

CZECH TOUR 2008 BLOG

Postcard from Poland – 18 October 2008

Moadim b'simcha! Happy Sukkot from Warsaw! On Wednesday, 15 October, Lynda, Myra, and Johanna Hershenson met up with JoEllen and Rick in Warsaw, Poland. JoEllen and Rick had already discovered the Warsaw International Film Festival and learned how to say L'chaim in Polish over local vodka. Nostravia!

On Thursday, we began exploring local architecture and shopping, not to mention borscht, pierogies, and pancakes stuffed with all sorts of delicacies. Lynda favoured dates while Rick went for salmon.

To our very pleasant surprise, we stumbled upon a sukkah attached to the mainstream Orthodox synagogue in town. We visited the kosher co-op to purchase a challah and shared the joy of entering the Sukkah to say the b'rachah, motzi, and shehechianu. The only thing missing was Paul who arrived later that evening.

The six of us enjoyed lovely local cuisine hosted by Rabbi Burt Schuman and Jan Cudec, executive director of Beit Warszawa, the first and only Progressive synagogue in Poland. Several more are emerging thanks to the dedication and service of folks at Beit Warszawa.



Interestingly, the overwhelming majority of congregants at Beit Warszawa have discovered their Jewish identity only recently. Perhaps as a grandparent or parent confesses in the later stages of life or after a journey of investigative self discovery. Rabbi Burt is enjoying his new home and congregation. It was a treat for all of us to visit with him. I especially enjoyed his company as I last saw him during our first year of rabbinical school 18 years ago!

Postcard 2 from Poland – 18 October 2008

Friday morning the six of us met up with our guide for Jewish Warsaw, a lovely woman called Grosza, who happened to be a member of Beit Warszawa. Grosza's personal story moved us. She was raised in a Polish-Catholic family. She recalled a long-standing feeling that she was different. As an adult she learned from her grandmother that her mother was a Jew. Grosza's grandmother did not give birth to Grosza's mother. Grosza's grandmother found Grosza's mother as a young girl stirring beneath a pile of Jewish corpses, kept her at great risk, and raised her as her own.

The first of many lessons for the day was the basic fact that before WWII Warsaw was 30 percent Jewish! Before 1939 Jews made up 10 percent of the population of Poland! We first visited The Jewish Historical Institute viewing a film about life inside the Warsaw ghetto and then we walked through the streets that were once inside.

In the photo (below) you can see JoEllen walking along what might be the only remaining wall to the ghetto. It is adjacent to the Jewish cemetery which was immediately outside the ghetto.



An enormous challenge visiting the Warsaw ghetto is that it's entirely gone. There are new buildings and parks. Multiple memorials, plaques, and statues keep memories alive but it is really difficult to integrate what we know into what we saw.

A rather profound question arises. Should the place have been left or should life move on? Some buildings were reconstructed after the war to look exactly as they were before while others were replaced with brand new structures reflecting modernity and new values. Next to the Jewish Historical Institute which was built to resemble the large Jewish library and school that existed before the war is a very modern glass skyscraper with a car dealership on the ground level. That site was the Great Synagogue the Nazis destroyed when they outlawed public Jewish worship. Why was the integrity of one building kept while the other was ignored?

Our reactions to the sights, sounds, and smells varied but we all shared a sense that much of what we thought we knew wasn't quite accurate. We expected a lot of gray and we have found colour, vibrancy, and friendliness. We have all were raised to believe that the Polish people could have taught the Nazis a thing or two about antisemitism and we have learned that one-third of the individuals Yad Vashem recognizes as Righteous among the Nations are Polish.

The truth is often difficult to grasp. We have our personal prejudices and blind spots. The challenge, I suppose, is to remain open to new information, to listen to people's stories, and simply to live with contradictions. Perhaps the greatest strength of the Polish people, Jews and non-Jews alike, is indeed their capacity to live with the contradictions left in the wake of destruction and occupation of forces from the West and the East.

Friday night we were all good and ready for Jewish life after a day of reflecting on death and degradation. We braved public transportation despite the significant language barrier to join Beit Warszawa for Kabbalat Shabbat, a tasty dinner, and good company. We did New Zealand proud introducing ourselves with a round of Te Aroha and the gift of a New Zealand themed mezuzah and a Klezmer Rebs CD. Perhaps the most powerful personal sharing of the day was acknowledging the yahrzeit for Rick's Polish born mother in Poland in a living and growing Jewish congregation. Wishing long life to us all!
Shabbat shalom!

Postcard 3 from Poland – 20 October 2008

On the way to Krakow...

Sunday morning we met Greg, who became our driver from Warsaw to Krakow with a couple stops along the way. Our new friend, Jan, from Beit Warszawa suggested we visit Kazmierz Dolny to try to get a feel for shtetl life in Poland. Lynda remembered a photograph from one of Miri's March of the Living trips of a Jewish cemetery in which broken memorial stones were plastered into a wall along the roadside.

First we enjoyed a lovely coffee in the town square. Waffles and cream and recently harvested walnuts were particular treats. Myra's future was told by a very petite older Gypsy woman. The language barrier left her fortune a mystery as perhaps it should be. A bit of a surprise took us all in one of the local tourist shoppes. One of its walls was filled with paintings like the two in the photo (right).



Every Jewish man, painting and puppet, was depicted with piles of gold coins. The elation of learning how many Polish people are represented among the righteous of the nations waned. I could not help but ask Greg, our driver, what did Poles think of Jews in his opinion? His answer brought us all back to where we started..."You must understand," he said before the war Poles work for business owned by Jews. Poles are lazy. They want to know why Jews own the business and not them. Not me, of course. I work hard. I have money and nice home. But Poles are lazy and they want. Jews are smart. So they own business. This is way it is..."

Wow. So much there to unpack. I think we, as Jews, know this stereotype all too well. Facing it so viscerally in Poland was quite a sobering experience for us today. Still as we reflected on Greg's words we could not help but wonder about how the Polish people will heal from their own self hatred and denigration. After their own suffering under occupation from the West and the East, from the Nazis and the Bolsheviks, their sense of self is terribly damaged. Until they feel the pride of all the great accomplishments of Polish academics and artists and musicians and humanitarians, how can things here really change?

Still en route to Krakow we had the profound satisfaction of visiting Radom, an industrial town, which was the home town of Rick's mother. Further along our journey we took note of the hometown of Carol's father.

It was an emotional roller-coaster of a day. The truth is that most of our hours together were filled with laughter and continued camaraderie. Ultimately I think this is what it means to me a Jew rooted in history. Basically genuine love for one another and for humanity interrupted every so often by harsh reminders of being an other. I only pray that as humanity adjusts to global community in which there are no secrets we practice courage and generosity in our relations with one another. It is empowering to be here and not be afraid. But it is also sad and a bit painful.

Postcard 4 from Poland – 21 October 2008

Presently we are on the road from Krakow to Auschwitz. There is a strange energy hovering above our pleasant conversation. We enjoyed Krakow, only sorry we didn't give ourselves more time there. A familiar traveller's lament.

Last night a few of us marked the start of Sh'mini Atzeret in the regularly operating Rimus schul, built in the memory of Rabbi Moshe Isserles, who wrote the significant commentary of the Shulchan Aruch from which what we refer to as Halachah developed.

We shared a festive dinner enveloped in the music of a local Klezmer trio/quartet. A trio because there were three players, a quartet because one of the band members played violin and sang. Paul recognized the humorous profundity of a three Jews and four instruments.

Below is a photo of a Ukranian quartet in the central square. Once again, we pondered the maths.



We met a local resident called Henryk and invited him to share dinner with us. Sylvie, our guide, introduced Henryk as the last genuine coffee house Jew in Kracow. Henryk's self-introduction was particularly thought provoking. He said, "According to the most recent definition of a Jew, either a

survivor of the camps or an adult who has learned since the end of Communism he has Jewish roots and subsequently converted, I do not know who I am. Formerly I was a Jew born in Kracow after the Holocaust."

Upon reflection I am curiously drawn to Henryk's self-deprecating humour. He is simply a Jewish man born to Jewish parents. Being raised during the Communist period, Henryk was not particularly religious. His intellectual curiosity over time and the freedom of the post-Communist era has moulded him into an incredibly learned Jewish scholar. He has translated works of Rabbi Abraham Joahua Heschel and the Hasidic Rav Nachman of Bratslav into Polish and is currently working on a book about Jewish life in Kracow. Still in a time of almost overbearing need to celebrate the few remaining survivors of the Shoah and new Jews of Polish cities, Henryk is an interesting social anomaly. I am deeply grateful to have made his acquaintance.

Postcards from Hermanuv Mestec...24 October 2008

The day was beyond my expectation – after so many months of planning, thinking, reading about lost communities, here we were in a beautiful old Czech town, we think about 5000 people today, many old low buildings, and the carefully tended synagogue and adjacent art gallery; downtown was around the corner and very calm, most of the activity was at the bus stop outside a very large church.

...The interior of the synagogue was intensely painted/decorated in subtle colours, totally to our surprise – that it was so cared for and so beautiful. The people were very warm, they smiled so much – this was a big change from all our efforts to engage with Poles with a smile – rarely reciprocated. We felt we were welcomed with warmth and sincerity. And the art collection, just amazing, we have pictures galore.

...My overall impression of the whole day was warmth – in the beautiful wood inside the synagogue and the adjacent art gallery building (formerly the school and rabbi's residence), in the tears and huge welcoming smile of Maria who cares for the shul and gallery, in the eyes and hands that reached out to touch us as we paraded the Torah around the congregation of some 150 people. We had flute music to welcome us in and a concert of Yiddish/Ladino music to end the service. The two Torah scrolls – ours from the southern hemisphere and Beth Or's from North Carolina – met quietly before the service. We each had a chance to hold the other's scroll before we entered the sanctuary. It was a beautiful and poignant moment as the two scrolls were placed side by side in the Ark. Joy mixed with sadness – we were so happy to be able to take our scroll 'home' but underlying it all was the overwhelming sadness of the reason we were there at all – the ghosts of those who were lost accompanied us throughout the day. I felt overwhelmingly privileged to be able to be here.

...People: warmth, expectation and respect everywhere. The people reaching out to touch and respect the Torahs and shake our hands. Again, the same expectancy and respect of the people as they queued to come up to the Bimah to touch, marvel and respect. For me, standing at the reading desk with Johanna, and seeing this in the eyes of every person standing in line, this must have been a particular highlight among many.

...Personal connections: we were taken to the Jewish cemetery by the daughter of Mr Mares, “the last Jew of Hermanov Mestec”. His wife had not been Jewish and the daughter did not regard herself as Jewish, but clearly cherished and protected his heritage. Now, since his death, she had had to move from the town and protecting the heritage was more difficult. So it was very sad to see this tangible scene of loss in the cemetery, beautiful though it was. But it was immensely comforting to her and to us to tell her that since we had started, at Yiskor, saying the names of the Jews of Hermanov Mestec killed in the Holocaust, we were able to recognise many of the names that we saw on the gravestones.

Postcard from Prague – 25 October 2008

It is Shabbat. We welcomed the Sabbath queen last night with the Progressive congregation Beit Simcha. While the service was in Hebrew and Czech, familiar melodies helped us feel right at home.

Upon request, we brought our Torah Scroll to share with the congregation’s members and guests. One young woman wearing a cross on a necklace told me she had been learning biblical Hebrew as an elective amidst her studies in Economics. I asked her if she wanted to give it a go. With help, she worked her way through a paragraph in which the Israelites first reached Mt Sinai. If you could only see the joy and accomplishment beaming from her eyes and smile.

Later I shared the encounter with the rabbi. He taught me a new word to describe what had happened. Alongside the emergence of renewed Jewish life in Central Europe, is the emergence of philo-semitism.

Philo-semitism is, as you would guess, a love of Judaism. It differs from the sort of love of Jews many of us have encountered among Evangelical Christians. It is more genuine in that it is not rooted in a theological perspective of days to come. Rather it is some sort of a compulsion to learn and witness, appreciate and contribute to rebuilding Jewish life where it was destroyed.

Philo-semitism is a challenge as much as it is a joy here. The joy is self-evident. Who doesn't like it when another takes genuine interest? On the other hand, how do we nurture the rediscovery of Judaism among Jews who really have only been cultivating new Jewish life since the fall of Communism only a decade and a half ago? There are few rabbis to do the work of teaching and building communities. The emerging Jewish communities are small. Often there are quantitatively more philo-Semites than there are Jews. Sometimes they are qualitatively more intellectually knowledgeable about Judaism. They don't have the baggage of Jews who suffered under facsism and communism because they were Jewish.

How do we cultivate our own communities and spiritual lives while simultaneously appreciating and partnering with our neighbours? We don't want to return to self-imposed isolationism. Still we need to pay attention and nurture our internal growth and development as emerging Jewish communities.

I can only conclude with words from Pirkei Avot, Lo alecha hamlachah ligmor... No single person or congregation can complete this task alone. It will have to be a joint effort with long term goals. V'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimema... None of us are free to ignore the work. We just need to figure out our role.

Determing our role in and of itself is a challenge. I'd also suggest it is an open ended challenge because as we pay attention to one another and get to know one another we learn new information. What we start isn't always what we ought to finish. We must always remember that we are partners in this ever-unfolding creation of the universe.

Yitkadal veyitkadash shmay rabbah...

Postscript: Final Czech Tour Postcard

16 November 2008 (by Paul Blaschke)

It's been three weeks since the end of the trip – already? Most of us are back in New Zealand, but Johanna and Mark are still absorbed by the film project, and Myra is



still swanning around Europe (envy, sigh...). It's so hard to keep hold of the immediacy and the intensity of this wonderful experience, amid the clamour of everyday life. But there are so many memories. Here are a few:

- Our trip had a perfect symmetry to it. The high-light for me came right in the middle of the trip – the journeys between Krakow, Oswiecim and Auschwitz, Prague and Hermanuv-Mestec. In these incredibly intense 36 hours, we experienced the ghastly low of the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz-Burkenau concentration camps, and then the incredible high of the Simchat Torah celebration in Hermanuv-Mestec. At either end of the adventure, two wonderful Friday nights were spent with the Progressive Jewish congregations of Beit War-schau (Warsaw) and Beit Simcha (Prague). Between the ends and the middle were a few slightly less intense days touring and learning in Warsaw, Krakow and Prague.
- The wonderful feelings of elation, warmth, and mutual respect in Hermanuv-Mestec, tempered by great sadness for what had been lost there, will stay with me forever.
- We haven't said much about the terrible, tangible expression of that sadness and loss that we saw at Auschwitz. I suspect our feelings about that afternoon are very varied. But I think that we all felt degrees of ambivalence about the inevitable transformation of the terrible reality of the camps into a type of exhibition. This was an example of "world heritage", a "tourism product" even – but perhaps it is a necessary reality if the world is to witness and learn.

- For me, the more positive transformation was not only to learn about the thriving Jewish place that Oswiecim had been before the Holocaust, but also to vicariously experience the joy of discovering Rick's part of that story in the form of two headstones in the Jewish cemetery there. These two days were beautifully complemented by the two Friday evenings, at Warsaw and Prague. What a pleasure to experience the vitality of the new/old congregations and their apt forms of worship, to meet many warm and interesting people, and to learn a little about the huge challenge of rebuilding, in the twenty-first century, Jewish communities and experiences in one of the hubs of the Jewish world.



Erev Shabbat service at Beit Simcha, Prague

- As well as the more serious aspects of the trip, and the educational material that we had all tried to digest beforehand and en route, we had a heap of fun together. The group worked so well and even though we didn't always meet the goals we had set, every day was so rich and varied that pre-conceived plans ceased to matter. This balance gave each of us the support we needed, as the weight of the past is always evident throughout Eastern Europe. A group of this size could readily adapt to a new timetable or opportunity and maximise the opportunities presented.
- An example of this was the 11pm visit to a stunning old shul (not in current use) in the tiny town of Boskovice, in eastern Czech Republic. We had the feeling of being lost in the fog during the hours it took to get there but managed to pass the time with singing and JPS jokes – the Jewish Positioning System we devised on a long trip in Poland. Our singing in the shul was astounding. For nearly an hour we brought some life to the beautifully fresco painted building- goodness knows what the neighbours thought! Reaching Prague at 3.30am was the down side but that's travel for you.



Late night singing in the synagogue at Boskowice

Of course we are all still digesting the rich fare of our experiences, and will be for some time. Our meeting at Temple Sinai (7th December 2008) was an important step in that process.