

Discovering the History of a Lost World

By Dr. Tomasz Cebulski Founder Polin Travel

I always wanted to become a chemist to follow the family tradition. History as such seemed to have little value for a growing boy focused on the future. History was dull and limited to memorizing dates and facts. At the same time, history seemed to be omnipresent in the rapidly changing Poland. As always, things omnipresent are the easiest to be taken for granted and to be out of perception. History became a daily reality as, almost overnight, Russian as a second language was replaced in my school with English. Overnight the teacher retrained herself in Shakespeare without realizing how much Pushkin was still present in her teaching. Western products and chains replaced the misery and shortage-ridden economy of late Communism. Overnight I lost my pen pal from Russian Omsk, and even the “Dynasty” and “Miami Vice” series on TV were of little comfort. History was in the air bringing the wind of change, but we rarely focus on the air we breathe.

Even my little town of Oświęcim felt the change with the establishment of the International Youth Meeting Center. It is a German institution that brings 20,000 to 30,000 German students a year to educate them about the place, which with this new wind of change was no longer called “Obóz w Oświęcimiu” but rather “KL Auschwitz.” The Center also promotes Polish-German dialogue and reconciliation. For me, the most fascinating aspect was the foreigners, real foreigners from the other side of the Iron Curtain. They were so different but at the same time so much like us with their universal teenagers’ anxiety. Soon I started to travel with the educational projects to Germany, and that was like travel to the moon.

This was only the beginning of my fascination with travel and exploring otherness. Otherness had been part of Poland for centuries, but in the course of two totalitarian systems in the 1940s and ’50s was changed into an almost homogenous monoculture, a mere shadow of the rich diversity of the past.

Teachers can change your life, and my new chemistry teacher had a unique talent for discouraging me from science within just a few classes. Around the same time I enrolled in a WWII-related summer volunteer project in London to practice my English, but by some coincidence the London option was canceled and a Warsaw project was offered as a replacement. Warsaw seemed an epicenter of the socialism from which I had tried to run. There we were, a bunch of teenagers with rakes, wheelbarrows, and machetes in the center of Poland’s capital in an overgrown jungle hiding some 200,000 cemetery stones. We were engaged in the cleaning project of one of the largest Jewish cemeteries in the world, 83 acres of jungle contributing to the veil of silence about the Jews in Poland. The project, seemingly overwhelming and impossible, enabled us to regain the land stone by stone, one human story after the other. The depth of history started to fascinate and lure me in, but even more fascinating was the silence and confusion caused by any questions about who those people were, why Korczak “the Pole” was there, what happened to all those people, and why no one seemed to remember. The gate of Okopowa Jewish cemetery in Warsaw to this day marks for me the entrance into some other civilization, the civilization of Warsaw Jews, which in the 1920s and ’30s was probably the most culturally, politically, and spiritually developed Jewish civilization in the world.

I also later had a 3-month experience of Communist life in the Negev desert. Yes, I was a kibbutznik, experiencing the dawn of the communal system, which seemed to have been lost with the capitalistic urge for individualism. Travel became a part of my life, an educational addiction that took me through London, the South African township of Ermelo, and Stockholm, among many other places. In between, I kept returning to Kraków to study International Relations, later followed by Middle Eastern Studies. My university studies would not have been complete without hundreds

of genealogy research projects that became my new passion. Genealogy research became my way of breaking the veil of silence about Polish Jews. This veil seemed to be paralyzing for both Jewish families interested in uncovering their family history as well as for local Poles who often were the only repositories of memories about the Jewish part of their town or village. Although archival records were always very helpful and emotional to work with, meeting a person who was the family neighbor and had witnessed both personal and community history always took me to a completely different level, a level of "touching history".



Dr. Tomasz Cebulski, front right (in checked scarf and brown hat), with a Taube Jewish Heritage Tour group in Kazimierz

Over the years the Holocaust and KL Auschwitz became my points of expertise. After receiving many guiding and teaching certificates, I decided to reenter Jagiellonian University in Kraków to pursue my PhD research focusing on the contemporary shape of Auschwitz memory and its meaning to humanity.

The persistent urge to explore just the tip of the iceberg called the civilization of Polish Jews has never abandoned me. The new POLIN Museum of History of Polish Jews is successfully trying to fill in the void of this lost civilization by presenting the milestones of its history. Another persistent thought that is now becoming my new scholarly interest is humanity's inability to prevent genocides. As good as we are in commemorating, mourning, and educating about the history of genocides, with the Holocaust remaining the ultimate example, humanity has not yet learned the hardest lesson about its prevention. We shall not be surprised again.

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