

March of the Living, A tour of Poland – A Range of Emotions and a Must for Everyone

Most Yom Ha Shoah commemorations find us in a community synagogue, listening to a harrowing tale from a Holocaust survivor, or Zooming a program while seated in our kitchen. This year, Brett and I marched, draped in an Israeli flag, from Auschwitz to Birkenau. This year, we participated, along with 6,000 others (Jews and non-Jews) from around the world, in the March of the Living. While I expected to be sobbing for the entire 3 kilometers, I found myself feeling invigorated by the large groups of teens who were participating with much pride, while trading pins and contact information. We also met large delegations of non-Jews who were marching – groups of youth from Poland, Germany and Bulgaria. There were, of course, solemn moments to the march – especially when we transported ourselves back to the 1940's and pictured life in the camps, knowing that the Jews doing this march at the time were marching to their deaths. I found seeing the sign “Arbeit macht frei” at the entrance to Auschwitz to be particularly jarring.

Much of the week was spent touring concentration camps and extermination camps – Auschwitz, Birkenau/Auschwitz II, Treblinka and Majdanek. Auschwitz has been preserved as a museum, with much to see and read – original brick barracks, crematoria, watch towers, photographs, documents and prisoners' belongings and personal items - hair that is still braided, suitcases, and thousands of pairs of shoes. As expected, the mood was solemn, and we were focused on trying to take it all in. Our experience at Treblinka was heart-wrenching. The site is largely open fields and forest, with thousands of stones to commemorate entire towns that were wiped out and to memorialize the hundreds of thousands of murders that took place. There is largely nothing original to see because the Nazis destroyed the camp in order to hide the atrocities that took place there. The feeling of loss and destruction of a people was palpable. We also spent time in the Lopuchowo Forest, where thousands of Jews were shot and their bodies dumped into mass graves. It was eerily easy to picture the scene of the executions while standing in the middle of the forest in front of the 3 sites, each containing about 1,000 bodies.

We very much enjoyed our time in Krakow, a beautiful, walkable city rich with history and culture. Prior to WWII, close to 60,000 Jews lived in Krakow, roughly 25% of the population of the city. Today, as may be expected, Jews are much less than 1% of the city's population. However, Jewish history and culture are visible throughout the city, most notably in the Kazimierz district, the area where the Jews were required to live. Fun fact - the Jewish Cultural Festival, one of the largest in

the world, takes place annually in Krakow. During our time there, we had the opportunity to speak with the dynamic CEO of the Krakow JCC, who described his efforts to help enliven the strong but small Jewish population of Krakow, and to aid in the discovery and exploration of Jewish roots among those Polish people learning that they have a Jewish relative who hid their Judaism due to trauma and/or fear.

Warsaw, unlike Krakow, was mostly destroyed during the war. We spent time walking through parts of the city that comprised the Warsaw Ghetto, which was about 1.3 square miles. When looking closely at the ground, one can see, among the dirt and stones, small red pieces of crushed brick that are remnants of the walls that surrounded the ghetto. Our guide mentioned that it is quite common during renovations and construction for workers to dig up pieces of brick from the wall and even human remains.

Like Krakow, before the war there was a thriving Jewish population – almost one third of the population – now well under 1%. Jewish life and culture does not permeate the streets as in Krakow, but there is a strong institutional presence – active synagogues, including the Nożyk Synagogue, that survived the war due to its use as a stable by the Nazis, a wonderful museum, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and the Warsaw Jewish cemetery dating back to 1806. It continues to remain in use today. Jews report that they feel comfortable living Jewish lives in Warsaw.

We left Poland feeling somewhat hopeful that the Jewish population there is relatively safe and slowly growing. We returned to the US with fortified Jewish pride and a renewed commitment to fighting anti-semitism. And a hopeful but probably unrealistic wish that those who are unknowing of their Jewish ancestry will discover it with a fervent sense of wanting to return to their roots and contribute positively to the Jewish community and the Jewish population!