



21st-Century Jewish Life in Berlin and Krakow

By Larry Bridwell

Jewish culture in Central Europe is in the midst of a dazzling renaissance stimulated by the fall of communism and the enlargement of the European Union. Nowhere is that more evident than in Berlin, the heart of Germany, and Krakow, the capital of medieval Poland.

In the vibrant center of Berlin, near the historic buildings of the Nazi Third Reich, is a beautiful golden dome topped by the Star of David. With exquisite irony, The New Synagogue is a prominent visual beacon in the city's skyline and is the anchor of a thriving community of 30,000 Jews now living in Berlin.

It is amazing to experience the combination of the urban vitality of a dynamic neighborhood alongside the preservation of its Jewish history. Under communism, many of the structures in the central Jewish Quarter in East Berlin became decrepit, but remained standing. Buildings are now being renovated, and the gentrification of unified Berlin is honoring its Jewish roots.



Among the most touching remembrances are historic markers commemorating the Jewish residents who were taken from their apartments and sent to their death. They take the artistic form of small golden plaques identifying each victim and their years of birth and death. These sidewalk remembrances are called "stumbling stones" with the admonition of "Never Forget" to all who walk in these streets.

For visitors, Jewish history comes alive on English-language walking tours. My guide earned a Masters Degree in History with a dissertation about 19th-century Jewish life. He pointed out that during the 1920's, Berlin was the second largest city in the world, with only New York having more residents. After World War II, only 5,000 Jews remained out of 200,000 who had lived in Berlin, and the population remained stable until 1990. The fall of the Berlin Wall increased freedom of movement in the former Soviet empire and attracted Jews of many nationalities to Berlin's unusual mixture of capitalism and communist heritage which offered a comfortable, exciting place to live.

The first major event on the tour is appropriately the sculpture by the East German sculptor Ingeborg Hunzinger, "Block der Frauen," (Block of Women), in honor of the German wives who demonstrated during World War II to support their Jewish sons and husbands held by the Nazis. Among the protesters were soldiers in military uniforms demanding information



about their relatives. This created a public relations nuisance for the Nazi establishment. To end the troublesome demonstrations, the authorities quietly released the men, including some who were already on trains to Auschwitz. The guide emphasized this history, because he said that it shows that ordinary citizens had an impact and that if more Germans had acted in similar ways, more Jews would have been saved.



The tour included visits to an historic Jewish cemetery that is being restored and to the home of the first woman Rabbi in Germany, Regina Jonas. A plaque notes that she lost her life in Auschwitz in 1943.

Although the Holocaust killed or exiled nearly ten million Jews, 21st-century Berlin now has a vibrant Jewish life well integrated into its historic center, with kosher restaurants, bakeries, and another female rabbi who was recently ordained.



A special dimension of Jewish life is Klezmer music, which is flourishing in the ancient Polish city of Krakow. In 1453, Krakow's Jewish district of Kazimierz was established by Polish King Casimir the Great and flourished until World War II. Today, it has three synagogues and several restaurants featuring Jewish food and music. Only 300 Jews live in Krakow, but its culture has received major support from young Poles seeking varying spiritual experiences in a deeply traditional country.

The son of a Catholic family, Janusz Makuch, started the annual Festival of Jewish Culture in 1988 and told the New York Times, "It is a way to pay homage to the people who lived here who contributed so much to Polish culture." Konstanty Gebert, editor of a Polish-Jewish monthly, *Midrasz*, said to The Times, "This is Poland rediscovering its Jewish soul."



You can find the new Jewish life at the intimate Ariel restaurant, which serves Jewish food and, along with it, the Klezmer music of the Jascha Lieberman Trio. The Trio plays traditional Jewish melodies as well as songs from Romania, Serbia, and Macadonia as well as original compositions by Lieberman, who is Jewish. The group itself is culturally eclectic: the accordionist is Polish and the bass player, Hungarian. All of them trained at the Krakow Music Academy. Maciej Negrey, reviewing the trio's CD,

Rememberance of Kazimierz, noted that Jewish folk music incorporated influences from many cultures, because its musicians frequently traveled across Central and Eastern Europe. The audience, which included a tour group from Germany, applauded enthusiastically.

Part of Jewish history is anti-Semitism, which unfortunately still exists in modern Europe. It is worth noting the security precautions in both Berlin and Krakow. The Berlin tour guide mentioned that after 9/11, Germany wanted to provide effective protection, so police are present at the major Jewish sites. In Krakow, we did not see any security personnel, but in the middle of the Kazimierz district was a police station with police vehicles prominently parked in front. Germany is obviously aware of its legacy and wants to protect Jewish sites. Krakow did not have police officers visible, but security was clearly available at a moment's notice.

If you go to Berlin and Krakow, you can witness history being made as Central Europe dramatically transforms itself. The fall of the Berlin Wall brought the end of Soviet-imposed cultural restraints. The European Union, in its enlargement from six nations in 1957 to 27 countries in 2007, expanded human freedom. Krakow – which had struggled under Soviet domination -- has become a prosperous city. The new capital of Germany is a thrilling combination of West and East Berlin. The fruits of this new European spirit include thriving artistic communities, interacting across a wide range of ethnic roots. The Jascha Lieberman trio believes that music transcends nationality, and its repertoire reflects the past and future of the European Union, especially 21st-century Jewish life.

Jewish Life in Berlin (walking tour)

<http://www.berlinwalks.com/>

Ariel Jewish Restaurant in Krakow

<http://www.ariel.ceti.pl/>

Photos by Peter McNelly

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