

Jewish Culture Festival showcases revival in Krakow

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Kazimierz, once the center of Jewish life in Krakow, Poland, has reclaimed its mantle. And nothing better tells the story — or helped catalyze the revival of this historic district — than the popular Jewish Culture Festival.

Held this year from June 25 to July 3, the 26th annual festival brought an estimated 12,000 people to the streets of Krakow for nine days of workshops, concerts, panel discussions, dances, tours and more.



Krakow's Jewish Culture Festival celebrates Poland's lost and found Yiddishkeit
photos/michael ramus

Jews and non-Jews, Poles and visitors from throughout the world flocked to the compact quarter of Kazimierz, across the river from where Oskar Schindler's factory and the Nazi-imposed Jewish ghetto once stood. Festivalgoers could choose from more than 200 events, held daily from morning until past midnight, learning about Poland's vibrant Jewish past, the decimation during the Holocaust and the growing Jewish resurgence today.

Begun as a small, two-day affair in 1988, the Jewish Culture Festival now draws widely respected scholars and world-class musicians and singers. Agnieszka Legutko, Yiddish lecturer and director of the Yiddish language program at Columbia University, calls it the largest of its kind "in Europe, if not the world."

This year's theme, the diaspora, reflects both current world affairs as well as Jewish history. It also supports a festival goal: giving Jews around the world the opportunity to come together. And come together they did — from Krakow and Warsaw, from the U.S., Israel, Australia, Central Europe and far beyond.

That global ambiance was most evident on July 2, when an international crowd of thousands jammed together at

"Shalom on Szeroka Street," a six-hour evening extravaganza of music by groups from Israel, Hungary, the U.S. and other nations.

Along with celebrating Jewish solidarity, the festival also showcases a Jewish cultural revival carried out largely by Polish non-Jews. The country's Jewish population today is estimated at anywhere from 3,000 (considered halachically Jewish) to 100,000 (with at least one Jewish grandparent).

Festivalgoers fill Szeroka Street for a six-hour, Saturday night concert. photo/michal ramus

No one represents this dichotomy better than festival founder Janusz Makuch, a non-Jewish Pole who has directed the gathering since its inception. He calls himself a "Polish Zionist," adding, "I love Israel. This is my country."

The festival is also a chance for Poland's political leadership to show off this cultural revival to the outside world. "I want us, Poles and Jews together, to build a Commonwealth of Friends," Andrzej Duda, president of the Republic of Poland,



wrote in introductory remarks in the festival's 32-page program.

Non-Jewish visitors were in abundance this year. Berlin resident Gisela Vendovsky said she came primarily for the Yiddish singing workshops and concerts, even though she doesn't know Yiddish or Hebrew and isn't Jewish. She discovered the festival five years ago while visiting her son and grandchildren in Krakow. Now she always plans a trip to coincide with the event.

Another festival fan, Alan Williams, traveled from the U.K. to attend Yiddish singing workshops and learn more about Judaism, though he, too, is not Jewish. Williams first heard about the festival

years ago and comes for the whole week.

"This city and Poland in general have such a link with the Jewish past — it was largely ignored," he said. "This is a chance for the city to show how it's trying to prepare for the future."



Deborah Strauss conducts musicians in her klezmer workshop. photo/liz harris

The festival "has changed history in a sense, because of this non-Jewish interest in Jewish culture," Legutko said as she led a group on a walking tour of Kazimierz synagogues.

Born in Poland and raised Catholic, Legutko now lives in New York. She first learned about her family's Jewish past when she was in her early 20s. In high school, she told the group, she was taught that 4.5 million non-Jewish Polish citizens died in the war, though she later learned the number was closer to 1.5 million.

"People born after the war learned this distorted version of history," she said. "March 14, 1943, the final day of liquidation of the ghetto [in Podgorze], marked the end of the flourishing Jewish life in Krakow. About 65,000 Krakow Jews perished in the Holocaust," comprising 90 percent of the city's Jewish population.

Now that the truth has emerged, the younger generation is eager to learn more.

Krakow university student Justyna Anatosha, 23, is a Jewish studies major who eagerly followed Legutko on a July 1 tour. She said she attended many festival events. "It's my interest. I love the culture, really," she said. "Maybe because of Jewish theater, and Hebrew is one of the most beautiful languages for me."



Tel Aviv DJ David Pearl spins tunes at an "After Shabbat" party on June 26. photo/michal ramus

Cantor Jeff Warschauer, a Columbia University faculty member and founding artistic director of KlezKanada Institute for Yiddish Jewish Culture and the Arts, conducted singing workshops over the course of five days. He is also half of a musical duo with Deborah Strauss, of Buffalo, New York, who led the festival's klezmer sessions. The two hold Yiddish dance and music workshops in the U.S. and abroad.

"A lot of people come year after year after year," Strauss said after an animated, two-hour, midmorning workout in an old brick school building. Some of the participants started when they were as young as 8 or 9, she said, and she's watched them mature over the years. At workshops last week in Krakow, the room was crammed with 30 musicians of all ages.

"It's not just about playing tunes," Strauss said.

"It's about singing the melodies and learning the feeling and the groove. Every year, it's just an amazing collection of people."

Myriam Figureau, a journalist from Lyon, France, comes not to work but to play. A flutist and ardent admirer and student of klezmer, Figureau took the workshops and attended nightly concerts in the glorious, fully restored Tempel Synagogue. There she swooned over klezmer virtuoso David Krakauer's performance with the Bay Area-based Kronos Quartet, whooped it up with the energetic Brothers Nazaroff featuring accordionist Daniel Kahn and the Painted Bird, and swayed to the Middle Eastern fusion band Diwan Saz.



Krakow journalist Marta Duch-Dyngosy interviews Maria Nowak, 96, a Righteous Gentile. photo/liz harris

options ran the gamut.

Not all of the events were celebratory. In a moving talk toward the end of the week, 96-year-old Maria Nowak of Krakow told a rapt audience how she helped her Jewish friend Helena Goldstein escape from the Podgorze ghetto in October 1942.

Speaking through an interpreter, Nowak (née Balzek) smuggled food and clothing to her former schoolmate and provided her a fake birth certificate and baptism papers. Years later Goldstein made her way to Germany and then Israel, where she informed authorities at Yad Vashem of her friend's efforts. Nowak was recognized as Righteous Among the Nations in 1995.

Asked during a Q&A if she was scared about being caught, Nowak answered with a smile. "I was afraid, but how long can you be afraid?"



Agnieszka Legutko tells history of the Popper Synagogue in Kazimierz photo/liz harris

The opening synagogue concert on June 26 showcased revered cantors such as Benzion Miller, who also led Hasidic singing workshops. Miller, like clarinetist Krakauer (who also led a workshop), is a fixture at the festival.

Even on hot nights when the air was still, concertgoers filled the hard wooden pews and folding chairs, even stood in the aisles, to hear the stylistically diverse musical performances.

Working in a cooler space during the day, New York City-based freelance writer and cookbook author Leah Koenig led a series of cooking workshops culminating with a sold-out "Shabbat Pop-Up Dinner" for 30 people. Koenig held shop in what was once a beit midrash, or house of study, now just an abandoned space with bare concrete flooring and faded frescoes on the walls.

At her June 29 workshop, Koenig walked participants to a farmers market around the corner to get ingredients for red cabbage and beet coleslaw with dressing. She encouraged them to pick out whatever they liked for a fruit plate — and there was lots to choose from, including bright red cherries, tiny round gooseberries and fat ripe strawberries.

From art workshops for kids and adults, to discussions and debates about contemporary Jewish life in the diaspora, to hip DJ dances,

Myrna Goldenberg, a professor emerita who taught graduate-level Holocaust studies at Johns Hopkins University, flew to Krakow from England, where she was attending a Holocaust conference. She hadn't been to Krakow in 26 years and found its transition "very impressive."

"This is wonderful," she said. "There's such a revival of Jewish culture. It's inspiring."

Bay Area philanthropist Tad Taube, whose Belmont-based Taube Philanthropies is a major funder of the festival, was also in town for the event. He said it is one of several Krakow Jewish institutions that raise "the visibility of the Jewish contribution to Polish culture."

The festival serves as "a very strong magnet to bring people from the U.S. to Poland," who in turn

will serve as ambassadors to bring others, said Taube, who was born in Krakow in 1931 and left on the eve of the Holocaust in 1939.

In a ceremony July 1, Taube Philanthropies presented its 2016 Irena Sendler Memorial Award to professor Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland, and Maria Piechotka, who was active in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising (and will receive her award at a later date). The award is given to Polish citizens "who have been exemplary in preserving and revitalizing their country's Jewish heritage."

Accompanying Taube was Shana Penn, executive director of Taube Philanthropies, and Taube board member Anita Friedman, executive director of S.F.-based Jewish Family and Children's Services. Friedman, who sits on the S.F.-based Koret Foundation board, which also funds the festival, did her doctoral work in organizational psychology and is a licensed clinical social worker.

"I feel like the Poles are looking for wholeness, there's a hole there, and that's why I think [the festival] works," Friedman said. "People seek meaning in their lives."

Referencing the younger generation who flock to the festival, she said, "Young people want to know their story. Children who know their family story, the strengths and the tragedies, have higher levels of self-esteem. ... They're more resilient, stronger. They give back to family and community.

"There's a renaissance of interest among American Jews who come to this part of the world" looking for their roots, she said, and they, too, give back. "We want to try and help make the Jewish people stronger, and one way to do that is link them to their story."

J. arts & supplements editor **Liz Harris** recently returned from a weeklong trip to Krakow, Poland.