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Post-War Emigration and Identity – the Australia Experience

INTRODUCTION

Along with places like New York City, Los Angeles, Toronto and Montreal, Melbourne, in Australia, was one of the major places to which Holocaust Survivors from Poland migrated – those who did not go to Israel. And like these other places, Melbourne received its fair share of survivors from Częstochowa. It's worth mentioning here that, prior to World War II, Australia had a relatively small Jewish community – mainly “anglo” in origin – and quite conservative, wanting to maintain a “low profile” and not wishing to appear “too European” or “too Jewish” within a general population that was predominantly descended from Great Britain.

Holocaust survivors from all over Europe came to Australia after the War, but the two largest groups came from Poland and Hungary. For some reason, the Hungarian Jews went mainly to Sydney, while the Polish Jews (including those from Częstochowa) came to Melbourne. Until the early 1980's that saw the first waves of Jewish migration to Australia from the former Soviet Union, the Polish Jews and their descendants comprised around 75% of Melbourne's Jewish community. In fact, outside of Israel, Melbourne's Jewish community had, within it, the highest percentage of Holocaust Survivors of any community in the Jewish Diaspora.

This high percentage of Polish Jews, and their descendants, added a certain characteristic atmosphere to Melbourne's Jewish community. And despite more recent waves of Jewish migration from the former Soviet Union, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Argentina, and despite the fact that the vast majority of Holocaust Survivors have now sadly disappeared, still around 60% of today's Melbourne Jewish community were either born in Poland or are descended from Polish Jews.

THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE & ITS IMPACT

The vast majority of Polish Jews who arrived in Melbourne came between late 1946 and the mid-1950's. Most came directly from Europe (via France or Italy), while others came after spending a short time in Israel. It is worth noting here that there were some Polish Jews who arrived in the late 1920's and 1930's. They came to escape the anti-Semitism that was prevalent at the time and others, after the rise to power of Hitler, came because they were clever enough to see the storm on the horizon and Australia was as far away from Europe as they could get.

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Why did Polish Jews come to Australia after the War? Apart from the fact that most of the rest of the world either closed its doors to Holocaust Survivors or imposed strict immigration quotas, Australia encouraged European migrants and, like their pre-War counterparts, Australia was as far away as they could get from a Europe that held nothing for them but pain and bitter memories.

Melbourne's Jewish community, relative to the size of its population of 60,000, now has the most developed communal infrastructure of any Jewish community outside of Israel. Melbourne's Jewish community boasts:

- nine Jewish Day Schools,
- almost fifty synagogues,
- cradle-to-grave social services,
- a Beth Din,
- a Rabbinical College,
- a mikveh,
- a Jewish Community Centre,
- Zionist youth groups (across the whole political spectrum),
- Jewish student societies on every tertiary campus,
- an entire range of Jewish sporting clubs,
- a Yiddish cultural centre,
- a Holocaust Museum & Research Centre,
- the Australian Jewish Museum, and
- a Chevra Kadisha with three large, exclusively Jewish cemeteries.

And, to a very large extent, this extensive infrastructure can be directly attributable to the post-War Holocaust survivors who came from Poland. There are several factors that contributed to this:

- Following their experiences at the hands of the Nazis during the War and the memory of pre-War anti-Semitism in Poland, these survivors would find it hard to trust a non-Jew ever again. They were also used to living as a fairly close-knit community. Hence, as they could not trust anyone else to do it for them, they believed that they had to look after their own interests and create their own communal infrastructure.
- They came from Poland where, more so than anywhere else in Europe, the Kehillah played an important role within Jewish communal life. The Kehillah or "Community" ran the synagogue, the mikveh, the kashrut supervision, schools and, in many instances, looked after the elderly, the poor and sick. It was run like a co-operative and, as such, instilled in Polish Jews a mentality which dictated that they look after themselves and each other. Polish Holocaust survivors brought that mentality with them to Australia and to Melbourne.

- The Melbourne Jewish community which the Polish Holocaust survivors encountered on arrival in the late 1940's and early 1950's was, as mentioned before, a predominantly "anglo" and discrete one. These "anglo" Jews found their "Polish co-religionists", as they called them, too European, too loud and unsettling because their customs, dress, food and language drew too much attention to themselves from the wider Melbourne community. This made the "anglo's" nervous fearing that it might encourage anti-Semitism. As a result, they did not readily embrace the new arrivals and so the Polish Jews basically began to form a Jewish community within a Jewish community.

These three factors served as the major forces that influenced the way in which Polish Jews, Holocaust survivors, (including those from Częstochowa) developed a new home for themselves in Melbourne.

THE MIGRATION EXPERIENCE & GROUP IDENTITY

Immigrant groups, in just about every society, tend to gather together in their new homeland. In a strange land, with a strange language and, sometimes, even stranger customs, new immigrants support each other to not only help settle into their new environment, but also to help maintain the traditions, the customs and the religious practices of the land they left behind – in other words, to help preserve their identity as a group and as individuals. Polish Holocaust survivors were no different. In fact, they had even greater factors that drew them together:

- the fact that all of them had lost family and friends to the Nazis. In many cases, they were the sole survivor of not only their nuclear family, but also of their extended family.
- by being part of a group, and being in a position to help others, it aided in dealing with the pain of "survivor guilt".
- they had been persecuted as Jews and so they believed that they had a responsibility to the memory of those who perished to continue to live as Jews in their new homeland, and
- as mentioned before, the "Kehilla" mentality that they brought with them and the distrust of anyone who was not Jewish.

As well as going on to develop elements of Melbourne's Jewish communal infrastructure which have endured and developed to this day, Polish Holocaust survivors, as in other places to which they had migrated, formed Landsmannschaften – over twenty of them in Melbourne which grouped together Holocaust survivors who had come from areas all over Poland.

The reasons why these people formed and/or joined these Landsmannschaften varied with the individual and the effects of both their pre-War and Holocaust experiences. I will discuss these further on in this presentation. Whatever the individual reasons were, these Landsmannschaften, however, were to perform several important functions at a group level:

- They provided comradeship and mutual support for immigrants, with a common background, in a strange land.
- They enabled these Holocaust survivors to, collectively, mourn their lost family members and friends through annual “Yizkor” services and, in many cases, through the publication of “Yizkor” books in which many survivors would pay tribute to those who had perished and to a society that had all but disappeared.
- They enforced a kind of group collective identity as “Holocaust Survivors” – their very presence being living proof of the fact that Hitler did not succeed in total genocide.
- It enabled members of the Landsmannschaft to keep their own personal memories alive through mutual reminiscences of their lives before the Holocaust – so, at the very least, the society that had now disappeared in reality could, at least, be preserved in memory.

As with Holocaust survivors from other parts of Poland, the Landsmannschaft provided a kind of focal point for these immigrants to expand their circle of friends within their new homeland.

In English, the saying goes “Birds of a feather flock together” – so that new arrivals to Melbourne, originally from Częstochowa, would naturally gravitate to their Landsmannschaft, not only to experience something familiar in a strange land, but also to discover who else had survived through meeting other members of the group and through hearing stories of others’ survival. Although it would not have been their principal intention, this process reinforced these survivors’ identity as Częstochowa Jews – both as a group and as individuals.

In Melbourne, the Częstochowa Landsmannschaft held its annual Yizkor service and, while they did not publish their own Yizkor book, they contributed to those that were published both in Canada and in Israel. As a group, they participated in activities within the wider Jewish community. They collected money for the United Israel Appeal, for the Jewish Welfare Society and for the realization of the Jewish Holocaust Museum & Research Centre. Among the Landsmannschaften, there was an unofficial competition to see who could raise the most money for each of these causes – another kind of identity pride and reinforcement. At the height of their activity, in the 1960’s and 1970’s, they would organize occasional social functions like the New Year’s Eve party.

However, as Holocaust survivors grew older and became fewer, the importance of these Landsmannschaften as factors in maintaining identity grew less. Today, most of the

Landsmannschaften have disappeared. Some of the larger ones, such those from Łódź, the Zagłębie-area and Białystok still remain active only to the extent that they hold a Yizkor service annually through the efforts of second and third generations. The rest, including the Częstochowa Landsmannschaft, sadly are now no longer active.

Melbourne, today, also has a Polish-Christian community of about 35,000, the first generation of whom came to Australia in various waves of migration resulting from the upheavals in the political and economic situation in Poland.

From their arrival in Australia, the Jewish Holocaust survivors from Poland had very limited contact or interaction with this Polish-Christian community. In fact, with very few exceptions, these two communities lived and, in fact, still do live two quite separate lives in Melbourne.

Why has this happened? It could be because of the unpleasant memories of anti-Semitism that many of these Holocaust survivors experienced before the War in Poland that caused them to not wish to interact with the Polish-Christian community in their new homeland. Or was it because, as a result being Jewish, they had suffered so greatly at the hands of the Nazis and this had caused their Jewish identity to so dominate their Polish identity? I suspect that the answer is “either” or “both” – and will vary with each individual. It is also the topic for a whole other presentation. Even today, interaction between the two communities is quite limited. For example, even when both communities wished to celebrate together the life and achievements of Irena Sendler, the event was quite modest in its size. From the Polish-Jewish perspective, many second and subsequent generations have inherited the survivor generation attitudes of their forebears. Within the Polish-Christian community, the problem is a different one – many of the second and third generations are moving away from their Polish roots altogether.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY – HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS

All Holocaust survivors retained their identity after coming to Melbourne – how could they not after what they had experienced? Except for the very young “Child Survivors”, all had very vivid memories of pre-War Częstochowa – the home they grew up in, the family which they lost, the schools they attended, the friends they played with and the city with which they were so familiar. And how could they lose their identity as Jews? Throughout their formative years and beyond, their Jewishness had been reinforced by their upbringing, by the pre-War anti-Semitism they experienced and by the brutality and butchery of the Nazis who persecuted them. But their individual identity as Polish Jews and as Częstochowa Jews manifested itself in several, quite different, ways.

My own family was one which typified those who did identify as Polish Jews and as Częstochowa Jews. Polish was spoken in the home, hence my ability to understand the language. About the age 9 or 10, my mother taught me to read Polish from Henryk Sienkiewicz’s “In the Desert and in the Wilderness”. One of my earliest memories was of my

father bouncing me on the end of his outstretched leg, as though I was riding a horse, as he sang to me “Krakowiaczyk Jeden”. As quite a young child, I remember my parents taking me to the cinema to see the Polish blockbuster movie “Krzyżacy”. It was quite an occasion as this was one of the first major Polish movies to have been shown in Melbourne.

My mother, coming from a modern-Orthodox family, would tell me of the pride she felt in being the top student in “Polonistyka” (the Polish language) at her Jewish high school and how all the students had stood on the Aleja, together with students from all the Catholic and state-run schools, to mourn the death of Marshall Józef Piłsudski. My grandfather, Ajzyk Moszkowicz – a dentist on Garibaldi Street – had, as many of his patients, nuns from Jasna Góra. As a young girl, my mother remembers fondly the relationship she had with many of these women over her childhood years, when they came to her father’s surgery located within their apartment.

My father, although growing up in a traditional-Orthodox family, spoke with pride of his uncle, my great-uncle Maurycy Rajcher, who was the first Jew to serve on the Sosnowiec City Council, the city from which his family had come to Częstochowa. He also told me of his childhood dream of playing football for the Polish national team.

Even though both my parents would also talk about incidents of anti-Semitism in their pre-War lives, in the home within which I grew up, the three distinct identities existed quite strongly – that of being Jewish, being Polish and of having roots in both Częstochowa and Sosnowiec. And as much as in many other homes, this maintenance of identity would have been repeated, there was also a large percentage of homes where this was not the case. Here, Holocaust survivors would refuse to speak the Polish language (let alone teach it to their children) – the language in the home would be Yiddish. Nearly all reminiscences of Poland were tinged with bitterness. Stories of Polish anti-Semitism were passed on to their children. Anything to do with Poland and the city or town they had left was in the past, and it was to be left there – in the past.

Obviously, this second group of Holocaust survivors had adopted these attitudes from their own experiences. But what experiences? Was it because they had been the subject of more anti-Semitism in Poland than the first group? Was it because their upbringing in Poland was in a smaller town or village which was predominantly Jewish so that their contact with Polish-Christians had been minimal? Or was it because their experiences during the Holocaust had so badly scarred them, that they wanted their contact and identity with non-Jews – Polish or otherwise – to be kept to a minimum?

The answer to that is also the subject of a whole other presentation. Suffice it to say, this second group formed a significant proportion of Polish Holocaust survivors and, like the first group, would pass on their attitudes to the next generation.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY – THE SECOND GENERATION

The following are three examples of Second Generation – the children of Polish Holocaust survivors, which typify this generation in Melbourne:

Group 1 (Myself)

People in this group either speak or, at least understand, the Polish language. As well as identifying as Jews, they have a strong sense of their roots in Poland and, hence, of their roots in a particular city, town or village. Many will have visited Poland with their children and will encourage their children to participate in events like “The March of the Living”. They will encourage their parents to tell their grandchildren about their pre-War lives and their Holocaust experiences. While this group will strongly support Israel, they will also take an interest in Poland and in Poland’s Jewish community. Some, like me, may have even claimed their right to Polish citizenship.

Group 2 (My best friend)

People in this group may or may not understand Polish and, if they do, it is at a very basic level. They know that they are descended from Polish Jews, but feel quite indifferent to their Polish roots. They neither feel an affinity to nor a dislike of Poland and Polish Christians. They feel more connected to Israel than they do to Poland. They regard themselves either as Jewish Australians or as Australian Jews.

Group 3 (A close friend)

People in this group, even though they are aware of their roots, dislike Poland, the Polish people and anything Polish. They will not understand the Polish language, will know little of Polish culture and will show no interest in learning about it. They seem to exist in some kind of “comfort-zone of hate” – a hate passed onto them from their Holocaust survivor parents. They still regard Poland as a land full of anti-Semites and that nothing in Poland has changed in the last seventy years. They regard themselves as Jews, as Australians and as strong supporters of Israel – and want nothing to do with anything Polish.

It is pleasing to observe that, over the past two decades, the number in Group 1 (those of the Second Generation who identify with their Polish roots) has grown. Possibly, this is due to one or a combination of the following factors:

- the fact that it is easier to visit Poland following the fall of communism,
- the fact that a Jewish community is re-emerging in Poland today,
- the fact that many of their children are visiting Poland through organized student tours and return home excited by what they experienced, or
- perhaps that it is now quite fashionable to trace your family’s genealogy and, to do that, you need to immerse yourself in the environment in which your ancestors lived.

Their interest in their Polish identity will, of course, centre on the places in Poland from which they are descended – in my case, Czestochowa and Sosnowiec. Apart from

Warsaw and possibly Krakow, these are the places that they will naturally visit first and in which much of their time will be spent while visiting Poland.

As a consequence of this, some Second Generation have even taken an interest in Polish-Jewish dialogue and in developing further their understanding of their Polish roots. A Polish-Jewish dialogue group has been formed in Melbourne and some second generation have even got involved in their parents' Landsmannschaft in an effort to see that it continues well after the survivor generation has gone.

I am hopeful that 2010 will see a further resurgence in Polish identity among the second generation with the visit to Melbourne, next April, of the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich. He will speak at events organized by Magen David Adom Victoria and by Melbourne's Holocaust Museum and Research Centre. He will also be interviewed by the media and visit schools and university campuses. I have asked him to concentrate his public speeches on what is happening in today's Poland – in particular on the re-emergence of the Jewish community, the resurgence of interest in Jewish culture and on the level of anti-Semitism in today's Poland as compared with pre-War times.

My hope is that, with Rabbi Schudrich's visit, more people will understand that circumstances have changed dramatically in today's Poland, that there is an active Jewish community here and that this will encourage more descendants of Holocaust survivors from Poland to re-evaluate their attitudes and their identity.

Back in the 1950's, Holocaust survivors, once they had settled into their new country, formed an organization called "The Worldwide Federation of Polish Jews (Australian Chapter)". This body formed like a "council" of representatives of the Landsmannschaften, with its main aim being to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and to construct a Holocaust Museum in Melbourne. After their dream of a Holocaust Museum became a reality and as Holocaust survivors began to grow older and die, the organization became ever smaller until the point was reached where, while it still existed, it became inactive.

In June of this year, a group of second generation – the children of Holocaust survivors from Poland – decided to revive this organization. They have now developed a new constitution for the organization, a new statement of purpose and given it a new name "The Australian Society of Polish Jews and Their Descendants". Among this reborn organization's aims is to connect with the Jewish community in Poland and with the Polish-Christian community in Australia. It is also committed to preserving the Polish-Jewish heritage of their parents and, through education and cultural events, brings Jews and Christians, descended from Poland, closer together by emphasizing those historical and cultural elements that they have in common. This organization, of which I am a Board member, is only just beginning to function again so that I cannot say that we have achieved anything more than laying out a plan for the future. However, by the time of our next Reunion in Częstochowa, I hope that I will be able to report on some positive achievements in both Poland and Australia.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY – THE THIRD GENERATION

Today, the grandchildren of Polish Holocaust survivors are aged from their late to middle teens through to early thirties. They naturally feel more disconnected from their grandparents' heritage than did their parents. However, two factors have now begun to change that trend and connect more of this third generation to their ancestral roots:

- “The March of the Living” – each year, almost 100 Jewish teenagers (70% of whom have Polish roots) visit Poland to participate in this event and to tour places of Jewish interest in the country. Over time, this event has incorporated more opportunities for these young people to meet with “the living” in Poland and to appreciate that while Poland may be the site of the largest Jewish graveyard in history, it is much more than that. They visit the Lauder-Marasha School in Warsaw, meet the members of “Cholent” – a group of young people based in Krakow who have realized that they are Jewish and provide mutual support while they come to terms with their new identity.
- “The Poland Heritage Tour” – organized by the Australian Union of Jewish Students, this tour takes about 50 university students, many of whom have their roots in Poland, on a similar tour as the participants in “The March of the Living”.

There are several benefits of these tours for the participating young people:

- It brings to life many of the stories they have heard from their grandparents,
- It reinforces their Polish identity: “So THIS is where I come from!”
- It helps them to appreciate the extensive Jewish communal infrastructure in Melbourne into which they were born – after experiencing a Polish Jewish community where every little part of Yiddishkeit is still a struggle.

Many of these young people return to Australia wanting to know more – they may even return to Poland with their parents or grandparents. Others find the experience enough.

IN CONCLUSION ...

It is an absolute fact that the further a generation is away from the immigrant generation, the weaker will be the identity with the ancestral homeland. “What the eyes don't see, the heart doesn't feel” is a saying that applies here. In Australia, as the Holocaust survivor generation slowly and sadly disappears, there seems to be a slight resurgence among a section of the second generation toward learning of their Polish heritage and embracing their Polish identity. There is, however, a much larger proportion of that generation which is either not interested or even antagonistic to the idea. It is still too early to say what will happen with the third generation – the grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors. Over 150 young Australian Jews visit Poland each year on organized tours – many others visit informally with family or friends. How many of them will see their Polish identity as part of who they are and how

many of them will identify with the ancestral home cities, towns and villages of their grandparents is the topic for another presentation – perhaps ten years from now.