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OPINION

The Legacy That Polish Jews Deserve

A new museum highlights a fruitful, millennium-old cultural interplay.



A STROLL DOWN MEMORY LANE: A gallery at the museum depicts a Polish street scene typical of those found between 1919 and 1939. ASSOCIATED PRESS

By

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One of Europe's most ancient demons has returned. In Berlin, a Jewish man was attacked during Rosh Hashana last month; French police recently uncovered a terrorist plot against Lyon's Great Synagogue; and former British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote earlier this month that well-established British Jews are telling him: "For the first time in my life, I feel afraid."

Yet in the face of all this, one country has very publicly taken a different turn: my homeland, Poland.

Since the end of World War II, the idea of "never forget" has been ingrained in the very fiber of our being. Having fled Poland as a child on the eve of the war, I understand this concept personally. But for too many people, their understanding of Poland has been limited to the Holocaust, World War II and the Soviet occupation. This is not the legacy Poland should have.

Poland's history is rich, complicated and universally relevant to any discussion of anti-Semitism. The story began centuries before the Holocaust and has endured well beyond it. Honoring the memory of those lost during the Holocaust must therefore not come at the exclusion of remembering how they lived and who came before them.

On Tuesday, rising from the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto, we celebrated the opening of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, a world-class, cutting-edge institution that is building bridges between the past and the present, Jews and Gentiles, Poles and people across the globe eager to reconnect with their roots. For a thousand years before World War II, Poland grew to be the center of Jewish life in the Diaspora. So much of what we understand Judaism to be today comes from the traditions that evolved in Poland. We need to reclaim this heritage, which underscores the pivotal role Jews played in our Judeo-Christian Western culture.

The realization of a decades-old vision, the museum was possible thanks to Poland's largest-ever public-private partnership—an unprecedented accomplishment and a model for other Eastern European nations to follow as they erect their own modern cultural institutions. Museums like this do not come about without the support of many people and diverse resources, not the least of which have included the Polish government and the city of Warsaw, which have come together in a strong statement of tolerance and pluralism.

That this moment is set against the backdrop of a rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe is a reminder of the museum's purpose and value. It is a part of the antidote to hatred that has been too often directed at the Jewish community. Hate is built on ignorance and misunderstanding. This museum, since its inception, has served to bind the Jewish community and Poland as a whole. It has helped solidify a link that had been broken for a long time.

Let us move beyond a narrative of Poland as a depressing Jewish graveyard of the past, and let us immerse ourselves in the reality of the enduring achievements of Jewish life and their broader contributions to Western culture. An ornately reconstructed wooden synagogue from the 17th-century, with its hand-painted ceiling crafted by hundreds of volunteers and its details overseen by architectural, cultural and religious scholars; a one-sided, once-official coin minted by a Jew and bearing Hebrew letters, dating from the 12th century; the 750-year-old Statute of Kalisz, the first official charter granted to Polish Jews from the state that allowed Jews more freedom than anywhere else in the world at the time. These are the treasures of Poland's rich past.

An architectural marvel, the museum is now testimony to Jewish life past, present and future. The city and the country that encircle the museum are in some ways its most precious artifacts. And it's an artifact that won't be overlooked or misunderstood by anyone open to its lessons.

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