

Dumneazu

Ethnomusicological Eating East of Everywhere.

MONDAY, JULY 04, 2011

The Festival of Jewish Culture, Krakow.



The [21st Festival of Jewish Culture in Krakow, Poland](#) took place last week and I was honored and excited to take part as a performer with Di Naye. It is a festival like no other – ‘festival’ hardly describes how the entire city quarter of [Kazimierz](#) is transformed for a week into a center for Jewish and Yiddish culture including concerts, workshops, gallery exhibits, museum presentations, dance, and food. It is pure *nakhes* to be there, not the least because it gives us Klezmer musicians a chance to spend some real quality time hanging with each other, hatching new musical projects, and meeting the people who actually listen to us and sipping coffee with them in the many cafes that have sprung up in Kazimierz. A lot of writers have mentioned the supposed irony of the Jewish revival in Kazimierz since the release of the film “Schindler’s List” but to visit Krakow during the festival is to see how a small but dedicated group of people – Poles trying to recover the multicultural heritage of their country – can make an annual festival the cornerstone of a cultural movement that ensures that the Jewish culture of Krakow endures all year long. The founder of the festival, Janusz Makuch, is well known to all of us dealing in East European Jewish culture. Janusz embraces the old multicultural heritage of Galicia – the southern Polish region that anchors itself to the urban center of Krakow.



Not born as a Jew, as a young man Janusz learned that half of his town was once Jewish, which lead him to learn Hebrew and Yiddish and study the works of Polish Jewish literature and folklore. Janusz introduced himself to an audience in Israel [a few years ago this way](#): “*My name is Janusz Makuch and I come from Poland. I come from a country of rabbis and tzaddikim, gaons and melameds, from a country of Jewish sages, writers, bankers, architects, painters, doctors, shoemakers and tailors, physicians and politicians, scientists and Jewish soldiers, from a country of devout, good people... I come from a country of anti-Semites and goodhearted people and the greatest number of Righteous among the Nations... from a country of countless shtetls, yeshivas and Hassidic courts, from a country of Jewish autonomy and pluralism and I come from a country of pogroms and murder. I come from a country whose greatness was co-created by Jews who were Polish citizens. And I come from a country that after the war kicked out Polish citizens who were Jews. I come from a country of anti-Semitic madness where they burned Jews in barns. And I come from a country of Christian mercy where they hid Jews in barns. My name is Janusz Makuch. I come from Poland and I am a gay, and at the same time for more than 20 years I have*

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created and run the largest Jewish culture festival in the world. I'm a Jewish Pole - and I'm proud of it." That is about as cogent a sense of Janusz as I could find, and it shows the depth of commitment and understanding that motivates the Krakow Jewish Culture festival and sets it head and shoulders above so many other festivals working with a similar theme.



A festival has to be more than a charismatic organizer – and Janusz leads an office of organizers unlike any other festival I have been to. Patient, efficient, with an endless well of good humor, Kasia, Robert, and a small army of young volunteers guarantee that everything flows smoothly, no small task when dealing with dozens of musicians and artists' bruised egos and lost luggage. While there are other good Jewish music festivals in Europe – London comes to mind, as well as the projects coming via Paris' Medem – Krakow is the Big One. (This makes me more than a little ashamed to even think about the ridiculous *schmutzerei* that is Budapest's idea of a Summer Jewish Festival – a festival that can't ever seem to find any decent Jewish music or arts even with a budget large enough to float the Titanic. But then Hungary is not Poland.)



And then there are the venues – especially the glorious Tempel Synagogue where we played our big concert. A classic 19th century Moorish Revival style synagogue restored to a fully functional state with excellent acoustics and room for a large audience, this was a place that could serve performers as intimate as Lauren Sklamberg and Frank London's Tsuker Zis Project, and as big and party happy as the amazing show by Jeremiah Lockwood and [The Sway Machinery](#) with guest Sarahwi singer from Mali, Khaira Arby.



Lockwood has done amazing things using cantorial music and has also done some amazing work that has been documented on the [Nigun Project via New York's The Forward web site](#), but he has deep roots in country blues and with a lineup including alumni from the New York Afrobeat band [Antibalas](#) they simply blew me away. Late at night the crowd gathered at the funky Alchemia Club next to the old market for late night jams led by [Paul Brody](#) with a changing cast of musicians. And then there is the big closing concert at Szeroka Square – the Mother of All Jewish Music concerts, ever. From Israel came the stunning and innovative [Yemen Blues](#). This year the special guest – nobody can be said to be the 'headliners' here – was [Abraham Inc.](#), a project that and... Fred Wesly, the trombone player from the legendary James Brown Band in

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teams clarinetist [David Krakauer](#) with DJ [Socalled](#) Josh Dolgin the 1960s and 70s.



Yes, the driving sound behind “Hot Pants” and “Say it loud, I’m Black and Proud” before joining my all time favorite funk band Parliament-Funkadelic and leading their offshoot [The Horny Horns](#). Yes, *that Fred Wesley*, pumping out funky horn lines behind Yiddish samples mixed by Socalled and held up by one of the best lineups of contemporary funk I have seen in years. And that’s just the finale. Dan Kahn and Painted Bird had to leave early, but their show was one of the most memorable of the concert series - most of the shows are available on the [festival website](#) – including ours (Scroll down for Di Naye Kapelye.) I could go on and on... which it already seems that I have... but I will save it for a post later this week. There is so much to talk about... and I still have to go through my photos and unpack my bags and put all the instruments away...
Serdecznie dziękuję, Krakow!



Posted by [dumneazu](#) at 7:33 AM



2 comments:

[Uwe von Seltmann](#) said...

Great article about the Jewish Festival!
And thanks for giving an amazing concert with Di Naye Kapelye!
Big hello from Kazimierz
Uwe
We are hoping to hear and see you again next year ...

11:44 AM

[Uwe von Seltmann](#) said...

I forgot to write: Your blog was a real discovery for me!

11:46 AM

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