vishniak that conveyed the impression that Jewish life in early 20th century Poland was exclusively that of religious Jews. To demonstrate this point, at the cemetery, which is very large, we visited the gravesites of S. Ansky and Y.L. Peretz, two major figures in Yiddish literature, the father of Janos Korchak, a famous educator (among Poles as well as Jews), who instead of saving himself went with his students to Treblinka, Esther Kaminska, considered the mother of Jewish theater (and the mother of the famous actress Ida Kaminska), and Marek Edelman, a leader of the Bund, and Ludwig Zamenhof, who invented and disseminated Esperanto. Each had a different vision of Yiddishkeit and/or the future of the world, and made significant efforts to carry out their vision.

The idea behind creating Esperanto was that if everyone spoke the same language, then there would be no more wars. My parents learned and became teachers of Esperanto, and attended an Esperanto conference in Sweden. They hoped to gain asylum in Sweden, but the Swedes sent them back to Danzig. (I only know two words of Esperanto, “ne parole”, pronounced “neh pa-ro-leh”, and meaning “don’t speak”, which one parent said to the other as a warning that the children were listening.)

We also visited the gravesite of Adam Czerniakov, who was the leader of the Warsaw Judenrat (see below). Also buried in the Warsaw cemetery are many of the major figures of the Gur branch of Chasidim (to which we now refer to as Gerer Chasidim) which were based near Warsaw. [At the cemetery we saw the large group of young girls who were on our flight (and kept some of us up all night with their animated conversations), but their visit to the cemetery was focused on the prominent rabbis buried there – we didn’t see them at the graves of the others mentioned above.]

We also visited a place in the cemetery where 50,000 Jews of the ghetto were buried in a mass grave, the victims of starvation and disease in the early 1940s; apparently Shalmi was involved in the effort to identify exactly where in the cemetery that gravesite was located.

Afterward we went to the Umschlagplatz – where Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were gathered each morning (see below) and transported to Treblinka. At the memorial at that site, Shalmi’s focus was on countering the myths of the Shoah that dominated the first 25 years after the Holocaust – myths that fit in well with the emerging Jewish state – that the Jews acted like sheep being led to the slaughter (“which we Israelis will never allow to happen again”), of the heroic focus on the Warsaw ghetto uprising, and of the negative role of the Judenrat.

Shalmi argued against the simplistic “intentionalist” model propounded by Lucy Davidovitch and other early historians that the Nazis intended from the beginning to destroy all the Jews. Although a fundamental component of Nazi ideology was that Jews and Jewish culture were a threat to society, and that threat had to be eliminated, no documentation exists that they intended to kill the Jews. Indeed when the idea was initially proposed that killing the Jews would be a good way of carrying out their ideology, Himmler’s response was “Are we barbarians?!”

The more recent view is referred to as the “functionalist” model and posits essentially that the Nazis had no specific plan of ending the Jewish influence on their society and at each point in time made a decision that seemed appropriate to them at that time; that is, the functionalist model assumes that the Nazis essentially played it by ear.

There are three stages in the Nazi’s policy toward the Jews. From 1933 to 1939, their goal was to get Jews to emigrate. This was confined of course to the Jews in Germany, but was unsuccessful because, despite their actions against Jews, the Jews didn’t seem eager to leave and, more importantly, no one wanted to take them. So that approach failed. Moreover, when they took over Poland, the Nazis now had an additional 3 million Jews under their control. So they had to abandon the emigration strategy.

Their second approach was an isolation strategy, that is, to gather all the Jews together – moving them from small towns into the cities and, in effect, isolating them from intercourse with “their” society – and have these collections of Jews function as separate states by appointing Judenrat, councils of Jewish leaders whose role it was to manage and oversee these large concentrations of Jews. They created the ghettos in big cities, near railroads, apparently intending to move them away to designated sites so that they would be removed from the new society that the Nazis intended to create.

Apparently their initial plan was to move all the Jews to Wisko, a town northeast of Warsaw and they recruited Jews from Czechoslavakia to start building homes in Wisko. While construction was underway, the Nazis captured France, and the focus shifted to sending all the Jews to the French colony of Madagascar, which is off the African coast. The Madagascar Plan was apparently seriously considered for over a year beginning in mid-1940, including the idea of sending one million Jews there each year for four years. However, that plan did not come to fruition, apparently because British forces recaptured Madagascar in 1942.

The third stage, extermination, did not really begin until early 1942 when the final solution was promulgated at the Nazi's Wannsee conference in February, although some Jews, like Abba Kovner in the Vilna ghetto, recognized that this was coming. Massacres had already been taking place in Eastern Europe in late 1941 – Jews were rounded up and shot by special units of the SS called Einzatzgruppen (or, often, by the locals, particularly in the Ukraine) and buried in pits – this is what happened to my family in Lida (now in Belarus). It could be argued that this demonstrates that killing the Jews was the Nazis' original intention … but it could also be argued that these massacres enabled the Nazis to accommodate themselves to the idea of mass murder and enable them to formulate a policy of extermination.

How do the "functionalist" historians of the Holocaust explain why the Nazis changed their policy from isolating the Jews to exterminating them? Perhaps it was simply that the policy of isolating the Jews was not working … and that, as an outcome of the Einsatzgruppen, extermination now became a psychological acceptable possibility. Perhaps this was their intention from the beginning but, as noted before, there is no documentary evidence that this was the case; moreover, the phrase "final solution" presumes that other solutions had been tried and had been unsuccessful. Although in hindsight we know what happened, at the time even those in the ghettos did not know what was about to happen.

What was the perspective of the Jews in the ghettos? They referred to the situation as "der milchomeh – the war," not thinking that this would be different than other wars, and not recognizing that their fate might be different from that of the other Poles [the term "shoah" was of course invented later] and their plan was "iberleiben", to somehow survive and wait for the Americans to defeat the Germans as they had done in the previous war. And in December 1941, when America entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, "waiting it out" seemed indeed to be a reasonable plan. Thus, for example, when Abba Kovner's strategy of armed rebellion was communicated to the other ghettos at the end of 1941, they all (including Mordechai Anilevich, a major youth leader in the Warsaw ghetto) thought that armed resistance was premature, that the situation was now stable, though uncomfortable, and that there was no point in incurring the attention and wrath of the Nazis.

In Machzor Eit Ratzon, I included the following episode: "Eileh Ezk'rah – these I do recall. When the Nazis forced a group of Chasidim to sing and dance for their amusement, they did so but they replaced the words of the song by "mir vellen zei iberleiben – we will outlive them. They died, but our people have survived, and the Nazis of that generation are no longer." This is a different meaning of "iberleiben" – not that we will somehow survive, as individuals, but that we, as a people, will outlive our oppressors, as we have in the past.

Shalmi regards Adam Czerniakov, the head of the Judenrat in Warsaw, as "heroic." He devised a system of distributing the "labor" that the Nazis expected of the Jews in Warsaw, allowing wealthy people to buy out of their quota and using that money to pay those who did the work. So although he "collaborated" with the Germans, his doing so was of benefit to the community … and was a response that reflected the iberleiben perspective. However, in the spring of 1942 the Nazis told him to select 6,000 people a day to send to the East, retaining in Warsaw only those whose labor was essential and their families. Recognizing that something terrible was going to happen, Czerniakov committed suicide rather than carry out the Nazi orders. (For this he was later faulted.)

From the Aumschlagplatz, 6,000 Jews were sent each day to their death in Treblinka, so that in 50 days, the Nazis exterminated 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto, leaving only 60,000 workers. The problem for the Nazis was not the killing of the Jews but disposing of the bodies, so they built "death factories" – the largest two of which were Treblinka, which could handle the cremation of 6,000 bodies per day and Auschwitz, which had a daily capacity of 12,000. (Most people were exterminated within hours of their arrival!) So from July to September 1942, 6,000 Jews were shipped each day from Warsaw to Treblinka and in 50 days the extermination of the Jews in the Warsaw ghettos was completed. The Nazis then moved on to the next ghetto.

Did the Jews realize that they were being sent to their death? (Apparently, Adam Czerniakov did.) Could it be that even after 50 days, they still allowed themselves to be shoved into cattle cars (for which they had to purchase one-way tickets)? Had they known what was happening, one might expect that they would resist, force the Nazis to shoot them and somehow dispose of their bodies, and thereby slow down the transport. But they didn't. Does that mean that they really didn't know what their fate would be? Or did it mean that they hung on to the slim hope that they would survive ("iberleiben") to the point that they refused to be killed a few days earlier as part of an effort to stall the Nazis' murder machine?

The ghetto uprisings took place subsequently – in the Warsaw ghetto on Pesach 1943 – after most of those in the ghettos had already been murdered, six months previously. The uprisings were led by a coalition of the various youth movements. The goal of the fighters was not to escape but to die fighting and get revenge. In Warsaw, the fighters managed to hold off the Germans several times, using rifles on the rooftops and Molotov cocktails, but eventually ran out of ammunition … and the Nazis came back with tanks and reduced to rubble all of the buildings in the ghetto (so none of the buildings in the ghetto remain). In the meantime, the Jews built and hid in bunkers, but the Germans killed or captured them all (sending the remaining 50,000 Jews to Majdanek) – except the bunker at 18 Mila Street, where the fighters refused to come out and over 100 (including Anilevitch) were suffocated by the Nazi's gas. Several hundred escaped through the sewers – half of them were caught and killed by the Polish partisans – and the other half managed to escape.

The sculptor Nathan Rapoport built a huge memorial to the fighters in Warsaw in 1948, portraying them as Roman heroes. On the reverse of the massive sculpture of the heroes is a modest frieze portraying the victims as bewildered religious Jews who have nowhere to turn. These two images fit in with the Israeli ideology of the time – that is, the Jews of Europe were like sheep that were led to the slaughter, but we will fight to the death for our existence, like the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto. But, as noted earlier, the Jews were just biding their time and recognizing that their best hope might be to lay low until the Nazi thing blew over – the iberleiben plan. They may have chosen incorrectly, but that is only in hindsight.

The Rapoport memorial of 1948 could not have been built a few years later, because the Russians took over Poland in the late 40s and the monuments that were built during their regime universalized the victims, so that in accordance with Communist ideology, the victims were never referred to as Jews, but as Poles. It is true that, in addition to killing three million Polish Jews, the Nazis killed three million non-Jewish Poles, so that each Polish family included victims of the Nazi terror. However, the Jews were targeted for extermination, so all members of every family were killed.

The Aumschlagplatz memorial which we visited was only built in the 1990s, once the Russians had left. Originally, there was just a plaque attached to one of the buildings next to the Aumschlagplatz, a building that was there at the time and that "witnessed" the round-ups that took place every day.

In addition to the Aumschlagplatz memorial, the Rapoport memorial, and the Mila 18 bunker, all of which we visited, there were many other small (coordinated) monuments along the way. A very large museum will open next year (facing the Rapoport memorial) dedicated to presenting the 1000 year history of the Jews of Poland, with great support by the Polish government.

I recited the Kaddish, with my prologue, at the Amschlaugsplatz and again at the Rapoport memorial.

On Wednesday we visited the village of Tikoyen (Tiktin) and then went to Treblinka.

What brought the Jews to small Polish towns like Tikoyen and what role did they play?

In the Middle Ages (and perhaps earlier), all of the land was owned by the aristocracy, and the rest of the people had the status of serfs or share-croppers (perhaps a combination of the two). Later, perhaps in the 14th or 15th century, large cities began to form and needed food that could no longer be supplied by the farms in the immediate vicinity. The Polish aristocrats recognized that this was an economic opportunity for them – since the land under their control could support the production of much more food. However, they had no way to take advantage of this opportunity because they lacked people who had experience with business and the kind of network needed for "international" commerce.

In fact, Jews fit this need precisely because they were literate, had experience in business, and had in place a legal system that could support international trade. That is, if A wrote to B that he wanted a certain amount of wheat on a certain date, and B wrote back and said that he would sell A that much wheat at a certain price, and A responded "send them," then B would send him the grain. That is, B would trust that A would pay the agreed upon amount. Why is that? Because if he didn't, B could go to his local rabbinical court (called a "bet din"), which would issue an order that A should pay and would send that order to the bet din in A's community, which would honor the order of B's bet din and force A to pay. That is, the functioning of the bet din system ensured B that he would get paid for his produce.

So every landowner would try to recruit a Jew to come to his lands, to purchase the produce of "his" peasants, and sell them for use in the distant cities. (The Vistula River, which seems to be everywhere in Poland, made possible the delivery of the produce to far away lands.) But when they approached experienced Jews, their response would be that they could only come if they could bring their community with them – a rabbi, a melamed (teacher of children), a shochet (slaughterer), a mohel (circumciser), and their families – and they would all need a means of financial support. So the landowner would agree and give "his" Jews exclusive rights to sell alcohol and cigarettes (for example). In effect, the imported Jews would become the region's middle class and the primary interface between the landowner and his peasants.

Thus, pointing to a model of the town of Tiktin (Tikoyen), Shalmi noted that the tavern was across the street from the church, which was located in the center of the town. The peasants from the entire region would go to church on Sunday morning and after the mass would go to the tavern (for Kiddush). Not only was the saloon-keeper a Jew, but so was the shoe-maker, the pharmacist, the tax collector, etc. Thus all the shops in the neighborhood of the church were owned by Jews. The synagogue was typically just beyond the shops.

The aristocrat's Jewish tax collector would typically stand at the front of the church on Sunday morning (with a "policeman" supplied by the aristocrat) and deny entrance to church (and therefore participation in the mass) to those who had not paid taxes. (Collecting taxes in the town enabled the tax collectors to avoid encounters with the peasants' dogs.)

So it's not surprising that the towns were mainly occupied by Jews (Lublin's population in the late 1930s was 60% Jewish) and it's not surprising that the peasants did not have positive feelings toward Jews. Indeed, all of their frustration with the system was directed not at the source of that frustration – the aristocracy – but at their representatives – the Jews. The system changed when serfdom was abolished in the late 19th century (was this in Poland as well as in Russia?), but the echoes of the system continued.

The destruction of the Jews.

On Thursday we visited Treblinka. This was not a "camp", but a death factory. Almost everyone who was sent there had been converted to ashes within hours of arrival – 6,000 human beings a day. The Nazis had already decided that, since they had no place to send Jews, they had to kill them. The methods used in the east, shooting by Einsatzgruppen, was inefficient – only a few (relatively) could be killed at a time and their bodies had to be disposed of individually – and inhumane … to the soldiers, many of whom were revolted by what they were ordered to do. So they sought and found a more efficient way of killing people and disposing of their bodies – death factories. Those killed at Treblinka including 300,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto, who were killed over a period of 50 days. Altogether, the Nazis created six such death factories (including Treblinka, Birkenau (at Auschwitz), Sobibor, and Belzec), which collectively were referred to as the "Reinhardt Aktion – Operation Reinhardt," presumably after Reinhardt Heydrich, who was in charge of the overall operation. (He was assassinated shortly after it began.) They were strategically located so as to carry out the "final solution", the extermination of the Jews of Poland.

The death factories were different from "concentration camps" and "labor camps". Concentration camps were used to imprison (and "re-educate") dissenters and potential threats (like professors and communists); these were established when the Nazis came to power in 1933 and constituted a system that was parallel to (but separate from) the existing system – i.e., police and jails. The two systems were later combined. At labor camps, prisoners were used to carry out what was needed for the war effort. In actuality, the prisoners were so poorly treated at labor camps that most did not survive for more than a few months, so that in effect the labor camps were "slow-death factories."

Shalmi focused on the commandant of Treblinka, who knew that what he was doing was wrong (he was Catholic and his priest told him to quit), but who kept doing it nevertheless, ensuring that his death factory ran smoothly and that his daily quota was fulfilled. (He had replaced a true believer who was not a good administrator.) Shalmi felt that with many of the perpetrators we have nothing in common, but this one was a person like ourselves – that is, a person with a conscience – and his compliance forces us to ask ourselves what we would do in his situation.

When Treblinka had completed its mission of killing all of the Jews in its assigned region of Poland, it was destroyed by the Nazis. They probably did not destroy it to cover up what they had done, since they were at the time still confident of winning the war, but because it was no longer needed. What has been erected there is a large monument that is surrounded by rocks, each of which represents a particular Jewish community whose residents were killed at Treblinka.

Before leaving, our group recited Kaddish – and beforehand I read aloud the prologue to the Kaddish that I had written a few days earlier – "Kaddish Rabbah for the Jews of Poland." This was a very emotional moment for me.

More emotional for me was a visit earlier that day to Tikoyen (Ticktin), where one day the Jews were rounded up in the market place and marched off to a spot in the woods where they were shot and buried. After visiting the synagogue (see below), walking around the town, and discussing (as noted above) the presence and the role of the Jews in Poland, we visited the marketplace and then went to the place in the woods where Tikoyen's Jews were killed.

The same happened to my relatives in Lida who, on May 8, 1942, were among 6,000 Jews who were rounded up, shot, and buried on the outskirts of their town, which was only about 100 miles east-northeast of Tikoyen, but in Belarus (another country and another world). And so as I stood where that happened to the Jews of Ticktin, I imagined that I was in the parallel site in Lida, and said Kaddish for my mother's brothers and sisters and their families (the cousins I never knew) who were killed there, and for my father's cousins (and uncles and aunts). I knew that this site was as close (geographically, functionally, and spiritually) as I would be able to come to their resting place, and so recited this Kaddish (and my prologue) as if this was their resting place.

My father's mother, brother and sisters left Lida for my grandmother's town of Oshmana and so escaped the massacre in Lida. (How did they know to leave – or was it accidental – and why was there no similar massacre in Oshmana?) They were all sent to labor camps and somehow all my father's siblings survived. My grandmother was in the same labor camp, but was murdered the day after Yom Kippur.

There were three adjacent areas in the woods outside Tikoyen, where the Jews were killed. Presumably they dug three separate pits. Each area was no more that 100' square, and is now enclosed in wrought iron fencing. A boulder outside the largest area marked what had happened here. Many stones were left near the boulder, as well as many burnt out candle holders. Shalmi noted that when he visited previously, he needed the assistance of a local person to find the location, but now there were directional signs and official memorials. (From one of the local Poles who was present at the massacre, and helped cover the bodies, Shalmi had learned that the Jews were killed by machine guns, from the rat-a-tat sound that the Pole described.)

Many Israeli flags were draped over the fences – left by groups of Israeli students as a "nitzachnu – we have been victorious" statement. Shalmi thought this inappropriate because it didn't take into consideration that this "victory" was achieved at a price that was too great. But I think that his misgivings results from his interpretation of "nitzachnu" as a political statement rather than as an emotional statement –"you didn't succeed in getting rid of us!" The next day, we saw a group of Israeli young adults at Majdanek (see below) and, although displaying flags there didn't seem quite appropriate, I certainly sympathized with the statement they made. (I have several similar remarks in the "Eileh Ezk'rah – these I do remember" section of Machzor Eit Ratzon.)

The synagogue in Tikoyen was a magnificent structure, built in 1642, and had recently been restored by the Polish government. The synagogue is maintained by the government as a museum, staffed by people who are not Jews – there are none in Tikoyen.

The main hall of the synagogue is a large square, with walls high enough to make the hall a cube – it had a raised bimah in the center whose platform was about five feet higher than the main area. What was particularly striking was that there were prayers written in large letters that covered the walls – many of which were intact – although the synagogue, like the others we visited, was used by the Nazis for storage or stables. The prayers on the walls sometimes exhibited variations which indicated the seriousness and, sometimes, playfulness of the writers. For example, the prayer that we all chant when we return the Torah to the Ark appears on the wall. One of the verses of that prayer is "Kohanecha yilb'shu tzedek, vachasidecha y'raneinu – Your priests will be clothed in righteousness and Your faithful will sing with joy. (Psalm 132:9)" The text on the wall had the added Aramaic word "d'nan" before y'raneinu, so that the latter half of the verse reads "and Your faithful – right here – will sing with joy." Among the prayers is the following announcement in big letters: "These are the prayers during which you are not allowed to speak: Hallel, reading of the Torah, blessing of the Kohanim, blessing over the T'fillin, recital of the Confession, Shofar, reading of the Megillah, and recital of the Amidah." (It should not surprise us that even the pious Jews of Tikoyen hundreds of years ago did not always pay attention during services.) It then gives an acronym for all these prayers, as if seeing them in large print is not sufficient reminder. Being able to read and understand these prayers was a gift, allowing me to be, for a moment, on the same page as the Jews of Tikoyen.

The next day, Thursday, we went to Majdanek. Unlike Treblinka, this was not created to be a death factory, but rather a labor camp, and unlike Treblinka, its task was not completed, and so most of the camp was left intact. A substantial percentage of those brought here were non-Jews, who were in effect enslaved. The work at the camp was primarily experimental agriculture – the Nazis sought to develop plants that could serve as fuel and plants that could produce ersatz rubber – as well as whatever support was needed for the agricultural workers.

The treatment was different at different labor camps – in some cases, those in charge of the camp were rebuked for keeping their workers unhealthy, because their superiors recognized that there was not an endless supply of labor. On the other hand, some labor camps were in effect slow-death factories, whose workers rarely survived for more than a few months.

Toward the end of the war, there was a major dispute between the more ideological Nazis, who wanted to kill the Jewish laborers, and the more nationalistic Nazis, who wanted to keep the labor force working in support of the war effort. The ideologues won the dispute with respect to Majdanek and, as a result, the 50,000 Jews who were extracted from the Warsaw bunkers after the April 2003 revolt and brought to Majdanek were slaughtered in a two day period in November 2004.

We entered Majdanek exactly where the prisoners entered Majdanek. On our right were two long buildings parallel to the road. When the slave laborers reached the end of those buildings, they were separated by sex and undressed (outside). They then entered the two buildings (men in one and women in the other) where their hair was shaved, after which they entered (as we did) a large shower room with many water sprinklers. Most then exited the building, but some were instead sent to the next room, where there were two gas chambers. Those sent here were the people who were considered unfit for work – too old, too young, too sickly – and they were immediately gassed. Which gas chamber was used depended on the number to be gassed. If the number was small, they were put into the smaller chamber and put to death using carbon monoxide (from the exhaust of a motor); if the number was large, they were put into the larger chamber where Zyclon-B was used. There were no gas chambers at the end of the women's building, so they were presumably gassed in the gas chambers at the end of the men's building. The bodies were discarded on a pile behind the building. Later in the war, when the Nazis realized that if they lost the war then having these bodies around could cause them problems, they dug up all the bodies, moved them to another place, and burned them.

Many of the barracks are now used as a museum, and we had time to stop in several of them – one containing thousands and thousands of shoes. Outside the barracks were many posters that contained information about various aspects of the destruction of Poland's Jewry, including one that noted that the pope was silent about what was happening … with the clear implication that he actually knew what was happening – a surprising statement in this very Catholic country.

The walk through Majdanek was too long for me … too much walking and too much standing, so I retired to the bus when I got there … and so missed seeing the memorial that was there and our group's recitation of the Kaddish.

Itinerary.

As noted above, when we arrived in Warsaw on Tuesday morning, we went directly to the Warsaw cemetery and later to the Warsaw Ghetto. In between we had a box lunch prepared by a caterer based in Krakow – we had the same box lunch each day except Shabbat and Monday. We had dinner at a synagogue in Warsaw (more about this later) and stayed at the Metropol Hotel.

On Wednesday, we drove to Tikoyen (Ticktin) and then to the place where the Jews were murdered outside the town. We then drove to Treblinka and afterwards went back to the hotel, where dinner was waiting for us.

On Thursday, we left Warsaw and traveled to Lublin, stopping along the way at the town of Kazimierz Dolny and then to its cemetery and a memorial that was erected there that incorporates pieces of tombstones that were recovered by the Polish authorities from Russian construction projects.

The Russians apparently destroyed Jewish cemeteries in town after town, seeing them only as a source of raw materials for their construction projects. Although it was not in our itinerary, I would have visited my parents' home town of Lida, but gave up on the idea when I learned that the Russians had destroyed the Jewish cemetery there, so that I would not have been able to find the graves or gravestones of my grandparents. (Why did the Russians not destroy the cemeteries in Warsaw and Krakow?)

The memorial wall that was built in Kazimierz Dolny out of these recovered fragments of tombstones was about 30 feet wide, 10 feet tall, and 1 foot thick, with a jagged cleft in the middle to symbolize that the Jewish community had been ripped apart by the Nazis. On both sides of the wall, there were fragments of many tombstones. The text on the tombstones (as well as on tombstones elsewhere) was very interesting, as the families tried to describe the person who died and the heartbreak they felt at their loss. It seemed that every Polish Jew was a tzaddik, since everyone was described in glowing terms. That cynical remark aside, it seemed that rather than describe the deceased by his or her roles in life, the tombstones spoke of the qualities of the person and the feelings of the mourners in prose and poetry; each tombstone was individualized and thereby helped bring that person to life.

Nessa photographed a few of these tombstones for me. One piece of the memorial wall had the following phrases: An upright and honest man / who followed the correct path / and supported himself with the work of his hands – ish tamim v'yashar, halach b'derech hatov, v'nizan b'yegiah kapayim …" I couldn't make out the next two lines, but this was apparently a person who had a difficult time supporting his family, but still lived an honorable spiritual life. Another fragment on the memorial wall read: Let your tears run like water for this upright man, crowned in good deeds – r'du kamayim dimah / al ish yashar / muchtar b'ma-asim tovim. The word "keter – crown" has long been used (it even occurs in Pirkei Avot – Ethics of the Fathers) metaphorically to describe one's focus in life – a scholar wears the keter of Torah, an observant person wears the keter of mitzvot, etc. But I had never seen the verb form "muchtar" of the noun "keter" which suggests that the crown that this person wore was woven out of his good deeds. As noted earlier, being able to read and understand what was inscribed on these stones was a gift, enabling me to make, for a moment, connections with the people who were buried here.

After visiting this cemetery, we went to Majdanek (as described above) and then to Lublin. Although Lublin was not one of the major centers of Polish Jewry (these were Warsaw, Krakow, and Pozen (which we didn't visit). But it was important because in Lublin there was an annual gathering of the "Council of the Four Lands – Va-ad arbah aratzot") – which was the central body of Jewish authority in Poland from 1580 to 1764. Among its major functions was the allocation to the approximately 70 different communities of the payment of taxes due to the aristocracy, but it also dealt with religious issues like the kashrut of wine (and therefore the issue of socializing with non-Jews); the study of secular texts (the Ramoh in Krakow (1520-1572) – where Copernicus lived (1473-1543) – permitted the study of secular texts – [was he aware of, or even familiar with Copernicus?], whereas the Maharal of Prague, who was trained in Pozen, said no – even though he himself studied them); how to deal with the false Messiah

Shabbatai Tzvi who had a huge following in the aftermath of the Chmielnitzki massacres in the 17th century (the Council dealt with the dispute between Rabbi Jacob Emden and Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz, resulting in the latter's acquittal on the charge of heresy); and a strange case that ended with a person taking the name Azulai, an acronym of “ishah zonah lo yissah – he didn’t marry a whore.”

In Lublin we stopped briefly at the restored Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva, although we did not have the time to go in the building. The yeshivot in Poland achieved such great prominence that every congregation worldwide wanted its rabbi to have been trained in Poland.

In Lublin we visited a building which had been converted to an exhibit hall of Jewish Lublin. The group that we met had interviewed all Jewish Holocaust survivors from Lublin that they could find, as well as non-Jewish Poles from Lublin, and had created a house-by-house description of Jewish Lublin in 1940. All of their research is available at www.teatrnn.pl, so called because they are a theater group which promotes tolerance through theater and other educational activities. NN stands for “no name”, so called because the names of many of the Jewish residents of Lublin were lost.

We then had a catered dinner at a nearby restaurant, and after dinner saw a performance of I. B. Singer’s “Teibele and the Demon” (performed in Polish and Yiddish, with English subtitles) by the leader of TheatrNN – he spoke Yiddish beautifully, and noted that his Jewish friends observed “Du bist a goi, ober du host a Yiddishe neshameh – you are not a Jew, but you have a Jewish soul.” The group is called the Brama Grodska theatre group – the Grodska Gate was the name of the passage from the originally Christian to the originally Jewish section of Lublin and is the location of the group. The speaker’s name was, I believe, Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, and apparently his efforts have resulted in threats against his life (which he didn’t mention) – see http://humanrightshouse.org/Articles/18359.html

We stayed at the Hotel Europa in Lublin, a walk of several blocks from the theater. The street was lined with outdoor cafes. After returning to the hotel, I had a beer at an outside café where I saw the finals of the Olympic Men’s 200 Meter race, narrated in Polish, in which all three medals were taken by Jamaicans. Although our hotel had wifi, when I stepped off the elevator on my floor, I found half a dozen tour participants sitting on the floor with their electronic equipment, since they couldn’t access the hotel’s wifi in their rooms.

On Friday, we left Lublin for Krakow, stopping along the way to see the newly-restored synagogue in Dambrowska Tarnow – the town was the home of the parents of one of the people on our tour. The layout of the synagogue was like that in Tykocin, but here the upper walls and high ceiling were decorated with paintings – e.g., the twelve mazalot (signs of the zodiac) and the months to which they corresponded. Along the route to Krakow, Schindler’s List was shown on the bus (since the story takes place in Krakow), but I was unable to watch it because the screen was so small … and because I needed a rest.

When we arrived in Krakow (Holiday Inn) we had a snack and then went to see and daven in the Temple Synagogue, which seemed to be a liberal synagogue (although it had balconies for women, perhaps because it was originally orthodox, although maybe not, because we can’t assume that liberal Jews of the 1930s were also egalitarian) – we were the only ones davenning there. After that, we had dinner with about 40 Krakovians at the Jewish Community Center a block away (which usually has 70-80 people on Friday night, but many were away for vacation).

On Shabbat, I didn't wake up until 10am, so didn't go to shul with the group – they attended Orthodox services, whose participants were essentially disjoint from the Krakovians who came to dinner the previous night. After breakfast, I davened in my room. After lunch at the hotel, the group went for a two-hour walking tour of Krakow, which I passed up because I needed to rest and instead wrote some notes about the trip.

At the evening we had three guests who are members of a group of Jews in Krakow, called Czolent (discussed below).

On Sunday, we went to Auschwitz, which was originally a concentration camp and a labor camp, complete with a modest crematorium. That was not sufficient for the Nazis' purposes, so adjacent to Auschwitz they built a death factory called Birkenau (also known as Auschwitz II). The crematoria at Birkenau were destroyed by the Nazis, but the crematorium at Auschwitz remains standing. Auschwitz has been transformed into a showplace of Nazi brutality and, like thousands of other visitors on that day (mostly not Jewish), we had a guided tour of the facility. We were divided into two groups (eerie!) each with its own guide. Each group had its own walkie-talkies, so we could hear our guide without hearing the dozens of other guides near us. As we went into each building, other groups were going out, so that it was like there were thousands of people forming a chain snaking through one building after another. As a result, there was no time to stop and reflect on what we were seeing. What we saw was visual – a room with shoes, a room with suitcases with people's names on them, a room with the hair of 30,000 women, a room with prosthetic devices, a room with cooking ware, a room of combs, a room of shaving supplies, a room of gas canisters – photographs taken by Nazi officers of each step along the road to death – photographs of prisoners labeled with their names, before the Nazis figured out that branding the laborers with numbers was more efficient and dehumanizing. (Those sent to their death were not branded – only those sent to work.) One of the buildings was designed for trials, which always resulted in the defendant being executed by shooting at the wall adjacent to the building. Another building was designated for torture, including a small "room", about 2' x 2' in which four people were forced to stand for long periods of time. And on and on.

It was striking to see the vast number of people – mostly non-Jews – visiting Auschwitz, and I wonder what they take away from their visit. I don't think it's a sense of complicity and guilt, for it is clear that many non-Jewish Poles were killed in these camps and there is no evidence presented of Polish anti-Semitism (I wonder whether that will that be discussed in the new museum in Warsaw – probably not) – so they leave with a clear sense of "man's inhumanity to man," of the atrocities that people can, and have committed. They perhaps leave with a sense of the loss of three million Polish Jews, and the contributions that they made and could still be making to Polish society – but this is less likely – perhaps it will be different for visitors of the new museum.

But from all of the attempts by the Polish government to mark the Holocaust – and mention the Jews, who are not specifically mentioned in any of the Russian memorials – and restore synagogues and cemeteries, it is clear that there is a desire to commemorate the existence and contributions of Jews to Poland. I think that we all welcome these efforts, but it is not clear what are the implications of these efforts.

It was also striking to me – from visiting Treblinka, Majdanek, and now Auschwitz – how huge the effort was to destroy us. This was not a simple problem for the Nazis, but one that took a lot of thought, a lot of experimentation, a lot of planning, and a lot of organization. Why was destroying us so important to them? Why would they conduct a war against the Jews when fighting that war clearly detracted from their ability to fight the war against America and its allies? The answer is in "Mein Kampf" where humanity is divided into creators of culture (like the Aryans), carriers of culture (like the inferior Poles), and destroyers of culture (that's us!) Why Wagner was in category A whereas Mendelson was in category C is a mystery to me … but that is the world view that the Nazis constructed. Amazingly, we were a threat to them, and they felt that they had to destroy us before we destroyed their culture.

It rained the whole time we were there – it apparently rains a lot in Auschwitz. We then went to Birkenau, but I was unable to participate in this portion of the trip – too much standing, too much walking, too wet from both rain and perspiration – so I sat in the bus for an hour or so. On the way back, we stopped at the renovated synagogue in Oswiecim, the town where Auschwitz (German name) was located, where we had a brief debriefing session. We then went back to the Jewish Community Center in Krakow, where we had dinner, followed by presentations (and Q&A) with Jonathan Ornstein, who is director of the JCC, and Prof. Alexandrowicz (see below).

On Monday, the focus was on Jewish Krakow. We visited the Alte Schul (Old Synagogue), called that since the 16th century when a new synagogue was built across the street; it had previously been called, presumably, just "the shul." The new synagogue was built by the father-in-law of Rabbi Moshe Isserles (known acronymically as the Ramoh, or locally the Ramoo), who became well-known because he wrote the Ashkenazic code of Jewish practice as a commentary to the "Shulchan Aruch" of the Sephardic Rabbi Joseph Caro. He was buried in a cemetery behind the synagogue (known as the Ramoh Synagogue); also buried there is Rabbi Yom Tov Lipman Heller. The synagogue was currently undergoing renovation, so we couldn't really see what it looked like. (Why did the synagogues of Krakow remain intact, while the synagogues in other areas were badly damaged by the Nazis?)

We crossed the river (the Vistula again) to the area that formed the Jewish ghetto (known as the Podgorze ghetto) – where we saw a memorial consisting of an installation of about 50 solitary chairs, reflecting the photograph of the students forced by the Nazis to carry their chairs across the river, and stopped at the location of Oskar Schindler's factory – of which only the gate remains.

We also crowded into a pharmacy that faced the plaza where the Jews of the Krakow were gathered to be sent to the Plazow labor camps (and where now the memorial is located). From the windows of the pharmacy, the proprietor Tadeusz Pankiewicz was able to see and record all that happened. For his assistance to the Jews, he was named a "Righteous Gentile" and the document that he received is displayed in the store, which is now a museum. His notes were published in 1947 as a book, with the title "The Pharmacy in the Krakow Ghetto".

The Nazis managed to convince the residents of the Krakow ghetto that they were going to a better place. They picked a few people, including a watchmaker, and asked him what he would need in order to continue to work as a watchmaker, and assured him that he would be supplied with all those things. As a result of such conversations, the Krakow ghetto residents all thought that they were going to better quarters, and refused to participate in the kinds of revolts taking place in other ghettos. Why were they so easily convinced that their lot would be different?

When told by the Nazis to draw up a list of 300 people who would be transported first, the head of the Judenrat in Krakow gave them a list of four names, himself and his immediate family. Of course, he was fired and the next Judenrat head complied with the Nazis' orders. The pharmacist reported that many people came to him requesting a tranquilizer (so that they could hide their infants in suitcases) and cyanide. At the plaza, across from his window, children were separated from their parents, and the parents were told that the children would come on the next train. They didn't. The parents learned what happened to their children when those whose task was sorting clothes found the clothes that their own children had been wearing.

After lunch at the headquarters of our week-long caterer, the group went to the Plazow labor camp, to which the Krakow Jews were sent, but I was tired and walked back to the hotel for a nap. Afterwards, there was a panel of educators discussing "memory and anti-Semitism" in Poland, but I only caught the last few minutes of that discussion. The discussion took place in the Galicia Jewish Museum, and afterwards there was a tour of the museum, whose main exhibit is called "Traces of Memory". The exhibit consists of photographs taken by Chris Schwartz about ten years ago which provide memories of the Jews of Galicia (the southeast part of Poland). Among the memorable photographs was one where the threshold of a Polish house was part of a tombstone – and the threshold was pulled out of its place indicating that the home-owner was willing to return it to the Jewish community. Another was one where there a small stand of trees in the middle of a field – acknowledging that that very spot had once been a Jewish cemetery. Another "trace of memory" was the house we saw next to the synagogue in Tikoyen which had a primitive stained glass window in the shape of a Jewish star. I purchased the book of the exhibit. We then met briefly with the director of the museum and then had dinner (accompanied by a local klezmer band – none of whose musicians were Jews), took photographs, expressed our appreciation to the tour leaders, and then headed back to the hotel to prepare for our early departure to the airport in the morning for a flight to Warsaw, followed by a flight to JFK.

One recurring set of issues throughout the trip was the extent of anti-Semitism in Poland – before, during, and after the Holocaust – and the future of Judaism in Poland. These interwoven issues are quite complicated.

The Jews whom we met in Poland, pointing to the difficult situations Jews faced throughout Europe, argued that, for Jews, Poland is now the best country in Europe. Indeed, the Polish government supports many efforts to memorialize the Jews of Poland; for example, as noted above, an impressive looking museum in Warsaw that discusses the 1000 years of Jews in Poland is scheduled to open this fall. There has been an annual Jewish cultural festival in Krakow for over 20 years, with lectures, concerts, etc. and these have been attended by thousands of Poles. We met Poles who devote themselves to remind Poles of the Jewish presence in Poland, like the man in Lublin who organized the effort to reconstruct, house by house, the life of the Jews of Lublin – and like the woman who was our guide in Auschwitz who often seemed on the point of tears, but who insisted that although she had planned to become a teacher, being a guide in Auschwitz was her mission in life (as was her mother's).

So both individuals and government are working to keep alive the historical Jewish presence in Poland, even though there have been almost no Jews in Poland. What about the general population? There were several major historical sources of anti-Semitism in Poland. One was inherent in the roles that the Jews acquired in their service of the Polish aristocracy – they were in the middle, between the aristocracy and the peasants, and it was therefore easy for the peasants to blame them for the conditions created by the aristocracy. The notion that the Jews were to blame for the conditions created by the aristocracy remained even when the power of the aristocracy diminished. A second source of anti-Semitism was the Catholic church, whose priests continuously promulgated the doctrine of Jews as Christ-killers. A third source of anti-Semitism that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s was the slogan of "Poland for the Poles" that was a response to the reestablishment of a Polish state after the first World War whose population was only 60% "Polish"; Jews were not considered to be Poles, even though their families had lived in Poland for hundreds of years. These anti-Semitic feelings translated into anti-Semitic actions in a variety of ways – from pogroms that followed losses by soccer teams to blood libels.

These anti-Semitic feelings were so strong that even when they were fighting a common enemy, the Polish partisans were in general antagonistic to the Jewish partisans – they were not willing to work cooperatively with them, unwilling to share weapons with them, and even killed them, as happened to many of those who escaped from the Warsaw ghetto. Clearly their anti-Semitism trumped their patriotism.

Fast forward 70 years. Can we imagine that this strong anti-Semitism has simply disappeared? One can argue that the changes in the Catholic church, due primarily to Pope John Paul II, have transformed the church so that it is no longer a fomenter of anti-Semitism. A Catholic panelist, when asked whether the church is playing a role in combating anti-Semitism today, noted that this has not been on their agenda, although they have by-and-large continued to follow John Paul II's views and avoid expressing anti-Semitic views.

The "Poland for the Poles" has largely disappeared because the Jews were all killed and the Ukrainian and German populations that were problematic for the Poland in the 20s and 30s were stripped away from Poland after WW2. Poland has no more minorities, although many Poles seem to be under the impression that there are millions of Jews in Poland and some seem to think that the Jews control the government – perhaps because they associate the Jews with the Communists who controlled Poland for 40 years (until 1989). Interestingly, both Jewish and non-Jewish Poles spoke positively about Poland's unwritten policy not to accept Muslims as citizens – indeed, it may be that the reason that Poland is "the best country in Europe for Jews" is that it has no Muslims – so that, in effect, Jews can benefit from Poland's current xenophobia (or racism).

Since no one referred to any studies of the current attitude of Poles toward Jews, we can't answer the question of how pervasive anti-Semitic attitudes might be in present-day Poland. However, there were three issues that were frequently discussed on our tour.

One was the question of how comfortable Polish Jews feel about letting it be known that they are Jewish. On several occasions we heard about situations where people of Jewish ancestry (usually one parent was Jewish) are interested in exploring their Judaism, but are reluctant to "come out" as Jewish. Those who mentioned this issued used this term, explicitly linking their reluctance to the corresponding reluctance by gays. The nature and causes of this reluctance we couldn't explore, but clearly these potentially identified Jews felt that letting others know they were Jewish was somehow risky.

Second was the frequent graffito "Kill the Jews". It turns out that this referred specifically to the desire by fans of one team to defeat another team, the team from Krakow, that have been referred to as "Jews" for the past 80 years, perhaps because the Krakow team was the last one to allow Jews as team members in the 1930s. So, as someone pointed out, it had the same meaning as "Kill the Redskins" has in the US. Indeed, one Pole reported that when she (or a colleague) visited a high school class to discuss the Holocaust and asked the students what they thought about the slogan, several students stood up and said "We are Jews" – they clearly did not mean that they were Jewish, but rather that they were fans of the team. So it would seem that for the younger generation, the term "Jew" may have completely lost its historical context.

Third was the presence of wooden dolls of different types, one of which shows a Jew holding some money, which people purchase as a good-luck charm. This has become a popular item in recent years. Do the people recognize the figure as a Jew, are they aware that this association of Jews with money is a stereotype that has had dire consequences, are they aware that even if they are not aware of this association Jews today would find this offensive? Perhaps not. Indeed, the objections that have been raised to this fad (including, apparently, by the Israeli ambassador) have been responded to with bewilderment. ("Why are you upset about this?") Should this be considered a manifestation of anti-Semitism, or are we being overly sensitive?

What future is there for Jews in Poland?

Since all the Jews we saw in Poland were in either Warsaw or Krakow, the question is rather, "What future is there for Jews in Warsaw? What future is there for Jews in Krakow?"

On our first night in Warsaw, we had dinner at a relatively new building which serves as community center, synagogue, and school. (Recall that the Warsaw ghetto was completely destroyed by the Nazis during the uprising, so that none of the synagogues that existed prior to the war remain.) The small synagogue can accommodate about 50 people and there are services there every Friday night. After dinner, there was a brief presentation by the man who is apparently the leader of the community – a Polish Jew who lives half of the year in Poland and the other half in Los Angeles; after the departure of the Russians, he was able to recover properties and land that belonged to his family, and returned to live half-time in Poland. He is apparently the leader of the community. He introduced us to the president of the synagogue, Michael Levi, a Jew of Egyptian background who lived in Italy, but is now working for a major energy company in Poland, another officer of the synagogue, who was clearly from Poland, a man and a woman who he introduced as cantors (one of whom sang a Ladino song for us), and a woman who will soon be leaving to attend Rabbinical School at JTS. After his brief presentation – during which he emphasized that Poland is the best country in Europe for Jews, and claimed that Polish anti-Semitism has been overemphasized, even during the war years – he and the others were very willing to answer our questions and share their stories. We learned from Levi that he knew a number of people of Jewish background who were reluctant to come out, but that he was trying to involve them in the Jewish community, one step at a time.

On Saturday evening in Krakow, we were joined for Seudah Shlishit at the hotel by three people in their 20s who were members of Czulent, so-called because it is a real mixture of people with different backgrounds. Two of them were a couple (accompanied by a rambunctious two-year old) and the other was a young woman who was soon to leave for Israel in search of a mate. The person who spoke most, and most articulately, was the first woman, who was raised as a Catholic by her Jewish parents (so as not to stand out), discovered that she was Jewish, and is apparently devoted to helping other people live a Jewish life in Poland. Her enthusiasm was clear, and I offered her both public and private words of encouragement.

On Sunday evening, we had dinner at the Jewish Community Center, where we had dinner on Friday night, and heard presentations by Jonathan Ornstein, the Director of the Center, who is originally from New York, and by a retired professor of psychology at the university who with his mother was hidden by leftist Poles during the Holocaust. Like the woman from Czolent, Ornstein was very optimistic about the future of Jews in his community, and I encouraged him to persevere in his efforts as well.

On Monday afternoon, we visited the Museum of Jewish Galicia. Our tour guide was an enthusiastic young Jewish woman from Nashville, who moved to Krakow to study Polish and Polish history, and has apparently decided to stay there. It turns out that there are many non-Jewish students in Polish universities whose focus is the Jewish community, the Holocaust, Hebrew, and Israel.

After the tour, we had a conversation with the Director of the Museum. Unlike the Jewish Community Center, which tries to reach out and involve Poles of Jewish background, the Museum's efforts are focused on reaching out to non-Jewish Poles, to inform them about the history of Jews in Poland and to show them, through magnificent photographs, the traces of the presence of Jews in Poland.

We did not meet the Orthodox community in Krakow, which numbers about 50 people, but taking together all the Jews of whom we aware, there must be a few hundred Jews in Krakow.

Some of the members of our group thought that there was no future for Jews in Poland, but to me it is clear that there is a future for Jews in Krakow … although like Jews in other small communities wherever they may be, finding Jewish mates and raising Jewish children in a non-Jewish environment are challenging problems. We spent much less time in Warsaw, so I can't speak as positively about the prospects of the Jewish community there because the information that I have gained is much less.

In general, however, it seems quite likely that given the relative economic stability of Poland (compared with other countries in the European Union) and given the absence of minorities in Poland (and the strife that results from minorities), many Jews from other countries may be attracted to settle in Poland.

My intention is to stay in communication with the three groups with whom we met, starting out by sending them, as I promised, copies of my siddur and machor.

Kaddish Rabbah for the Jews of Poland – August 2012 – Joseph G. Rosenstein

I stand here to recite the Kaddish
in memory of relatives who were slaughtered,

in memory of whole communities that no longer exist,
wiped off the map,
together with all their members,
by the forces of darkness,
by the forces of evil.

In every corner of this country Jews thrived.
Where I stand now,
my fellow Jews lived and walked
and talked and breathed,
they rushed about on these very stones.

But they are here no more,
for the whole country became a killing field.
Town after town, each with a Jewish presence,
now has a Jewish population of zero.

Religious or secular, assimilated or proudly Jewish,
socialist or anti-socialist, Zionist or anti-Zionist,
all suffered the same fate.

And You did not intervene …
You could not intervene …
… in these and other human affairs,
for you have placed the world in our care
and have charged us with the responsibility
to make ourselves more human
and to make the world a better place.

You mourn with us for our immeasurable loss
and for this huge step backwards
from the world that we strive to create.
And you mourn each day
for the inhumanity of humanity.

This inhumanity diminishes, as it were, Your divinity.
Your crown is tarnished.

And so we recite Kaddish not only in mourning
but also, as Agnon taught us,
to raise You up, to lift Your spirits,
to expand Your divinity, to polish Your crown.

Our Kaddish is an affirmation that,

even in the face of great evil,
even in this place of great evil,
we will strive to achieve Your vision
of a world that is repaired,
of a world where all are committed to repairing the world.

Yitkadal v'yitdakash sh'mei rabbah …