

# Visit to Poland

To mark the 60th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising April 2003

Edward Green



March of the Living to Birkenau

During April, I was invited to accompany my step-father, Arthur Lawson, the National Chairman of AJEX (the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women), to Poland for a trip marking the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. It proved to be a most educational and informative trip, and as to be expected very emotive.

The group of actual ex-servicemen numbered around 20 in all, with the rest of the group being made up of wives or other members of the servicemen families. Many of the veterans were in their eighties and had fought in various campaigns in the war and throughout the world. They were travelling to Poland at their own expense to learn more of the atrocities there and to honour those that perished.

Our starting point was Krakow, a city spared by the Germans in preparation of them making it their capital after the war. It proved to be a stunningly beautiful city, with a vast open square at its heart, and a friendly and welcoming people. Differing from Germany and Austria, where I have visited often, I felt no trace of present day anti-Semitism. What I did feel was, I trust, a genuine and sincere interest in the Jewish people and their impact on life in Poland by the Poles today.

The introduction to Jewish life in Poland took the form of a visit to the Cultural Centre of Jewish Studies, housed in a refurbished building in the midst of the former Jewish quarter of Krakow. The centre proved to be impressive in so many ways as not only was it staffed and run by a non-Jewish team, but it appeared that the government had been the instigator and the driving force behind the building of the centre and its present day upkeep.

The centre houses a library illustrating the importance and history of Jewish life in Poland. From what we saw, it dealt with the Holocaust in an honest and sensitive way, and without shrinking from its effect. There were films showing Jewish life at that time, and even being able to recognise some of the buildings, I found it difficult

to really appreciate the feel of the Jewish life as it was. We were informed that by 1931, Krakow had become an important centre of Jewish social and political life in Poland and in 1938, it was recorded that Jews owned 45% of big and medium sized factories in the area and 63% of the workshops. Amongst doctors and lawyers, 61% were Jews.

The number of Jews in Krakow was to grow at the start of the war, as many Jewish refugees from the countryside fled to Krakow. At that time, the businesses were to be aryanised, and Jewish property confiscated. In May 1940, the German authorities announced their intention to reduce the Jewish population of over 70,000 to 15,000 essential workers through



Memorial parade at Auschwitz



voluntary evacuation. Those left were to suffer during that winter from disease, hunger and the cold. On March 31st 1941, the Ghetto was erected and some 20,000 Jews, including over 6,000 from neighbouring communities were crowded in. Several thousand were also to work outside the Ghetto and were to be escorted each day to and from work. Many in the Ghetto were reduced to living in cellars, warehouses, attics and hallways, with resulting epidemics breaking out raising the mortality rate to 13 times the pre-war level.

The Quarter, now mainly residential, housed a number of beautiful old shuls, amongst them the Alte Schul. This is the oldest Jewish building in Poland, dating from the fifteenth century and one of the few of the original 2000 shuls in Poland. As our trip was in commemoration of the 60th. anniversary of the uprising, we coincided in our trip with many groups from all over the world, and in particular the Americas. There were literally thousands of young men and women from North America, South America and Canada in Poland at that time, and this added immeasurably to the occasion. Additionally, I believe there were 1000 Israeli school children who had travelled to Poland, with their families all picking up the \$1000 expenses of the trip. On Erev Yom Hashoa, most of these children were to be found singing the Hatikva on the steps of the old Shul, a most moving and emotional moment.

The trip took in visits to many sites of historical interest. Additionally, there were visits to sites that were unique to

the members of AJEX. We were to visit the British War Graves cemetery in Krakow, in a corner of a vast public cemetery. There, the members held a service, to honour the sixteen Jewish men who were buried there. The Jewish soldiers, many from Palestine, were captured in Crete, sent to Poland and died in a prisoner of war camp. The last post was sounded by two bugle players who had come with the group, members of the Jewish Lads and Girls. They proved to be most impressive in their own right, always immaculately turned out and treating the elders on the trip with the utmost reverence and respect.

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Leaving Krakow, we travelled to Auschwitz, where we were to witness the Presidents of Poland and Israel laying wreaths. Despite its 'sanitation' and the dismantling of much of the camp by the Nazis themselves just before the end of the war, Auschwitz proved to be as harrowing as one would have expected. We saw some of the huts where the Jews were billeted; there was a mock up of the living conditions and unbelievably, photos dating from the time. What there wasn't, was any idea as to the

sounds and smell of so many people living in such close proximity and in such conditions. No imagination, I believe, could give the true impression of the horror of how that must have been.

We were privileged to be invited into the inner sanctum with the Presidents and

the Rabbinical leaders to see the wreaths laid. They were laid at the spot where so many of the executions took place, against a stone wall at the edge of the camp. This wall was known as the Wall of Death. Many of the very religious attendees wore shoes they would dispose of after the visit, as they regarded the whole camp as a cemetery.

Leaving the camp, we walked much of it in silence, submerged in our own thoughts, as part of the March of the Living to Birkenau, over an hour away. During the march, many of the Israeli youngsters began to sing, as if in celebration of life. This, I found, to be the most moving of all, as whatever horrors had gone on, the Jewish spirit had never been broken nor would, and it confirmed that there will always be hope as long as there is life. At Birkenau, much has been removed, but the old train lines were there to remind us all of the cattle trucks that had brought our fellow Jews to their end, in all weathers and under all conditions, with families being split, many too sick and frail to cope. There was a further service held at the Monument to the Nations, amongst rustling birch trees where the Presidents both spoke so movingly, reminding the assembled audience that at these two camps, over one and a half million Jews were to lose their lives.

After this service, our group travelled on to Warsaw, in anticipation of the main part of our trip. Warsaw, the capital of Poland, was totally rebuilt following its destruction during the war. Although, most of the street names survive, many of the buildings do not, and we were to visit many of the spots where so many of the tragic events of that time were to unfold. During the period between the wars, there were just under 400,000 Jews living in Warsaw. This number comprised about a third of the city's population.

It was in October 1940, that the Germans established the Ghetto in Warsaw for the Jews of the city and those Jews who had come into the city. In an area far too small, over half a million Jews were crowded, 50,000 of them children. Cut off from the outside world, the walls were 10ft. high and crowned with barbed wire. There was an average of 13 people per room, with thousands homeless



Remembering the 60th Anniversary of the Ghetto





Birkenau

and by June 1941, four to five thousand Jews were dying a month, mostly from starvation, often their bodies strewn in the streets. It was estimated that by the summer of 1942, some hundred thousand had died in the Ghetto, and most of the rest were to be subsequently deported to the death camps. The Germans were to blow up the abandoned buildings of the Ghetto, as with much of Warsaw, an attempt to leave no trace of their misdeeds.

The visits in Warsaw were to prove surreal, as visiting, for instance, the Umschlagplatz, on our first day in Warsaw and the site where the victims were selected for the camp at Treblinka, proved to be a confusing experience. The site is now marked by a beautifully designed marble memorial and our group was one of many who chose this spot to hold a service. Situated on a busy main road, with the traffic zooming past, we struggled to imagine this place as the site of such misery and tragedy.

Moving through the once totally Jewish neighbourhood, and now a modern housing estate, we stopped and held a service at the site of 18 Mila Street, immortalised in the book by Leon Uris, and the place where the bunker housing the 100 who made up the main core of the Jewish uprising was positioned. It was there that the Commander, Mordechai Anielewicz amongst others was later to commit suicide in May 1943 rather than to surrender. This small group was to

defy the might of the German army with painfully small arms and home-made bombs for a period of three weeks and was to be an inspiration to all engaged in fighting the Germans.

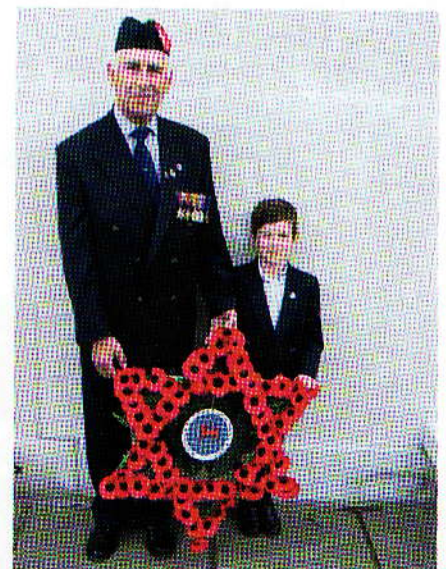
Later the same day, we were to witness the exceptional service that had been organised at the magnificent monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto on Zamenhofa Street. Once again, the two Presidents spoke and laid wreaths followed by the many dignitaries, and once again, it was pleasing to see that the representatives from AJEX were accorded great courtesy, with an area cordoned off with seating, a very rare privilege given to only a very few out of the thousands gathered in the square for this service. Looking around, it was interesting to note and in a way gratifying, that since the fall of Communism, the skyline has altered, and many of the new and most impressive buildings are being erected by Jewish property developers mostly from the States.

Our next stop was the major Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, undoubtedly a slice of history on its own. The majesty and importance of the stones were a clear indication as to the importance and the integration of the Jewish community in Poland from the Fifteenth Century up to the Second World War where a Jewish population of over 4 million had become a seemingly accepted and valued part of the country.

This moving day was capped in the evening with a visit to the Opera House in Warsaw. Rebuilt in grand classical style, but with the advantages of modern acoustics, we were to enjoy a special programme in honour of the events and the two Presidents, with a concert performed by the Polish Sinfonia Varsovia and featuring amongst other, music, the 'Israel' Symphony written in 1916 by Ernest Bloch, when he was under the influence of the burgeoning Zionist movement. The same evening, the Polish President was also to launch plans for a further memorial to be constructed, this time at the lesser known Nazi death camp of Belzec.

Our last day was taken by a visit to Treblinka, the site of the main deportation camp for Warsaw. The camp has no buildings dating from the war and has been given over to a most moving memorial, with large solitary stones serving as memorials to those who lost their lives. On this trip, we were to be joined by the Cantor, David Hass, whose voice and Kaddish was to sound over the grounds with a haunting and melancholy poignancy that was to prove a fitting climax to our visit.

Our visit to Poland was harrowing seemingly at every turn. It was, however, an experience I would not have liked to have let pass by. There were many lessons to be learnt, the most important one to me, being that we live with hope eternal for the future, and a solid memory of the past.



Freddie Green, aged 7, with his step-grandfather, Arthur Lawson, laying the wreath on behalf of AJEX at the American War Cemetery, Cambridge, on Memorial Day 2003.