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Why Are Jews
Returning
To One of the
World's Most
Anti-Semitic
Nations?



Next Year in Warsaw

By Vince
Beiser P34

Facing the Musicals: Broadway on CD

FEINGOLD, KERNER, McDONNELL, AND VINCENTELLI P45

ASHES AND DIAMONDS



poland is among the most
anti-semitic nations on earth.

but it is also the site of a
miraculous jewish renewal.

BY VINCE
BEISER

been restored, but much of the district is a genuine ghost town, its quiet streets lined with empty, crumbling buildings abandoned since World War II. Ragged plastic sheeting flaps in empty windows, and swatches of plaster have fallen away from the moldering brick walls. On the occasional doorway, the faint imprint left by a mezuzah can still be seen.

But a strange kind of Jewish life remains in Kazimierz today, focused, as it has been for centuries, on

Much of Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter in Cracow, Poland, looks the way you might expect a place would look after its 40,000 inhabitants were marched out and killed, their homes left to decay for 50 years. Some areas have

the cobblestoned central square. The still-functioning 16th-century Remuh Synagogue and its adjacent cemetery are there, as is a Jewish history museum in what used to be another synagogue. Of more recent vintage are a bookstore, a small hotel, several cafés, and five restaurants. All have names like Ariel and Noah's Ark.

These businesses are Jewish themed; but except for a soulless kosher restaurant patronized mainly by Israeli tour groups, all are operated by non-Jews. At night, each of the restaurants features klezmer music played almost exclusively by non-Jewish musicians.

Several of these places opened up during the mini-boom in tourism sparked by *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg's Holocaust opus, filmed on location in Cracow. The Jordan Jewish bookstore-tourist agency has added to its tours of Kazimierz and

BEFORE the STORM



COMMUNITY CENTER PHOTO BY MICHAEL DEAN; ALL OTHER PHOTOS FROM AND I STILL SEE THEIR FACES/SHALOM FOUNDATION

Fifty years separate this 1936 photo (below, left) of the market square in Kazimierz and the recent image (below, right) of children at Warsaw's Jewish community center.



Man and boy in the town of Gorą Kalwaria, 1939

A summer day in Kazimierz, 1922



A Jewish trader at market in the town of Baranów Sandomierski, 1937



A group portrait of Jewish activists in the Union of Polish Communist Youth



Lodz, 1943:
The sign reads,
"Jewish
Quarter, Entry
forbidden."



A year after this photo was taken, the mother handed her daughter over to a Christian family. The child survived.

Auschwitz, just an hour's drive away, a tour of the sites used in the movie. Many are fakes, reconstructions; the Plaszow concentration camp, for instance, is today an undramatic open field, so Spielberg created a new one in a nearby rock quarry.

Ariel is a cozy, dimly lit, little restaurant on the square, with lacy tablecloths, walls adorned with paintings of bearded rabbis, and klezmer music playing on a stereo in the background. The menu offers matzo ball soup, latkes, kugel, "Purim chicken," and kosher beer. It looks like some big Polish-Jewish family's dining room in the 1930s—except that I am the only Jew there.

I scan the people at the tables; they're all speaking German. German tourists eating Jewish food cooked and served by Poles. It's a make-believe

THE LOST JEWS OF POLAND

In 1994, Warsaw's Shalom Foundation set out to document Jewish life in Poland before the Holocaust. They issued a call for photographs and were deluged with over 8000 snapshots. Most had been preserved by Christians as cherished reminiscences of their vanished friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The exhibition that ensued is currently touring Europe and Israel. Fifty years after Nazism, the memories of Poland's lost Jews remain.

Beiser

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Jewish culture, spawned by Spielberg's make-believe Holocaust—simulated Jewish life in a place of overwhelming Jewish death.

Malgorzata Ornat, one of Ariel's owners, is proud of the restaurant. She says the local Jews were suspicious of it at first, but now come around often. In fact, one of Poland's first post-war Jewish weddings was held there in 1992. Ornat's mother was a Jew who converted to Catholicism. When Ornat found this out several years ago, she became obsessed with Judaism, even going to study at the Oxford University Center for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies. "I find it fascinating, very mystical in a way, that Jews survived, through all the pogroms, wars, and persecutions. I feel I somehow have to prolong this culture or it will die." Having non-Jews run pseudo-Jewish restaurants, she says, "is not the best solution, but how can we bring Jewish people here and convince them to revive a Jewish community? Nothing like this has happened at all for 45 years, so it's a good sign that at least something is happening now."

Sure enough, Henryk Halkowski, 43, one of Cracow's few genuine Jews, drops in later for a drink. "As long as these businesses are in good taste, it's okay," he shrugs. "It's 50 years since the war."

On a Saturday evening a few days later, I walk into the near-emptiness of Warsaw's only remaining synagogue. Under the high, arched ceiling, three elderly men are scattered in the worn wooden pews built for hundreds, their murmured end-of-Shabbat prayers a soft undercurrent in the still air.

The aged rabbi sitting in a chair by the altar looks up from his prayer book as I enter. With his expansive white beard, round black hat, and frock coat, Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Joškowicz is literally an apparition out of Poland's past. Born in Lodz, Joskowicz survived Auschwitz to smuggle himself into what became Israel. In 1989, the Israeli government sent him back to minister to the spiritual needs of Poland's tiny post-Holocaust Jewish community. "There they are—the Jews of Poland," he says, with a wave at his meager congregation. "They are all old, and in 10 years they will be gone. Finished, the Jews in Poland." Sighing, he turns back to his prayers.

But the night before, the building next door that functions as Warsaw's Jewish community center was crammed with dozens of people celebrating the joint bar and bat mitzvah of two young Polish Jews by Michael Schudrich, an American rabbi who has lived in Warsaw since 1992. We recited the Shabbat blessings over bread and wine before descending on tables piled with fried fish, salads, fruit, and pastries in a party that lasted hours.

Quickly, Jewish life is reemerging in Poland. Since the collapse of Communism, Jews who have hidden their identity for years are coming out of the closet. A handful of Jewish weddings and bar mitzvahs have been held in Poland for the first time since the Holocaust. Polish Jews have established about a dozen new organizations, and attendance at Jewish summer camps, student events, and community seders has mushroomed. In Warsaw, which has the largest community, there is now a kindergarten with nearly 30 children and a Jewish day school for grades one to three. Official statistics still count no more than a few thousand Jews, mostly elderly Holocaust survivors; but community activists estimate the real number at anywhere from 10,000 to 80,000. At the same time, many Christian Poles are increasingly attracted to their country's Jewish past.

— The same kind of thing is happening all across Eastern Europe; but there is something

uniquely significant about Jewish life returning to Poland, a place that went from being home to the world's biggest Jewish community to the world's biggest Jewish graveyard—and a place where anti-Semitism is still very much alive.

To Joskowicz, an Orthodox rabbi who knew Polish Jewry as a Yiddish-speaking and largely observant community, 3.5 million strong, most of this revival doesn't count. "People are coming because they are interested in Jewish culture," he says. "But according to the Torah, only if your mother is Jewish are you Jewish. Ninety per cent of those who come do not have Jewish mothers." The newcomers do tend to be much more interested in Jewish culture and history than religion. But most of them fit the 20th century's *de facto* definition of a Jew: They have at least one Jewish grandparent. That made you a Jew for Hitler, it makes you a Jew in Israel, and it makes you a Jew in Poland's new community.

A surprising number of its members didn't even know they were Jews until late in life. A few months ago, a man from Bialystok visited Rabbi Schudrich. His mother had just died—or so he thought. After the funeral, her friends told him that his real parents were Jews who had given him away during the war to save his life; his surrogate mother never had the heart to tell him. Now, Schudrich says, this man is delving into Jewish history to find out who he really is.

Such stories are not unusual. Yitzhak Zohar, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) representative in Cracow, knows another woman whose mother confessed on her deathbed that they both were Jews. The mother smuggled the girl out of the Cracow ghetto during the war and gave her to Christian friends. After the war, she came back for her daughter, but never mentioned being Jewish. She lit candles every Friday night, though, never explaining why to her daughter. Such experiences have made Children of the Holocaust, a 500-member (and still growing) support group, one of the largest Jewish organizations in Warsaw.

Karina Sokolowska, 22, brown-eyed, round-faced, and sarcastic, always knew her father was Jewish. (Talking to any Polish Jew, the question inevitably comes up: How did you, or your parents, survive the Holocaust? In Sokolowska's case, her grandparents were deported to Siberia by the Soviets for the duration of the war—not a nice place to go, but certainly preferable to the Nazis' alternative.) But it didn't mean much to her father or to Karina until she left provincial Wroclaw to study in Warsaw. She didn't have many friends in the capital, a grim, gray metropolis of 3 million that is a showcase for the worst impulses of Communist architecture. A classmate told her about the new Jewish student union; she went to a few meetings, met some people, and eventually moved in with these new friends. Now she goes to community events regularly and works at the Warsaw JDC office. "It changed my life, that's for sure," she says, then adds with an ironic laugh: "I don't know if that's good or not. For many Poles, I'm not Polish any more. And many Jews don't consider me one of them, because only my father is Jewish. A lot of us in the community are like that. Sometimes I feel like we're just doing all this stuff for ourselves."

Poland's Jewish revival is being underwritten largely by American Jewish money, mainly from the JDC and the Ronald (son of Estée) Lauder Foundation. "Hitler and the Communists tried to completely destroy this community, and they were very successful," says Yossi Erez, a leathery man in his fifties with a close-cropped thatch of silver hair, who heads the JDC's Warsaw operation. Born in Lodz but raised in Israel, he came back to Poland in 1994. "We Americans and Israelis were convinced there was no more Jewish community here, just a few old people," he says. "But now, I see grass coming up from the ashes."

What about Poland's famous anti-Semitism? Most Jews, like other Poles, get defensive when asked. Sure, there's some anti-Semitism, especially in the countryside, is the standard reply, but no more than most places. There are no metal detectors or security guards at Warsaw's Nozyk Synagogue, they like to point out, unlike at many Jewish buildings in London, Paris, or Buenos Aires.

I learned a simple test, though, after several people refused to speak to me until I convinced them I was working for an American newspaper. I asked each Jew whom I interviewed if they would allow their picture to be published in a Polish newspaper article on Jews. Almost every single one, barring the most prominent community leaders, said no. "People are still afraid," says Erez. "We had an Israeli TV crew come here once, and some people ran away until I told them it wasn't Polish TV." Erez thinks one reason community events are so popular is they provide a place where people can openly say they are Jews.

There has been little anti-Jewish violence in Poland in recent years, beyond run-of-the-mill outrages that happen nearly everywhere Jews live: swastikas spray-painted on synagogues, Jewish graveyards vandalized, an arson attempt at a Jewish summer camp. But this is a country with a centuries-long history of anti-Jewish violence, and one where mobs were still killing Jews *after* the Holocaust. Let's not even get into debatable incidents that most Jews feel show a stunning lack of Polish concern for Jewish feelings, like the controversy over the Carmelite convent built at Auschwitz, or the recently quashed plans to build a shopping mall across the street from the world's most famous death camp. There's plenty of less ambiguous evidence to make Jews nervous.

In 1991, a survey by CBOS, a Polish polling institute, asked respondents to state the degree to which they were anti-Semitic: 5 per cent said "extremely," 10 per cent "strongly," and 16 per cent "moderately or slightly." (By contrast, a 1987 Gallup poll found only 6 per cent of Americans willing to admit to an "unfavorable" opinion of Jews.) Another study, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee in 1995, found that 30 per cent of Poles do not want Jews as neighbors; 36 per cent agree that Jews killed Christ; and 35 per cent think it "good" that there are now many fewer Jews in Poland than before the war. A favorite smear in post-Communist elections has been to accuse one's opponents of having Jewish blood. Lech Walesa pioneered the tactic in 1990 when he accused two rivals of "hiding their Jewish origins," unlike him, "a full-blooded Pole."

Then there are the Jew-baiters in the Church, perhaps the most influential institution in this overwhelmingly Catholic country. Photojournalist Edward Serotta writes in his book *Out of the Shadows* of meeting a young nun in a small town in 1990, who explained to him, as she does to local schoolchildren, that Jews killed Christian babies to make matzo—the infamous medieval blood libel, still in circulation.

In 1989, Polish cardinal Glemp accused Jews of "getting peasants drunk" in the past, "breeding Communism" and controlling the media in the present. And in June of 1995, Henryk Jankowski, a prominent priest closely involved with the Solidarity movement, mentioned in a sermon that "the Star of David is implicated in the swastika as well as the hammer and sickle," explaining later for those who didn't get it that Jews have a "satanic greed which is responsible for Communism and World War II."

No question: Anti-Semitism runs broad and deep in Polish society. But at the same time, many Poles throughout the years have sheltered and protected Jews. Bludgeoned by international outrage, Glemp and Walesa later apologized for their comments and condemned anti-Semitism. More convincingly, Glemp's statement was followed by a letter from an embarrassed Polish episcopate acknowledging the

"greatness and variety of links between the Church, Mosaic religion, and the Jewish nation." Stanislaw Krajewski, a Jewish leader active in interfaith dialogue, says many church leaders today openly oppose anti-Semites like Jankowski. Polish schools have begun teaching Jewish history, including the Holocaust, and the much criticized educational materials at Auschwitz have been revised to focus on the death camps' overwhelmingly Jewish victims.

At ground level, the last five years have seen as much evidence of philo-Semitism as anti-Semitism. Universities have opened Jewish studies departments, and hundreds of new books, films, and plays on Jewish topics have been produced. The Ministry of Education received 4000 entries for a 1994 essay contest on the subject "One Thousand Years of Jews in Poland." Kosher vodkas with names like Shabasova, Purim, and Hannukah are big sellers nationwide. In March, a Protestant couple that had converted to Judaism had a second, Jewish wedding in Lodz.

Being Jewish in Poland is a bit like being gay in the U.S. You can get away with it in the big cities, and even enjoy a certain chic among intellectuals and sophisticates. But you'd be leery of walking through some rural town or the wrong part of Warsaw with your triangles showing. Nothing at all might happen if you did; but none too distant history warns that you might also be met with anything from muttered insults to a homicidal mob.

Polish Jewish historian Helena Datner-Spiewak thinks one major obstacle to relations between the two groups today are "ceaseless charges of anti-Semitism against this nation; our Jewish refusal to scrutinize Polish history and notice their tragic courses, too; our Jewish self-centeredness in suffering."

Historically, Jews tended to look down on Polish "goyis" as stupid, illiterate peasants. Even today, and despite their deeply interwoven histories, Jews often overlook how the Polish nation has also suffered tremendously through centuries of wars and invasions that have several times wiped the country off the map.

Poland was for centuries the most welcoming haven in Europe for Jews, who have lived there almost 1000 years. Medieval Polish kings offered protection to Jews fleeing massacres and expulsions, hoping to take advantage of their skills as traders and administrators. Jews were given broad economic freedom and communal autonomy. Unlike most places in Europe, they were not confined to ghettos. A few served as doctors and bankers to kings. Nobles encouraged Jews to move into their towns and villages to work for them collecting taxes from the peasants. Many got rich acting as middlemen for the feudal landlords, but in the process, they earned the resentment of the downtrodden Polish peasantry. In the towns, Jews also faced competition from a growing local merchant class and hostility from the Church. Periodically, Polish anger exploded into bloody riots in which up to a dozen Jews could be killed.

Still, unlike in other places, these attacks were not sanctioned by Poland's rulers. And by medieval standards, a mob attack every few years was a small price to pay for the prosperity and freedom Jews enjoyed there. By 1648, the united kingdom of Poland and Lithuania was home to as many as 500,000 Jews, the largest concentration on earth. Even the 1648 uprising of cossacks and Ukrainian peasants then under Polish rule, which took the lives of thousands of Poles and one-quarter of all Polish Jews, only temporarily halted the influx. In the late 1700s, Poland was carved up between Russia, Prussia, and Austria; hundreds of thousands of Jews left, mostly for America. When the nation was reestablished after World War I, it contained 3.3 million Jews, 10 per cent of the country's population. Jews made up a third or more of many cities, including Warsaw, and outright majorities in some towns.

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Beiser

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By then, Jews had begun assimilating in unprecedented numbers into Polish society. This was an utterly new phenomenon that fueled a modern, more vicious anti-Semitism that found fertile ground in the turbulent years between world wars. The contempt of working-class Poles hardened into hatred as Jews strove to move into society. Polish sociologist Aleksander Hertz draws a parallel with the hostility of poor whites to the notion of equal rights for blacks, which "pains them as the prospect of their losing the one 'superior' position they have in a segregated society by virtue of having white skin. . . . For them, integration means social disaster, the overthrow of the entire recognized order which gave the 'white trash' a place under the sun." By now, Hertz adds, "Even if there were not a single Jew in Poland today . . . , the traditions of anti-Semitism have left such deep traces that the Jew as symbol could suffice entirely."

Hundreds of Jews were killed in pogroms between the world wars. This time, the government not only turned a blind eye to the violence but lent support to boycotts of Jewish businesses and campaigns to bar Jews from universities and professional associations. Nonetheless, Polish Jewry remained a thriving community that supported the Jewish world's leading cultural and educational institutions, publications, political parties, and unions. Hasidism was founded in Poland, and other pivotal Jewish movements, such as Zionism and Bundism, flourished there. The Jews had delegates in the Polish parliament and a broad influence on national life.

Then came the Holocaust.

Three million Polish Jews, along with hundreds of thousands from other occupied lands, were killed in Poland under the Nazi occupation. Three million non-Jewish Poles also died.

Many Poles collaborated with the Germans; many others risked their lives to save their Jewish neighbors. Every month, Yitzhak Zohar routes small cash payments from American Jewry to almost 1000 such "righteous gentiles."

Born in Cracow in 1922, Zohar escaped from a concentration camp and managed to cross southern Poland on foot to Slovakia, from where he made his way eventually to Israel. He was sheltered and fed many times on his wartime walk by Polish peasants. Now balding, snaggle-toothed, and rheumy-eyed, but still sharp, Zohar lives with his wife in a spacious apartment in Cracow, on a cobblestoned street a short walk from the medieval market square in the city's center. He came back for the first time in 1990 and took the job with the JDC partly out of a sense of obligation to his many family members who died there.

Zohar is delighted when I tell him I don't keep kosher, and promptly takes me out for a shrimp dinner punctuated with shots of vodka. The first month after he returned, he says, he walked daily in Kazimierz, the old Jewish quarter that is now part ghost town and part ersatz reconstruction. "When I last saw it, it was full of striving Jewish life," Zohar recalls. "When I saw it again, it was a cemetery." He searches for words, rubbing the fingers of one hand together. "It took a long time to swallow and digest the reality that there are no more Jews in the streets there, that the synagogue where my grandfather prayed and I had my bar mitzvah is now a museum."

Jewish persecution didn't end with the war. Polish mobs murdered as many as 1000 Jews between 1945 and 1947, most famously in the 1946 Kielce pogrom where 47 people were killed in a single day (including Karina Sokolowska's great-uncle). Most of the survivors fled to Israel and elsewhere. Almost all the rest left in 1968-69, when the ruling Communist clique fell back on anti-Semitism to both settle an internal power struggle and distract the public from the deteriorating economy. Thousands of Jews were fired from their jobs as anti-Jewish propaganda, cloaked as "anti-Zionism," flooded the state-controlled media. (Paradoxically, a common gripe of Polish anti-Semites today is the disproportionate number of Jews who were Communist officials before the purge.) Many Polish professionals and students spoke out against the hate-mongering, often at the cost of their own jobs.

Most people assumed that final exodus, which reduced the community to a few thousand, was the end of Polish Jewry. To a degree, however, it actually helped lay the groundwork for the current Jewish revival. Stanislaw Krajewski's parents were both Jewish, but never told him anything about what that meant. "In 1968, I was old enough to feel that anti-Semitic campaign was directed at me," he says. "That's when I understood that my parents' idea that Judaism wouldn't matter in the new world of socialism was wrong." Krajewski started reading about Judaism, and in the 1970s organized small groups of others like himself for clandestine meetings on the unmentionable subject of being Jewish. Today, he is one of the community's most prominent leaders—and, incidentally, not afraid to be identified as such in the Polish press.

Piotr Kadlcik stoops down to relight a couple of candles, snuffed out by the late-winter wind, that someone has left below a plaque bearing 300 names—one for every thousand Warsaw Jews killed in the Holocaust. We are standing in the concrete monument marking the site of Umschlagplatz, where the Nazis gathered Warsaw's Jews for transport to the death camps. Except for his mother, his entire family passed through here.

"If you come here often enough, it becomes like any other place," says Kadlcik, who is 34. He learned he was Jewish at 16, when his mother finally told him that the woman he had always known as his grandmother was actually a friend who had saved her during the war. Kadlcik was baptized but not raised as Catholic.

"All I knew was that Jews were somehow related to the death of Jesus. I was surprised I was one, because I thought they all had big noses, black hair, and black eyes," says Kadlcik, whose eyes are blue and hair brown. Today he works with Jewish youth groups and makes his living running a travel agency specializing in showing foreign Jews around Poland.

But there are a few places he has never gotten used to. One is in the Warsaw Jewish cemetery, a sprawling tree-lined acreage crammed with over 250,000 jostling tombstones. Near the front of the cemetery is a small cement monument set with glass-covered photographs commemorating the 1.5 million Jewish children killed in the Holocaust. Again, Kadlcik carefully relights extinguished candles. He is fully aware of how many of his people were killed in his country during the war, but he can go on living there because it is clear to him who was responsible. "I have been to Germany once for a few hours," he says, his voice sharpening. "That's

as much time as I ever want to spend there."

His family was totally assimilated. "They barely spoke Yiddish or went to synagogue. If the Holocaust had never happened I might not be a Jew. But to be a Jew here now is kind of a duty. If I don't do it, who will?"

Given the tiny size of the community and its near-complete assimilation, perhaps no one will in a few decades. "Objectively, rationally, it's correct to say that Jewish life in Poland will be dead in 50 years," says Rabbi Schudrich. "But Jewish life has never gone along rational lines. By rights we should have disappeared a long time ago, starting with the destruction of the First Temple. But we've been beating the odds for 2500 years. If you want to be a realist you should choose another religion."

The irony is that in today's Poland there are probably as many Catholics as Jews working to preserve Jewish culture. No wonder. Imagine if

95 per cent of American blacks were suddenly wiped out and no one was allowed to talk about their history and role in American culture for the next 40 years. Jews were so numerous and so prominent for so long in Polish society that their sudden disappearance has left a hole in Polish culture and memory.

In part, the new fixation on Jews is a way of displacing Polish guilt. Germans engineered the Holocaust, but the bulk of the killing was done on Polish soil; many Poles and most Jews are bitterly conscious of that fact. Combined with Poland's legendary reputation for anti-Semitism, it is a painful legacy. In the years before the war, "many Poles wanted the Jews gone," says Michael Steinlauf, assistant professor of Jewish history at Franklin and Marshall College. "They were not calling for mass murder, but the general feeling was, we don't get along with these people, we don't like them, we

wish they'd go away. Then the Nazis killed all the Jews, and the Poles were left with all their property. That leaves a terrible guilt, but it's an impossible guilt, because the Poles didn't do it."

The current government has tried hard to improve the country's image by apologizing for the Kielce pogrom, squelching the Auschwitz shopping mall, and speeding up restitution of Jewish property. On the cultural level, by ostentatiously appreciating, honoring, even emulating Jews, liberal Poles are attempting to atone, or perhaps exempt themselves, from responsibility.

But there is also a more visceral process at work: Many Poles miss the Jews. When Warsaw's Shalom Foundation put out a call for pre-war photographs of Jews for a recent exhibition, they were deluged with over 8000 snapshots, most sent by Christians—memories, treasured for decades, of vanished neighbors, co-workers, and friends.

In addition to cashing in on a trend, the people now publishing books about Jews and running ersatz Jewish restaurants in Kazimierz are trying, perhaps, to fill that absence. Since there are so few Jews left to revive the richness and diversity they added to Polish culture, it falls to sympathetic Christians to simulate their presence. Every year, says Lucyna Wozniak, who owns the Jordan Jewish bookstore in Kazimierz, more Poles—especially younger ones—come to her shop to glimpse their country's Jewish history. "The old life won't return," Wozniak says, "but we can preserve a kind of symbol of Jewish culture. They were here for so many hundreds of years. I don't think they should disappear."

They won't. The Jews are too deeply embedded in Poland, and in its psyche. ♦

Vince Beiser is a senior writer for The Jerusalem Report.