



JEWISH KRAKOW

The Final Concert of the Jewish Cultural Festival at Szeroka Street, with Stara (Old) Synagogue in the background Photo: Bogdan Krezel

A FILM MAKER FALLS IN LOVE

BARRY LAZAR

I went to Poland with a heart of stone. I only knew a few things about Poles and Poland. It is in the centre of Europe. They eat pierogis. They killed Jews. I had built a wall around this part of me. I would never go to Eastern Europe, never see the death camps. It was not how I saw myself; I could never deal with it.

I read books, heard lectures, saw movies, helped organise meetings when I was with Canadian Jewish Congress and remained content to stay on the periphery. I have been to Israel twice and several times to Italy, France, England, etc. In between was a chunk of geography, an emotional no-man's land, onto which I would never venture. But the fates conspired. Our film, a Holocaust love story, had been selected for Kraków's International Short Film Festival.

Before the war 10% of Poland was Jewish, 25% of Warsaw and Kraków, 70% of Oswiecim. Imagine New York

City if, tomorrow, every Jew disappeared. What would that do to the economy, the arts, the media, the city? That's what happened here. These weren't just *shtetl* Jews. They were also sophisticated, cultured, literate and aware. Chasids, the Haskala, the apostates. All Jews, all stripes, all gone.

And yet the faces remain. There are the faces of Jews everywhere. But they aren't Jews. Or so it seems. If there are traces of Poland in you and me, might not Jews remain in them, too?

There is a Jewish Cultural Festival in Kraków. It will celebrate its bar mitzvah year in 2003. Thirteen years of 10 days of klezmer groups from around the world, seminars of Jewish cooking, esoteric lectures, etc. Janusz Makuch runs the Festival. Thousands of people spend over a week celebrating Jewish culture. Some of them are even Jews. Makuch is not. In all of Kraków there may be 200 Jews. Last year 15,000 people danced in

the streets of Kazimierz – the celebrated and recently renovated old Jewish quarter. Every young person in Kraków seemed to be involved with Judaism but not be Jewish: the university student studying the kabbalah and wearing a *Magen David*, the journalist who taught himself Yiddish.

A young man managing the local English language book store explained it to me in the sort of vague way one might talk about a phantom limb. "We want to learn what we lost. You know something was there but we aren't sure what it was." And then the clincher "Of course, if there were Jews here again, this doesn't mean Poles wouldn't be anti-Semitic."

Yes, they love the Jews, at least the old fashioned hamishkeit they yearn for with nostalgia. There are rows of Jews in craft stores at the market. Wonderful Chasidic Jews and fiddler-on-the-roof Jews. A stallholder tells me that many Poles like to keep a Jew in the house.



Photo: Barry Lazar

“Many Poles like to keep a Jew in the house”

“They say it brings in money. Of course, I don’t believe that but many do.”

No one knows what a Jew looks like here anyway. On a wall in an alley in the nearby city of Czenstohowa where one day 4,000 Jews were shot and our guide says “the street flowed with blood”, there are graffiti. A Star of David has some defamatory writing. Next to it is a swastika with similar gibberish. Our guide explains that they are scrawled by local football clubs defaming each other. Dirty Jew, Damn Nazi – they don’t know any better. It is all the same.

There is both fear and the unknown. The fear is that the Jews are coming back. They will reclaim the houses, the land. They will force Poles from homes that may not rightfully be theirs. But that is the spoken fear. The unknown is that who knows who is a Jew? The stories are everywhere. A mother is dying and calls her middle-aged son to her bed. I have to tell you the family secret, she says. You were adopted. Your mother gave you to me as she went to the camps. You are Jewish.

“I get calls,” says an American living in Warsaw. He helps with a hotline for people who may be Jews. “I am a priest and I just found out I am Jewish. I am confused.” Or “I am an anti-Semite and I am Jewish. What do I do?”

We show our film at the Kraków Film Festival. About 200 people show up. It

is a documentary called *My Dear Clara* and is about the Holocaust told through love letters. It is also about the horror of war and the intractability of government. Anti-Semitism in Canada and Quebec plays a central role. Maybe the Poles like that. So it wasn’t just their fault. After the showing there is a press conference. The questions are about the love affair. In Canada and the USA our film is shown as a story about the Holocaust but here it is boy meets girl. In Poland, the message of the Holocaust is acknowledged but it is also hidden. Many things are hidden in Poland, or they are just beginning to show.

Kraków is the city closest to Auschwitz. Schindler’s list was, in part, filmed here. “If it wasn’t for Spielberg, we wouldn’t have all this,” says the owner of a Jewish bookstore in Kazimierz. A wave of his hand encompasses ‘Jewish’ restaurants where today matzah is served with rolls in the bread basket; and there are Jewish hotels and art galleries and six synagogues welcome visitors although only one has services. In the evening, non-Jewish Klezmer bands play to tourists from North America who come to recover their roots. It is a macabre pre-war shtick. A gallery of wooden Jews with the dust blown away, of museums to a lost culture, of a past with no foot in the present.

And at the same time, hundreds – maybe thousands – of young Poles try to find out who they are. The children of the children of the children assess what happened to them and move toward a future they can claim for themselves. The scion of the Este Lauder fortune has set up foundations in Eastern Europe. Emissaries are recruited from North America, Europe and even Israel, to go to Poland’s cities and towns and blow onto the few Jewish embers that remain.

There are stories of workers in Solidarity, the movement that forced democracy into Poland. At the height of their struggle, many workers looked for spiritual support and turned to anti-Communist clerics. But some in the movement felt uncomfortable with the Church. They were closet Jews. They started studying the only texts they could get their hands on: Exodus, books

by Bellow and Uris. They created flying synagogues – study classes that never met in the same home twice. They accosted tourists and asked if they knew a little Hebrew to teach them. “I know nothing,” said the tourists. “But you know more than we do,” was the reply. Bit by bit they regained their souls.

Poland is a country on the edge of joining the new Europe. It is a country of tall men and fashionable women and wonderful old buildings and modern railways and a superb communications system, and a love for contemporary art and cinema, and the oldest university on the continent, and it is too civilised for its own sake.

We are sitting on the steps of the Hotel Polonia, on the edge of a park that slips into the Old City. It is late but the trams are running and the street is bustling. Sidewalks are wide here and there is a contagious camaraderie as people laugh and stroll. We are washed with the warmth of a true Spring night. This Spring is more than simply a hiatus between seasons. It is a time for renewal and the air is thick with life.

My partner sees me smile. You are in love he says. And yes, he is right. I am in love with a city that is beautiful and cares about itself. I am in love with people who are proud and happy. I am in love with old buildings and young women. I am an urbanophile who is happiest in a complex city that is easy to live in but not easy to understand. Montreal is like that as is New York as is Florence or Paris or Jerusalem and Kraków wears this mantle too.

More importantly, there is a soul here that is also mine. It is the soul of a Jew who has inconveniently wandered home. It is not my home of course; but it is the home of one part of me, of that part that left Poland long ago.

Behind every Ashekenazi Jew in North America a Polish face peers out. In Kraków and in Warsaw, I look around and I see these same faces looking back at me. And to my astonishment I am not angry anymore. ■

Barry Lazar is a writer and documentary film producer who lives in Montreal, Canada. *My Dear Clara* is directed by Garry Beitel and produced by Beitel/Lazar Productions Inc.