

## Day Two: Jewish Warsaw David J. Small

Who could imagine a visit to some offices could be thrilling and mind-expanding? Someone who has not heard Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett give an insider's view to the in-process Museum of the History of Polish Jews. This museum, rising from the rubble and ashes of the Warsaw Ghetto site, is designed to tell the remarkable story of Polish Jews over 1,000 years of flourishing culture, religious, social and economic life with drama, tragedy and inspiration. The multi-media, cutting edge program of exhibits was conceived before the building was designed. Seven walk-through halls will invite visitors to explore the ages of Polish Jewry from earliest origins to growth and prosperity to disaster and beyond. Barbara, Sam, Marchin and a team of other world-class scholars, designers and builders are creating a fitting vehicle for the story of Polish Jews. The Ghetto and destruction of Polish Jewry will be one key element in the unique story. Barbara reminded us that the Holocaust came to Poland and did not originate here. The Museum will reflect that reality, portraying events from a Polish-eye view. She spoke hopefully of a new generation (tiny but hopeful) of young Jews who are open and enthusiastic in rediscovering their Jewish identities, many after generations of hidden Jewishness. Barbara's experience with her father, Mayer's reception by his old town in Poland gives her hope for the possibility of "constructive engagement" and greater understanding in today's Poland.

Sam Kassow punctuated our visit to the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery with fascinating commentary on the many literary luminaries, influential rabbis, newsmen, politicians, philanthropists, Hasids, Bundists, Zionists who were interred there.

Yod Lamed Peretz was the highlight for Sam, who reveres this Jewish literary giant who turned Warsaw into a center of Jewish Literature while holding a day job as a clerk. Peretz was so influential, urging Jew to modernize, embrace Yiddish, respect the Jewish tradition, and stay in Poland, that 100,00 people crowded to his graveside when he died in 1915. The cemetery, shaded by large trees, is a fascinating assembly of accomplished Polish Jews.

At the Nozyk Synagogue, we davened Mincha and said Kaddish for the dead. This was a moment of reflection and meditation. It felt good to be Jews treating a synagogue as a house of prayer today, not just as a historical curiosity. One member of the group teared up as she gazed at the ark of the only surviving synagogue in this once intensely-Jewish city.

At the Jewish Historical Institute, we viewed a film based on footage shot during the period of the Warsaw Ghetto from its start to destruction. The harrowing images of suffering and death were contrasted with efforts of Jews to resist

spiritually, culturally, socially and through force of arms. The worst were the scenes that Nazi film-makers forced the Jews to stage, of feasting and merriment and religious life. The famine, disease and death were not staged. We saw some traces of the work of Emanuel Ringelblum, whose Oyneg Shabbes project saved precious records of the life of the Jews in the Ghetto, their organizations, reflections and experiences that form a testimony to their power of resistance and persistence.

We made our way to the Umschlagplatz, the site of imprisonment and deportation of the Ghetto's Jews to death camps, by rail. We walked along a path in what was the Ghetto, visiting memorial stones in tribute to Ghetto fighters and leaders. At Mila 18, we stopped at the site of many Ghetto Fighters' last stand. About 50 lie beneath the grassy mound in the rubble. We visited the sculpted memorial to the Jews of the Ghetto and the Fighters, and saw the new museum building rising behind it. Steel is being fitted and concrete poured. We also visited some remnants of the brick Ghetto walls, where Estelle Kafer read evocative excerpts written by her son, Jared at age 17 when he was on the March of the Living in the same spot. All along the way, Sam shared the stories of the people, their suffering and courage. He explained the arguments and divisions between the Zionist and Revisionist fighters.

In the afternoon, our local guide led us on an excursion through the part of Warsaw that was inhabited by the Nazis during the war, and hence, left unmolested. Fine, prewar facades and a grand park filled with palaces and a monument to Chopin, the great composer and pianist marked a stark contrast with our earlier path. It was interesting to hear our local Polish guide share her narrative of history, telling of brave Poles who resisted the Germans and resented the Soviets. She expressed regret that during the Soviet period, young Poles were ignorant of much of the Jewish narrative. Recalling when she finally heard the "dreadful" truth about the wartime and the unfortunate fate that befell the Jews of Poland.

Warsaw is a beautiful and modern city, vibrant and appearing prosperous. Shiny steel and glass towers rise where grand synagogues once were. I like the city and am haunted by it at the same time. Tomorrow, on to Auschwitz and Krakow.