

## VISIT TO POLAND

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Tour Guide : Arek Hersh ( Holocaust Survivor )

Under the auspices of Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial  
and Education Centre

Group Itinerary : Krakow : Auschwitz- Birkenau :Lodz :Warsaw

Personal Visit : Skierniewice

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My visit to the Land of my Fathers

I have returned from Poland just a few hours ago and I feel the need to get something on paper in order to sort out my feelings. I feel something has changed but I can't photograph it as I have the places I have now seen, which hitherto had existed only in the words of my father or in the welter of images I received from books and TV documentaries .

My vision of Poland ( die Heim -) was conveyed to me throughout my childhood with an ambivalent and paradoxical message - on the one hand the pastoral idyll: the little town with the river he loved to swim in - ( he always scoffed at the laboured strokes of other swimmers and boasted that when he swam the surface was undisturbed ) - a town so beautiful the Czar had a summer Palace there and endless bucolic tales of picking fruit in the orchards and tending the horse of his brother Moshe who drove a droska and was so strong he could lift it up with one hand by the axle : on the other hand I was regaled with images of deprivation , forced service into the Russian army, Polish hatred , pogroms and arctic winters. I knew of course from Yad Vashem and other sources that the 6,500 Jews of Skierniewice once a centre of Chassidic excellence had suffered the same fate as the Jewish inhabitants of all the other Shtetls of Poland and Russia under the heel of Hitler's executioners . I was well informed on Ghettoisation and the extermination system so I thought I was mentally well prepared. I was not.

We first flew from London to Krakow . We were a group of mixed ages - At 71 I probably was the oldest .We had one non-Jewish girl writing a doctrinal thesis on the Shoah the remainder were Jewish apart from the group organiser Stephen Smith from Beth Shalom a non-Jewish foundation dedicated to disseminating information on the Shoah.

Krakow

We spent a few hours in Krakow which still has a tiny Jewish presence but many Jewish tourists - Krakow has a ?re-constructed ? Jewish cemetery which includes the modest classical matzevah of the Great Rabbi Moses Isserles called Rema ( died 1572 ) a great Talmudic scholar . The Hebrew inscription reads ?..... From Moses

Maimonides to Moses Isserles there has not been such a Moses ? Chassidim from all over the world come to pray at his grave and the remains of their candles and paper scraps containing their petitions are piled high beneath the revered stone. A mosaic wall has been made of the fragments of broken stones found after liberation and several synagogues are being restored. In the square outside the cemetery a mobile wooden kiosk offers Jewish religious souvenirs , paintings ,and even tee-shirts to Jewish tourists and there are several Jewish ?type? cafes and restaurants and one modern Kosher restaurant .

. We saw Schindler?s factory ( we later in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw were able to see one of Schindlers actual lists and carbon copies of business letters under his letterhead signed with a ?Heil Hitler ? ). The factory a typical rather grey run-down 1930 - ish construction was in use as an electronic works no-one would ever think anything remarkable took place here . No plaque marked its significance .The old Jewish quarter in Krakow has many buildings of great historic Jewish interest including a great 16th C synagogue designed by an Italian Architect and even a 19th c Reform synagogue both under restoration . The beautiful 17th C synagogue built by the wealthy Izaak Jakubowicz in memory of his wife has a moralistic Rabbinical legend attached to it of how Izaak a poor man had a dream about a pot of gold hidden under a bridge in Prague and how he went there and found nothing but was told by an old man to return home and look under his kitchen floor where he found treasure. We were told of the long Jewish history , of the autonomous privileges granted to Jews by King Cashimir in ancient times and of the heroic Polish Pharmacist who stayed in the ghetto with the Jews during the occupation by the Germans although he could have left .We ate in a ?Jewish type? restaurant in Krakow the attraction of which was that we were treated there to a performance by a trio of excellent musicians ( bass, fiddle and accordion ) who played a new type of Klezemer music adapted by themselves of extraordinary pathos and beauty.

#### Auschwitz - Birkenau

We were next day taken to Auschwitz -Birkenau by Arek who as an adolescent had arrived here in a cattle wagon deported from his home town of Sieradz.Arek related to us his terrifying story of how as a teenager he survived alone by a combination of providence , luck and an astonishing ability to make life or death decisions in seconds.Birkenhau Camp is quite separate from the well known and well visited Auschwitz which was a few kilometres away. Birkenhau was purpose built for destroying human beings ,there the crematoria worked day and night to dispose of the victims of the gas chambers , it was at Birkenhau that most of ?the selection ?

by Mengele took place and slave labour gangs marched each day to work in the factories of German industry .

Auschwitz ,partly built by slave labour, was a pre-war Polish barracks and the Germans originally housed there Poles whom they considered a danger to them - Communists especially but few Jews , who were being shot or starved to death in ghettos .

Auschwitz had the terrible 'Block 11' where people were subjected to terrible punishments and shot against the 'Black Wall'. It later became a symbol of Polish martyrdom and the museum and the usual tourist facilities are established there. Birkenhau has none of these .

The Soviets did not distinguish between Jews and Poles so Jewish martyrdom was not to be particularised.. The vast extermination camp at Birkenau fell into disrepair from neglect after the Germans had in panic demolished the gas-chambers in order to hide their crimes. Efforts are being made to restore it and we saw German apprentices from the Volkswagen works who had volunteered to work in Birkenhau on repair and restoration.

The mechanics of extermination of Jews and Gypsies at Birkenau is widely known from the numerous documentaries on the Shoah. Trains arriving from all parts of Europe , the immediate life-death selection and the horror of all that followed - we were entered the tiered wooden shacks where human beings spent the arctic Polish winter nights , we saw the primitive un-drained latrines. Only a fraction of the original wooden barrack huts still stood - the gas chambers were a pile of rubble and we saw and prayed at the pond where the victims ashes, not used as fertiliser, were dumped.

The whole bleak area ,enclosed by the electrified fences and watch towers, even in summer has an air of indescribable desolation which has to be experienced before one can even begin to feel its menace. A friend described it as being like the skeleton of a gigantic dead spider , still crouching and ready to spring.

It was apparent to me as a Surveyor that Architects and Engineers in comfortable offices somewhere removed from this hell had been given a detailed brief to design with the utmost economy a complex whose sole purpose was the degradation and destruction of fellow human beings en masse . Indeed on display at Auschwitz was one Engineer's working drawing of a gas chamber , which carried in the bottom left hand corner of the drawing ( in the normal professional manner ) the details of the draughting firm . Hundreds of such drawings would have been required .

The methods of construction everywhere showed ingenuity and even originality so as to involve absolute minimal cost and very little precious steel . This is in clear contradiction of the normal traditions of West European Architects and Engineers who were well known for heavy overdesign. The materials used were second-

hand and looted. There was one glaring exception to this policy of frugality - the gas chambers and their ante-rooms to them were all totally underground and it is much more costly to construct below ground than above. The reason can only be that the perpetrators considered it overridingly necessary to conceal from the waiting victims the fact, obvious if the buildings were above ground, that while many entered the building no-one emerged.

After Birkenau we were taken to Auschwitz. The buildings here appeared not unlike the austere Victorian barracks and prisons still to be seen in the UK - but the ambiance of the place was fearful - if Birkenau was a machine for extermination - here was a machine for prolonged torture and the breaking with extreme cruelty of the spirit of resistance and moreover it showed no signs of damage.

We saw the gallows (the cross-piece was a railway line) where prisoners were forced to watch exemplary executions. We saw the exhibition of mountains of human hair, suitcases, cooking utensils, spectacles, shoes, talismans and perhaps the most horrific of all the artificial limbs of the innocent men, women and little children who were sucked into this blackhole of evil never to emerge. For me the cumulative emotional trauma was here overwhelming and I was fortunate to find some relief in unashamed tears. Before we left we saw the gallows upon which Hoess, the Commandant of Auschwitz, was hanged at the scene of his unspeakable crimes. The gallows were erected by the Poles at the entrance to the gas chamber, this for me (paradoxically a passionate opponent of capital punishment) was a small reaffirmation that Justice still exists in the world, a fact which is so easily forgotten after seeing the sickening evidence of the grossest example of controlled and calculated evil the world has ever seen.

We then in silence took the long journey to Lodz by road stopping briefly en route to allow a member of our group to see his ancestral town.

I saw nothing of Lodz as I left my group in Lodz and traveled together with Edward Wlodarczyk my benevolent Polish friend who lived in Skierniewice the hour long train ride to the town. The magnificent two storied late 19th C Architecturally bizarre railway station which I knew from a print was in an advanced state of dilapidation - (? four years to build 30 years to repair?) and the town was a sprawling shabby mess. Edward Wlodarczyk lived at least two miles out of town so we took a taxi to his modest tiny house which was his father's before him where I was treated with great hospitality by his wife although it was quite apparent that they were suffering cruelly in the economic quagmire of post Communist Poland. The Czar's summer Palace now used as the offices of a Governmental Agricultural quango was there set in a

quiet garden exactly as my father described. We walked around the sumptuous rooms , I may well have been the first Jew to do so. Edward Wlodarczyk took me in his "car" a 25 year-old derelict Trabant of which he was clearly ashamed straight to one of Skierniewice's two Jewish cemeteries. There was almost nothing to be seen . The stones had been thrown into the river ( the same river my father delighted to swim in ) and the Local council had reconstructed the tiny plain stuccoed Ohel that once covered the remains of Skierniewice renowned rabbi ,of the rest nothing but a few broken remains of metzavot retrieved and stuck in the ground and a modest recently erected granite memorial headstone as a token marker of the final resting place of generations of my ancestors . The good intention shown by the new memorial was somewhat negated by the fact it was surrounded by cabbages by whoever now occupied the cemetery keepers house.

The second larger cemetery was equally bereft of its metzavot and the local council were in the process now after a belated half century's delay of constructing a small memorial garden with a handful of recovered stones set in concrete nearby. As we approached the workman casually raking the ground for the memorial, an old peasant woman with a yapping Dachshund puppy emerged from the shabby house adjoining the cemetery ( presumably the dwelling of its former guardian ) and followed me and my companion through the long grass She first quickly removed the two half finished glasses of beer perched on a tombstone and asked my friend " who is this man ?? - my Polish guide replied "just a tourist" I asked him later why he had not explained my interest in the cemetery and he replied " I did not wish to risk an commotion. But she was not deceived ,I had noticed that same strange expression before , half smile half sneer on the face of the peasants in Lantzman film "Shoah" when asked their feelings on the loss of their Jewish neighbours.

Few of the typical Shtetl weather boarded wooden houses remained around the market square , the big shul had been burnt down and a man trying to save some sacred articles was shot and thrown into the flames. The smaller shul was now a warehouse . I found the building ( Rawska #4 ) from which address we had received letters of a cousin in 1938 still intact .

There was nothing else to remind you that this was once the home of 6,500 Jewish souls and their forefathers for 700 years .

Edward Wlodarczyk told me a pathetic story . In the early years of the war Edouard's mother found a Jewish woman she knew lying in the main square of the town having been savaged by the dog of a policeman .She took her home and bound her wounds and was asked if she would hide the woman's family ( herself her mother ,husband and two children ) for three days. Edouard's mother

agreed although this involved putting them all in extreme danger . Edward Wlodarczyk and his brother belonged to the Boys Scouts and the police suspected that the boys scouts could be involved with partisans . At the end of the three days the family name Kutchinski made no effort to leave the house and the situation in the house became tense as the Polish family became ever more nervous and their guests made showed no intention to leave. The impasse was broken by the totally unexpected arrival from another town of the godfather of the Polish children . The visitor (a big fellow I was told ), on being informed of the of their unwelcome presence ordered the Jewish family to depart immediately . The Kutchinski family lived somehow to tell the story of their survival to a Commission at Yad Vashem . The Polish family now look upon the arrival of the unexpected visitor as providential since the house was searched by Gestapo a week later and the inhabitants Jew and Pole alike would all most certainly met their deaths. Sadly however the Kutchinski family when approached later by Edward Wlodarczyk said they have no recollection of the episode whatsoever.

No Jews live in Skierniewice to-day but I noticed as we noticed in other towns we visited, graffiti in the form of a large Magen David sprayed on the walls in the centre of which were written various letters . I naturally thought this was evidence of neo- nazi political activity. Not so . The graffiti are the work of followers of rival football teams. Instead of writing e.g. ?Down with Lodz United? they merely inscribe LU in the centre of a Magen David. - as a sort of hex. Is this the only folk memory of the 1000 years that Jews spent in Poland ?.

I left the Local Skierniewice Historical museum a copy of the citation accompanying the WW1 Croix de Guerre and Military Medal awarded posthumously to a Skierniewice cousin of ours . The actual medals are in my possession to-day.

I traveled by rickety slow train from Skierniewice to Warsaw . We stopped at a dozen little towns and Shtetls on the way - poverty was evident everywhere . Skierniewice has 30% unemployment and Edward Wlodarczyk a high level manager of an Engineering works for 40 years ekes out a living on a pitiful pension . Anna a young librarian friend of Edward Wlodarczyk who acted as my interpreter bitterly remarked to me ? the Germans are good at two things - killing and living - it is unjust that they should be boasting of the strong Mark while we struggle in poverty.? I fear the political situation in Poland is very volatile.

Warsaw

Warsaw however shows little overt signs of deprivation - multi storey hotels and shops bustling with tourists and with Paris type traffic jams . When our party was in front of the monumental

sculpture commemorating the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising , a heated argument erupted between four people who were all survivors of the Lodz ghetto - one told the story of how when he as youth was on a train returning to Lodz after his liberation , the train was boarded by armed Poles ( the Arka ) searching for Jews. He attached himself to a Polish couple who told him to pretend he was asleep at their feet. The soldiers approached and pointed at the sleeping figure and asked if he was a Jew - the couple assured him that he was not and they could vouch for his Polish-ness. The soldiers then left with a group of Jews they had ?arrested? and shot them. We were at the time being conducted around the old Warsaw ghetto area by Dr. Marion Turski, a world authority on Polish Jewish history and himself a survivor of the Lodz ghetto, and while he agreed it was true that several hundred of Jews were murdered by Poles after the War and many betrayed by Poles during the War - insisted that the we avoid oversimplification of the relationship between Pole and Jew. Living in the Lodz area in 1939 there were a large population of ?ethnic Germans ? who welcomed the occupation and who acted accordingly.

We were conducted with great enthusiasm by Dr Turski around the great Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw which was the second largest Jewish cemetery in the world. It was intact but colonised by Sycamore trees which engulfed the entire site. This cemetery was unlike any other I have ever seen. One is overwhelmed with the richness and originality of some of the memorials to the rich and famous which are everywhere to be seen.. Many sculptures are a brilliant compromise between free artistic expression and the religious injunction against graven images. We see celebrated examples of this by the Art Nouveau sculptor Abraham Ostrzega who uses angels with hidden faces as a repetitive theme . We see mausoleums incorporating Moorish elements , the sarcophagus of a banker is draped with a beautifully carved shroud in marble , the tomb of a famous artist has symbols of masons tools and a palette , that of a great actress shows a tragic mask, and perhaps the most valuable Jewish tombstones in the world that of Berek Sonneberg ( died 1882 ) the ancestor of the philosopher Henri Bergson which has two magnificent panels in relief one -illustrating the biblical verse ?... By the rivers of Babylon ? and the other showing the district of Warsaw named after him and containing much of his fathers property and remarkably the tomb itself.

These elaborate and beautiful metzsavot bear eloquent testimony to the wealth and prosperity of the Jewish community in Warsaw in the 19th Century and equally to the enormous contribution they made to secular Polish, economic, artistic , cultural, intellectual and political life.

A powerful symbol of the utter destruction which awaited this vibrant community was a stinking open sewer access in the centre of the cemetery through which a handful of survivors of the uprising escaped when the ghetto was razed by the German barbarians after the heroic uprising

We then visited the only functioning Synagogue in Warsaw next to the Yiddish Theatre only to be greeted by a demand to pay an admission fee of 5 Zloty before we were allowed in - this outrage, on principle we refused to accept explaining that probably everyone would make a voluntary contribution later and were grudgingly admitted followed by an old man with a plate .

All that was missing to make the old joke come true was to be told ? OK , you can go in but don't let me catch you praying ?

The main entrance doors of the Synagogue had recently been set on fire and a few stones in the cemetery had been damaged by vandals demonstrating that anti-Semitism was still alive and sick in Warsaw.

Of the original Warsaw ghetto nothing remained - under the paving of the streets still lay the rubble of what once was.

Our last evening afforded unexpected light relief. The whole group of 20 persons dined ( I use the word loosely ) at a Kosher restaurant in Warsaw. The tables were arranged in a U-formation. We arrived at 7.30 p.m. as booked. At 8 o'clock a frail and elderly waiter appeared bearing a single very small basket of cut local bread which he gingerly deposited and hastily disappeared having distributed some menus Nothing further happened for the next 30 minutes . We were all very hungry and I walked into the Kitchen to get some service only to see the ?chef? with his feet up quietly enjoying a cigarette . No sign of ? Manuel? ( his name was Alex actually ) .

In desperation one of our party went into the Kitchen and brought out more bread himself. When Alex eventually reappeared and went slowly round taking orders. I ordered the mouth watering ? roast veal and plum? only to be told it was ?off? and in order not to delay matters further I settled for ? Chicken and hot apple ? - which sounded great . The hors d'oeuvre was consommé and kraplech which was just like my mother used to make but the Chicken and hot apple turned out to be plain minced chicken fried in batter with chips. When I asked where was the hot apple ? - I was told that was a misprint in the menu. The desserts did not materialise - the waiter said it would take too long.

The future ?

Our dinner guest was DR Elizabeth Maxwell a French Protestant well known in working for reconciliation between faiths. She told us of an inter-faith conference ( Jew-Christian-Moslem ) at which she learned from a Vatican Cardinal, no-less , that the Pope had

ordered that Catholic seminaries include a compulsory course on Talmud - a revolutionary departure from its tradition - which if followed should go some way to altering the dangerous and negative image of Judaism found in Church doctrine of the past. Arek our survivor guide never hid his belief that the Church was the source of the river of hatred of the Jew which when fed by the streams of human wickedness and stupidity inevitably became the flood that so brutally destroyed 6 million human beings , a belief I share - but perhaps there are now hopeful signs that that river of hatred may yet be tamed and that Jews may at last have no cause ever again to fear their neighbours.

I had to make this journey and I have made it. I have no wish ever to return.

#### Afterthoughts

Almost a week has quickly passed since my return. In my thoughts and even my dreams have been in a turmoil .

I was just 13 when Hitler invaded Poland , as I came from a politicized family so I was aware of the menace of Fascism - one of my clearest childhood memories is being taken , as a 10 years old , by my older sister to a mass demonstration in Trafalgar Square in support of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War . Anti-Semitism was a fact of life in the tenement district of West London's Notting Hill in which we lived . I must have been aware of the threat to us as Jews since I vividly recollect the instant in the War when I suddenly wondered what would happen to us if the Germans invaded but it was not a thing the family spoke about. I went alone to Paris in 1948 to meet a Polish cousin who had survived with his wife and child by escaping into the Russian occupied Poland in 1939 and heard his story as far as I could understand it with my imperfect Yiddish. But it was history like the Spanish Inquisition and was not truly ?emotionally ? involved. I was too young or too busy to really question my father and mother about their grandparents and their extended families while they were with us and now I am left with the bitter regret that I missed that wonderful opportunity.

I retired five 5 years ago and I was looking for something to occupy my time so I decided to try to increase my minimal knowledge of my family history and the family history of my wife . I soon realized that although my father often spoke of his youth in Skierniewice and I knew his brothers' names I knew very little else, and I realized very quickly that to discover more about my Polish forbears would be an uphill struggle. I speak of my father's family only because I knew my parents were cousins of a sort and both my grandfathers came from the same Shtetl - Skierniewice and my mother's parents , brothers and

sisters all came to England before she, the baby of the family was born.

Research into my wife's Dutch family history however was much easier , they had been in England since the mid-19th C ( although they always claimed to have been here since Cromwellian times ) , what came as a terrible shock however was to find that quite close cousins of her grandparents had been sent to their deaths , from their homes Holland , to Birkenau and Sobibor in 1942 and 1943. The full roll of murdered Dutch Jews ( approx. 80% of the 104,000 - the highest proportion after Poland ) was recorded by the Germans and has been made available by the Dutch Ministry of Justice. How many Polish cousins did I have that must have met an identical but unrecorded fate.

I had read Primo Levi and marveled that any victim of such cruelty and hatred could have emerged with his humanity and compassion intact , I had seen and been moved by Lantzman's monumental documentary Shoah - but walking through the sordid wooden barrack huts that once held the huddled emaciated bodies of Jews from all over Europe brought me in a moment closer to them than a hundred documentaries were ever able to achieve. With the new found special empathy I found with these victims came terrible unasked and unanswerable questions. What Jew would take the hateful job of barrack Kapo for the price an extra bowl of watery soup or an extra crust of life giving bread ? Would I have even survived the brutal ghetto existence the cruel apprenticeship for the extermination camps ?

I see now with greater clarity the lethal progression from the deprivation of civil rights and organized pogroms in pre-War Germany, through the stigmatisation of the yellow star , brutalisation , confinement to disease ridden Ghettos (all volumes borrowed from the ample library of cruel Christian oppression of Jews through the ages ) to the deliberate starvation , enslavement and Final Solution which was the Nazis own contribution in the unique demonstration of human depravity we call the Shoah.. Which brings me probably to the most difficult question of all . I know now how , but why ? Who knows what the perpetrators believed . Was it just as Hannah Arendt argued just the banality of evil ?

I cannot bring myself to accept that anyone believed the 'racial purity theory' ? it was such patent lunatic nonsense, yet to those born to German gentile parents, steeped in the murky slime of teutonic myth and absorbing the ambient ancient Christian demonology of Jews with their mother's milk perhaps it was possible.

Arek told us how in Birkenau he was once near an SS guard who was casually eating his lunch from an aluminum canteen outside

the wire , the guard asked the starving man if he was hungry and made as if to pass some food across to him only to drop it deliberately to the ground for the dog to eat. Even in the face of such depravity and sadism for which there can never never be any excuse , we must resist the comforting temptation to deny the murderers and torturers their human form as they sought to deny ours. To do so would be to give us all a false sense of security . Perhaps the human psyche is like the structure of the earth itself with a molten core, a boundless hidden capacity for destruction , which is forever seeking a weakness or fault in the thin containing crust of conscience through which to wreck a volcanic havoc on those unfortunate enough to be in its path .

My knowledge of the Shoa has now been given meaning by my experience in Poland and paradoxically perhaps the anger I had nourished for so long begins to diminish.

Is this Catharsis ? - my dictionary tells me that the word ( before Freud) meant ? the purging or purification of the emotions through the evocation of pity and fear ,as in tragedy? Have I experienced a catharsis ? - time will tell . It has certainly given me little cause for optimism.