

A Tale of Two Countries: Poland and Turkey

By Chad Priest (AJC 2007)

Ever since I graduated from Princeton in June (2007), I have spent my time studying Jewish life in two countries where many people, at first blush, might assume that Jewish life simply doesn't exist: Poland and Turkey.

For six weeks this summer, I lived in Oswiecim, Poland, where, as a participant in the Auschwitz Jewish Center's summer fellowship program, I spent my time speaking with Jewish community leaders; visiting Jewish sites throughout Poland; and trying to get my mind around the full span of Polish-Jewish history—700 years and counting.

Since mid-August, I have been living and teaching English in Ankara, Turkey, and I have spent much of my free time corresponding with members of different Jewish communities in Turkey, from Ankara to Istanbul to Izmir.

To some, it might seem as if the Jewish experience in Poland and Turkey couldn't be more different. After all, the tradition and culture of Jews in Poland is Ashkenazic and Yiddish-speaking, whereas in Turkey it is overwhelmingly Sephardic and Ladino-speaking. In addition, Poland and Turkey have sharply contrasting historical images vis-à-vis the Jews: Poland is thought by many to be virulently and incorrigibly anti-Semitic, an accomplice to (if not a direct perpetrator of) the Holocaust, whereas Turkey is seen as beacon of religious tolerance, a place of refuge for Jews fleeing Spain in 1492.

However, in fact, I have found that Jewish life today in these two places—Poland and Turkey—actually share much in common. Jews in both Poland and Turkey are equally determined not to let the shadowy presence of anti-Semitism close to home keep them from going about their lives and worship. At the same time, the Jews of Poland and Turkey are often quick to point out that not all of (and, in fact, not even the majority of) their non-Jewish neighbors are anti-Semitic, and they view it as their special responsibility to fight against unbalanced, sweeping generalizations such as “Poles hate Jews” or “Turkey is becoming anti-Semitic.”

In both Krakow and Istanbul, the Jewish community arranges for local Jewish heritage to be showcased, and it seems that this effort is received quite warmly by many in the larger community. Krakow's Jewish Quarter is the site of an annual Jewish cultural festival, where last summer I saw hordes of non-Jewish Poles dancing in the streets to *klezmer* music (yes, kind of bizarre and kitschy, but also a sign that things are changing in Poland). The Istanbul Jewish community also puts on a Jewish cultural festival every year which brings in overflow crowds of curious Turks.

Although it may come as a surprise to many, I have found that, at least in some quarters, Jewish life is actually flourishing in Poland and Turkey. In Warsaw, I listened to the Chief Rabbi, Michael Schudrich, talk about how during just one weekend he performed a wedding, a *bris*, and a *bar mitzvah*. When I visited Istanbul (which is home to roughly 20,000 Jews), I found that a list of the city's synagogues runs to more than a page and that there is even a Jewish newspaper, *Salom*, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year.

Yet, the similarities between Jewish life in Poland and Turkey are not always so cheerful and encouraging. Several of the smaller, dwindling communities in both countries face the same daunting challenges as they struggle to sustain and preserve local Jewish life and heritage.

In the Polish town of Nowy Sacz, Jewish life is in its twilight. While before (and even after) the Holocaust Nowy Sacz had a viable Jewish community, today it has only one Jewish resident left, a man named Jakub Mueller. Speaking to me in the one-room shoebox synagogue that he has created for himself and for visiting Jewish tour groups in downtown Nowy Sacz, Mr. Mueller told me that his children are not interested in preserving the Jewish heritage of his beloved town, and that he doesn't know what will happen to the Jewish cemetery (of which he is the sole caretaker) in the future.

In Ankara, Turkey, Jewish life has also seen better days. While a half-century ago 2,000 Jews lived in Ankara, today only 35 remain. There is still a synagogue, but it is in a run-down part of town. There is a "Jewish Quarter," but all the Jewish residents moved out 30 years ago. Currently, there is no rabbi, and services are only held on Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. When I spoke to Can Ozgon, the current leader of the Ankara Jewish community, he told me that he wants to begin having services once a month, but with such a small number of people in the community, it will be difficult to make a *minyan*.

In sum, while Poland and Turkey are completely different countries with completely different communities and traditions, I have had quite a few similar impressions of Jewish life in each place. I have been encouraged, and I have been saddened, but above all, I have gained a rich, new appreciation for how Jewish people worship and grow in the Diaspora, how they build relationships with various groups of non-Jewish people, and how they quietly but resolutely attempt to stave off cultural attrition.