

Global Jewish
Peoplehood
Learning Series

I Am That
Jew.

Paula Harlan





I Am That Jew

One cannot understand Poland without the Jews, nor can one understand the Jews without Poland.

Setting the Space

- In order for our conversation to be as rich as it can be, we need everyone to feel safe to really share and really listen. Therefore, what is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can understand others and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will be mindful of when we step into the conversation, and when we step back to make room for others to speak.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will open ourselves to listen and learn from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence
- *Anything to add?*

I am "That Jew"

The underlying theme of this conversation guide is that:

One cannot understand Poland without the Jews, nor can you understand the Jews without Poland.

How do we connect with Judaism on a personal and individual level, and how do we connect with Jews we have never, and will never meet.

View ["I'm That Jew"](#) by Eitan Chitayat (6 minutes)

Just True. Jew. I'm that Jew.

What type of Jew are you?

There are many facets to our Jewish identity as we engage in our every-day, never-ending Jewish

journey, but how do you feel right now after watching that video?

Think about what you connected with in the video.

Did any clips resonate with you?

Think about 3 things in your life that matter most to you right now. Write them down (2 min)

We will now break into smaller groups and explore some great contributors to Jewish life in Poland. While reading these bios, discuss within your group where these individuals would fall in the video we just watched, and how (and if) you connect with any element of who they are.

We will spend 10 minutes reading and discussing in groups. Then we will come together and discuss our thinking as a whole group.



Sarah Schenirer (1883- 1935) was a pioneer of Jewish education for girls. In 1917, she established the Bais Yaakov school network in Poland. In her memoirs, she describes herself as the “unassuming and withdrawn daughter of Hasidic parents.” She could not continue with her studies after age thirteen because her family was poor so she became a seamstress. She wrote about an interaction with a client in her diary:

“People are such perfectionists when it comes to clothing their bodies. Are they so particular when they address themselves to the needs of their soul?”

After World War I, Schenirer gathered a group of girls in Krakow and taught them Jewish studies. While initially met with resistance, she prevailed and this educational movement for women developed into about 300 schools in pre-Holocaust Europe. In 1923, Schenirer established a teachers’ seminary to train staff for her rapidly expanding network of schools. The main goal was “to train Jewish daughters so that they will serve the Lord with all their might and with all their hearts; so that they will fulfill the commandments of the Torah with sincere enthusiasm and will know that they are the children of a people whose existence does not depend upon a territory of its own, as do other nations of the world whose existence is predicated upon a territory and similar racial background.”



Emanuel Ringelblum (1900- 1944) was a Polish-Jewish historian, politician and social worker known for his documentation chronicling the deportation of Jews from the town of Zbąszyn and the “Ringelblum Archives” of the Warsaw Ghetto. Ringelblum was born in Buchach (now in Ukraine) and graduated from Warsaw University. He taught history in Jewish schools and was known as a historian and specialist in the field of the history of Polish Jews from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. After he and his family were resettled to the Warsaw Ghetto, Ringelblum served as an active member of the Jewish Social Aid society where he aided starving inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto, and led a secret operation called “Oyneg Shabbos” where he and numerous other Jewish scholars would

submit diaries, documents, drawings, and preserved posters and decrees with the goal of preventing the total annihilation of Polish Jewish culture. Ringelblum wrote, “I hope my writings will be a stone under history’s wheel.” These documents were hidden in metal boxes and milk cans that were buried

underground. Approximately 25,000 items describing of the destructions of ghettos in other parts of Poland, extermination camps, as well as research done by scientists in the ghetto on the effects of famine were preserved in this manner.

While not all of the archives have been located, 25-30,000 usable documents have been uncovered. Had these testimonies not been documented and preserved, crucial information pertaining to ghetto life would have been lost.



Mordechaj Anielewiza (1919-1943) was born into a poor Jewish family in a small town near Warsaw. After completing secondary school, he joined and became a leader of the Hashomer HatZair –a Zionist-socialist youth movement. In 1942 he joined the ŻOB (translated as the Jewish Fighting Organization), a WWII resistance movement in Poland, and was appointed chief commander. Anielewiza played a key role in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, this resistance prevented the deportation of ghetto inhabitants to extermination camps.



Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859-1917) was a Polish physician, inventor and writer most widely known for creating Esperanto, the most successful constructed language in the world. Zamenhof believed that an international auxiliary language could help lead to a future of a world without war. He first developed this language in 1873 while still in school. Growing up, Zamenhof spoke German, French, Hebrew, Polish and Yiddish, and in school he studied classical languages: Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. Later, he learned some English and had an interest in Lithuanian and Italian,

also learning Volapuk when it came out in 1880, although by that point Esperanto was already well developed.

In addition to his linguistic work, Zamenhof published a religious philosophy he called Homaranismo (humanitarianism) based on the principles and teachings of Rabbi Hillel.

"The place where I was born and spent my childhood gave direction to all my future struggles. In Białystok the inhabitants were divided into four distinct elements: Russians, Poles, Germans and Jews; each of these spoke their own language and looked on all the others as enemies... I was brought up as an idealist; I was taught that all people were brothers, while outside in the street at every step I felt that there were no people, only Russians, Poles, Germans, Jews and so on. This was always a great torment to my infant mind, although many people may smile at such an 'anguish for the world' in a child. Since at

that time I thought that 'grown-ups' were omnipotent, so I often said to myself that when I grew up I would certainly destroy this evil." (1895)



Michael Shudrich became the Chief Rabbi of Poland in 2004, filling a position that had been vacant since 1999. An American rabbi active in Poland since the late 1980s, he has been instrumental in fostering the rebirth of the Polish Jewish community

“There is nothing logical about how Jewish communities function and survive. As long as there is a community, I, as a rabbi, feel an obligation and honor to be there to help people connect to their Jewish identity.”

“...before WWII, American rabbis would come to Warsaw to study Torah with the greatest Talmudic scholars of their time. This city was the heart of Jewish tradition. Now an American rabbi has to come here to help the Polish Jews.”

“In such a small community we should make great efforts to avoid division among Jews as much as possible.”

“I am aiming for the day when Poland’s Chief Rabbi will be Polish but, as of now, it doesn’t seem likely that this will happen in the immediate future. Developing local leadership remains a slow process...more people are coming to synagogue and attending activities but that’s where it ends.”

My primary obligation is toward the living Jewish community: to help them with their identity and assist them in expressing their Judaism. Yet there is a profound Jewish past in Poland, whose memory must be preserved and material sites protected...how many synagogues and *cheders* can we possibly afford to restore? While ones will we rescue and why those over others? When teaching young and old, the question remains how much does one focus on what will be and how much on what was? There has to be a balance; neglecting the future for the past is not reasonable.”



Jonathan Ornstein is the director of JCC Krakow. Born in the New York, Ornstein made Aliyah to Israel, served in the IDF and lived on a Kibbutz before moving to Poland to follow a girlfriend. He quickly fell in love with Krakow and has stayed ever since.

Established in 2008, The JCC Krakow is the first major initiative in the revival of Jewish life in Poland to have generated a multigenerational, public Jewish space. Its goal is to serve the existing Jewish community in Krakow and to offer “those who are looking for Judaism the option to explore what it means to be Jewish.” The JCC offers a full schedule of courses in both Jewish and secular subjects (Yiddish and Hebrew languages, Krav Maga, belly dancing, Talmud study), activities and daycare for children, a center for elderly members, and a library focused on Jewish history and culture. Starting with an entirely new and modern facility has allowed Ornstein to create a space focused entirely on contemporary Polish Jewish life and country’s Jewish future. The strategic focus on the present, rather than on the past, attracts a diverse group to the JCC including Polish Jews and non-Jewish Poles, and foreign visitors of all generations. Notably, many non-Jewish Poles are active in the JCC’s programming and are deeply committed to supporting Jewish life in Poland. The JCC serves hundreds of hundreds of members each month, most with “Jewish roots.” Ornstein says, “We don’t have the luxury of living in the past in Poland, so we need to make things happen.”



Agata Rakowiecka is the director of the JCC Warsaw, established in 2013. Agata represents the generation of Polish Jews rediscovering their heritage. The JCC is located in central Warsaw, in a modern building surrounded by other cultural institutions and close to the university. Rokowiecka says, “We were looking for a building that would show the Jewish community wasn’t just a thing of the past, but part of the fabric of daily, modern life in the city.” Describing programming during the JCC’s

first year of operations, she says, “there are religious and secular people of different ages sitting together, talking, laughing. I meet people who haven’t been involved with Jewish life for years. At these moments, I realize how needed and how important our mission is.”

“Polish Jews are taking over their own fate. They have their own ideas of what it means to be Jewish in Poland, to be Jewish and Polish. The JCC’s goal is to provide the people with a platform to express themselves.”



Maciej Kirschenbaum

At age 11, just as I was about to enter my teens, I discovered that I have Jewish roots. Out of our family of 70 members residing in the Chelm region, only 4 survived the war. I learned that my family name had been changed from Kirschenbaum, my father told me “I am telling you this, but please don’t share this information with your school colleagues. One is never sure whether a Jewish background could get you into trouble again. After all, the Nuremberg Laws targeted everyone who had a Jewish grandparent, regardless of their beliefs. I

didn’t tell you before because I wanted to protect you from prejudice.”

I connected to Jewish culture in the only way available in the early 2000s – by reading books on any Jewish topic I could find.

In 2006, at the first public lighting for Chanukah in Warsaw, I promised myself to grow as a Jew in order to be able to help others who were willing to explore their Jewishness. I also resolved to get involved in Jewish life and help transform Warsaw into an inclusive, safe space for all individuals. ZOOM (Jewish Polish youth group) led to our establishing Chawurah, a non-Orthodox alternative to the Jewish community in Warsaw. We led Passover seders, Shabbat services, and eventually we were able to hire a progressive rabbi for our growing community, founding a progressive congregation in Warsaw called Etz Chaim.



GIMMEL “We are a group of very curious young people, we love parties (and we know how to party!). Our mission is to prove that we have not only Jewish history in Kraków, but also Jewish future. In GIMMEL every member is different and we think this diversity is very important and valuable. We are secular, mixed, orthodox, reform or sometimes just undecided. There is a place for

everyone and each member brings something different and special to our club. We are like a colorful mosaic which still has some parts missing. If you are between 17 and 30 years old and you have some Jewish roots (even if they are far and not very visible, or you have just discovered them) we are pretty sure that you are our missing part! Send us a message; it can be a beginning of many friendships and unforgettable adventures.



Helena Czernek – “When I was 20 I started my own research into what it means to be Jewish. I already had some basics...as a member of the third generation after the Holocaust; I was not as burdened with the trauma of the past, which probably has made me much less anxious on my journey to find my place in the Jewish world. I also have more possibilities and opportunities as numerous Jewish organizations and institutions have emerged in recent years

(Birthright, ZOOM for Polish Jewish youth, Moishe House, etc.) In Poland, standard halakhic (Jewish religious law) indicators do not necessarily apply. Jewish revival in Poland is not necessarily about looking at the past and history only, but an attempt to create something new.”

“My explorations in the areas of Judaism and art came together for me in my designing of modern Judaica. The brand I’ve been creating is called ‘Mi Polin’ (Hebrew: From Poland). Through my work, I try to show, especially to Jews in foreign countries, that Jewish life is blossoming here again. I feel obligated to participate in the creation of a new Jewish life, because if not I, not we, then who?”



* Mezuzot: We create the future, remembering the past. – educating the Polish public on Jewish ritual (mezuzah) that may be found in their home or work place, and preserving mezuzah traces from across Poland to learn about the Jewish families who had lived in those homes.

www.mipolin.pl



Irena Sendler (1910-2008) was a Polish nurse and social worker who served in the Polish Underground during World War II. She was also head of the children’s section of Żegota, the Polish Council to Aid Jews, helping organize an underground operation rescuing Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto. Assisted by other Żegota members, Sendler smuggled approximately 2,500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto and provided them with false identity documents and safe shelter.



Janus Makuch is the director of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, established in 1988 (a year before the collapse of Communism).

In 1980, at age 20, Janus moved to Krakow and found himself living in a house in Kazimierz, the Jewish district of Krakow.

“If I had to give a name to the interest young Poles were showing towards Jewish culture, I would call it a ‘syndrome of searching for the sunken Atlantis.’ It was as though there was a revelation that this mysterious and beautiful world was irreversibly lost. And if I were to give a name to the interest of young Jews in their

own culture, I would say it was a ‘syndrome of a searching for a destroyed Jerusalem’...a revelation and a sense of sadness...fascination, longing, love and a new form of shared awareness.”

“Following the emergency of Jewish culture in Kazimierz, something more important also emerged – Jewish life – with its whole diversity, contradictions and continual desire to express its own rebuilt status quo. Of course the scale of this new Jewish life can’t be compared to what it was before the Shoah...but there is a point in discussing what this new world is life.

“I was born in Poland. I am a Gentile, and for 28 years I have been the creator and director of probably the biggest festival of Jewish culture in the world...Why do I do it?

Because I have a sense of responsibility for the good and evil that has been present in our community in its almost thousand-year history... because we were born here and we are the heirs to history, not just parts of it, but all of it.

I am trying to prove that being a Pole in this country may also mean being a Jew, and being a Jew may mean in this country being a Pole...for me there is no contradiction [in being a “Polish Jew”], in a sense my festival revives memory – a common memory. And it blesses the future – a common future. An in this sense, for me – a Pole – the heritage of Jewish culture is my own heritage.”



Tomasz Kuncewicz has served as the director of the Auschwitz Jewish Center since 2000. The center is located in Oshpitzin, a town that was a predominantly Jewish community prior to the Holocaust and later became known by its German name – Auschwitz. The Auschwitz Jewish Center, which includes a Jewish museum, a historic synagogue, and the Education Center, works to preserve the memory of a vanished Jewish community. Kuncewicz has dedicated his studies and career to Polish-Jewish history, the Holocaust,

antisemitism, other forms of xenophobia, and anti-discrimination education. When asked about Polish participation in The March of the Living program, Kuncewicz said, “There is a strong segment of the Polish society that is interested in the Polish heritage and dialogue. There has been a strong trend in Poland to work on this and confront anti-Semitism.”

“Jewish history in Poland is part of my history. You cannot understand Poland without the Jews.”



Hillel
International

Wrap up

Find a chevruta (partner) to discuss the following wrap up questions with.

- What are you taking away from our learning session today?
- What do you know about your own identity that you didn't know before?
- Do you have questions about your own identity that you didn't have before?
- What do you now know about the Jewish community in Poland?

Thank you for the opportunity to learn together!