

The Virtual Jewish History Tour

Poland



By Rebecca Weiner

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Poland was home to the largest Jewish population in Europe and served as the center for Jewish culture. A diverse population of Jews from all over Europe sought refuge in Poland, contributing to a wide variety of religious and cultural groups. Before the outbreak of World War II, more than 3.3 million Jews lived in Poland, the second largest Jewish community in the world; barely 11 percent (369,000) survived the war population.

The Middle Ages

There is no specific date that marks Jewish immigration to Poland. A journal account of Ibrahim ibn Jakub, a Jewish traveler, merchant and diplomat from Spain mentions [Cracow](#) and the First Duke of Poland, Mieszko I. More Jews arrived during the period of the first Crusade in 1098, while leaving persecution in Bohemia, according to the Chronicler of Prague. There is also archeological evidence, coins from the period with inscriptions in Hebrew, revealing that other Jewish merchants traveled to Poland in the 12th century. The coins may have belonged to 12th century Jewish traders, *Holekhei Rusyah* (travelers to Russia).

While persecution took place across Europe during the [Crusades](#), in the 13th century, Poland served as a haven for European Jewry because of its relative tolerance. During this period, Poland began its colonization process. It suffered great losses from Mongol invasions in 1241 and therefore encouraged Jewish immigrants to settle the towns and villages. Immigrants flocked to Poland from Bohemia-Moravia, Germany, Italy, Spain and colonies in the Crimea. No central authority could stop the immigration. Refugees from Germany brought with them German and Hebrew dialects that eventually became Yiddish

Jews were treated well under the rule of Boleslaw Pobożny (1221-1279) and Kazimierz Wielki (1310-1370). In 1264, Prince Boleslaw issued the "Statute of Kalisz," guaranteeing protection of the Jews and rights to become moneylenders and businessman. King Kasimierz ratified the charter and extended it. Freedom of worship and assembly was granted to the Jews, laying the seeds for [Hasidism](#) and other Jewish movements. One of the great sages of the time, Jacob Savra of [Cracow](#), was extremely learned in [Talmud](#), his opinions differed from Talmudic authorities in Germany and Bohemia.

In the 14th century, opposition arose to the system in which Jews owned land that would be used as collateral for loans. By the mid-1300's, hatred of the Jews existed among the nobility. According to the *Chronica Olivska*, Jews throughout Poland were massacred because they were blamed for the Black Death. There were anti-Jewish riots in 1348-49 and again in 1407 and 1494 and Jews were expelled from the city of [Cracow](#) in 1495.

During the 14th and 15th century, Jews were active in all areas of trade, including cloth, horses, and cattle. By the end of the 15th century, Polish Jews began trading with Venice, Feodosiya and other Genoese colonies in the Crimea, as well as with Constantinople. Accusation were made against the Jews claiming unfair competition in trade and crafts. Due to these complaints, in 1485, Jews were forced to renounce their rights to most trades and crafts. These accusations may have led to the Jewish expulsion from [Cracow](#) in 1495.

By the mid-16th century, eighty percent of the world's Jews lived in Poland. Jewish religious life thrived in many Polish communities. In 1503, the Polish monarchy appointed Rabbi Jacob Polak, the official Rabbi of Poland, marking the emergence of the Chief Rabbinate. By 1551, Jews were given permission to choose their own Chief Rabbi. The Chief Rabbinate held power over law and finance, appointing judges and other officials. Some power was shared with local councils. The Polish government

permitted the Rabbinate to grow in power, to use it for tax collection purposes. Only thirty percent of the money raised by the Rabbinate served Jewish causes, the rest went to the Crown for protection. In this period Poland-Lithuania became the main center for Ashkenazi Jewry and its yeshivot achieved fame from the early 1500's.

One the great talmudic scholars of the 1500's was [Moses ben Israel Isserles](#) (1525-1572). He founded a religious academy in [Cracow](#). Beyond Talmudic study, he was also familiar with many of the Greek philosophers and was one of the forerunners of the [Jewish enlightenment](#).

Colonization of the Ukraine

In the 16th century, Jews also thrived economically and took part in the settler movement of Poland. In 1569, Poland and Lithuania unified and then Poland annexed the Ukraine. Many Jews were sent to colonize these territories.

Polish nobility and landowners and Jewish merchants became partners in many business enterprises. Jews became involved in the wheat export industry, which was in high demand across Europe. The Jews built and ran mills and distilleries, transported the grain to the Baltic Ports and shipped it to the West. In return they received wine, cloth, dyes and luxury goods, which they sold to Polish nobility. The roles of magnates, middleman and intermediaries with the peasants were held by the Jews.

Jews created entire villages and townships, shtetls. Fifty-two communities in Great Poland and Masovia, 41 communities in Lesser Poland and about 80 communities in the Ukraine region.

From the 16th to 18th century, Jews enjoyed a measure of self-government — the Council of Four Lands (*Va'ad Arba Artsot*) — which served as a Jewish Parliament. Ordinances of the Council of the Lands revealed the ideals of widespread [Torah](#) study. Jews were active at all levels of society and politics. Almost every Polish magnate had a Jewish counselor, who kept the books, wrote letters, and managed economic affairs.

At the end of the 1600's, Poland-Lithuania was involved in a war against Sweden and another war against Moscow. The wars weakened Poland's food-exporting industries and strained the Polish nobility, who then put pressure on the Jews and raised tariffs. In turn, the Jews put pressure on the local peasants.

Chmielnicki Revolt

In 1648, a Ukrainian officer Bogdan Chmielnicki, with the support of the Tatar Khan of Crimea, roused the local peasants to fight with him and the Russian Orthodox Cossacks against the Jews. The first wave of violence in 1648 destroyed Jewish communities east of the Dnieper River. Following the violence, thousands of Jews fled west, across the river, to the major cities. The Cossacks and the peasants followed them; the first large-scale massacre took place at Nemirov (a small town, which is part of present-day Ukraine). It is estimated that 100,000-200,000 Jews died in the Chmielnicki revolt that lasted from 1648-1649. This wave of destruction is considered the first modern pogrom.

Rise of Hasidism

The revolts left much of the Jewish population impoverished. In the 1660's, many Polish Jews became caught up in the fervor and excitement of [Shabbetai Zevi](#) and, a century later, [Jacob Frank](#). According to [Hasidic](#) tradition, in southeast Poland, in the region of Podolia, [Israel ben Eliezer Ba'al Shem Tov](#) (otherwise known as the Ba'al Shem Tov or Besht) was born in 1699. It was said that he was a Ba'al Shem (miracle worker), curing Jews with amulets and charms. The Ba'al Shem Tov reached out to the masses and peasant Jewry. Hasidism flourished after his death and was spread by Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid (storyteller) throughout Eastern Europe.

The Baal Shem Tov



Partitions

There were three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and in 1795. Poland was divided among Russia, Prussia and Austria; Poland-Lithuania no longer existed. The majority of Poland's one-million Jews became part of the Russian empire. Poland became a mere client state of the Russian empire. In 1772, Catherine II, empress of Russia; discriminated against the Jews by forcing them to stay in their shtetls and barring their return to the towns they occupied before the partition. This area was called the [Pale of Settlement](#). By 1885, more than four million Jews lived in the Pale.

Rise of the Haskalah

During this period, the [Haskalah](#) (Jewish Enlightenment) spread throughout Poland. Supporters of the Haskalah movement wanted to reform Jewish life and end special institutions and customs. A belief existed that if the Jews assimilated with the Poles, then they would prosper and would not be persecuted. The Haskalah was popular among wealthy Jews, while the shopkeepers and artisans chose to keep speaking Yiddish and continue practicing [Orthodox](#) Judaism.



Great Synagogue in Białystok

JUDAJA BY Tenny

In the 19th century, the Haskalah philosophy of integration began to be implemented by the Sejm (Senate). The Jewish self-government, the Kahal, was abolished. A tax was levied on Jewish liquor dealers, forcing them to close their shops. Jews then became involved in agriculture. A yeshiva opened in 1826, with the goal of producing

"enlightened" spiritual leaders. In 1862, Jews were emancipated and special taxes were abolished and restrictions on residence were removed. Despite efforts to assimilate, Jews continued to be subject to anti-Semitism under the Czars and in Poland.

Political Life of Jews

Since Jews were treated badly by the Russians, many decided to become involved in the Polish insurrections: the Kosciuszko Insurrection, November Insurrection (1830-1831), the January Insurrection (1863) and the Revolutionary Movement of 1905. Jews also joined Polish legions in the battle for independence achieved in 1918.

In 1897, fourteen percent of Polish citizens were Jewish. Jews were represented in government with seats in the Sejm, municipal councils and in Jewish religious communities. Jews developed many political parties and associations, ranging in ideologies from [Zionist](#) to socialist to [Anti-Zionist](#). The Bund, a socialist party, spread throughout Poland in the early 20th century. Many Jewish workers in [Warsaw](#) and [Lodz](#) joined the Bund.

[Zionism](#) also became popular among Polish Jews, who formed the Poale Zion. Another group, the Folksists (People's Party) supported assimilation and trade unions. The Polish Mizrahi, a Zionist orthodox political party, had a large following. [General Zionists](#) became popular in the inter-war period. In the 1919 election of the Sejm, the General Zionists received 50 percent of the votes for Jewish parties.

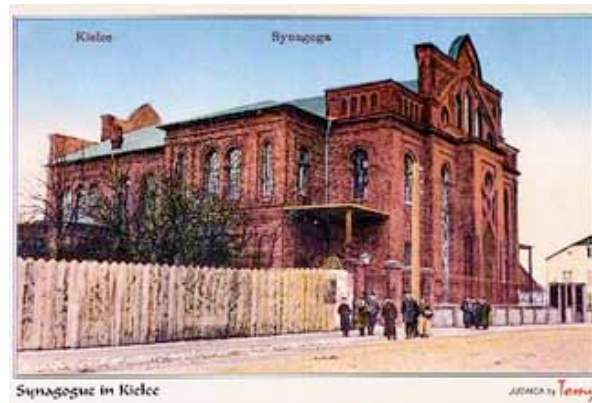
The map shows the territory of the Kingdom of Poland before WWI. The pink line is the post-WWII border between Poland and its eastern neighbors. The northeastern fragment of the Kingdom, which now belongs to Lithuania, is shown in green and a small area now in Belarus is marked in yellow ([ShtetLinks Site for Lodz](#)).



After World War I

In 1918, Poland became a sovereign state. Following Poland's rebirth, a reign of terror against the Jews began. Jews were massacred in pogroms by Poles who associated Trotsky and the Bolshevik revolution with Jewry (Trotsky was Jewish).

The situation was mixed for Polish Jews in the inter-war period. They were recognized as a nationality and their legal rights were supposed to be protected under the Treaty of Versailles; however, their legal rights were not honored by Poland. The Kehillah, a Jewish governing body, was not allowed to run autonomously. The government intervened in the elections and controlled its budget. On the other hand, Jews received funding from the state for their schools.



Economic conditions declined for Polish Jews during the inter-war years. Jews were not allowed to work in the civil service, few were public school teachers, almost no Jews were railroad workers and no Jews worked in state-controlled banks or state-run monopolies (i.e. the tobacco industry). Legislation was enacted forcing citizens to rest on Sunday, ruining Jewish commerce that was closed on Saturday. Their economic downfall was accompanied by a rise of [anti-Semitism](#). In the late 1930's a new wave of pogroms befell the community and anti-Jewish boycotts were enacted.

Before the outbreak of World War II, there was a thriving social and cultural life of Jews in Poland. A well-developed Jewish press circulated newspapers in Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish. There were more than 30 dailies and more than 130 Jewish periodicals. More than fifty percent of all physicians and lawyers in private practice in Poland were Jewish because of the discriminatory laws against civil service. The Jewish population stood at 3.3 million, the second largest Jewish community in the world.

The Holocaust

On September 1, 1939, [Germany invaded Poland](#). The German military killed about 20,000 Jews and bombed approximately 50,000 Jewish-owned factories, workshops and stores in more than 120 Jewish communities. Several hundred synagogues were destroyed in the first two months of occupation.

Immediately, restrictions were placed on Polish Jews. All Jewish stores were forced to display a [Star of David](#) and were subsequently raided and forced to pay large sums of money to the Germans. Jews were not allowed to own bank accounts and there were limits on the amount of cash they could store in their homes. Jews were not allowed in to work in textiles and leather.

On July 24, 1939, instructions came from the High Command of the Wehrmacht to intern civilian citizens, which led to the arrest of Jews and Poles of military age at the time of the invasion. Hundreds of civilians, Poles and Jews, were subsequently murdered. Still more Polish Jews were killed by the [Einsatzkommando](#).

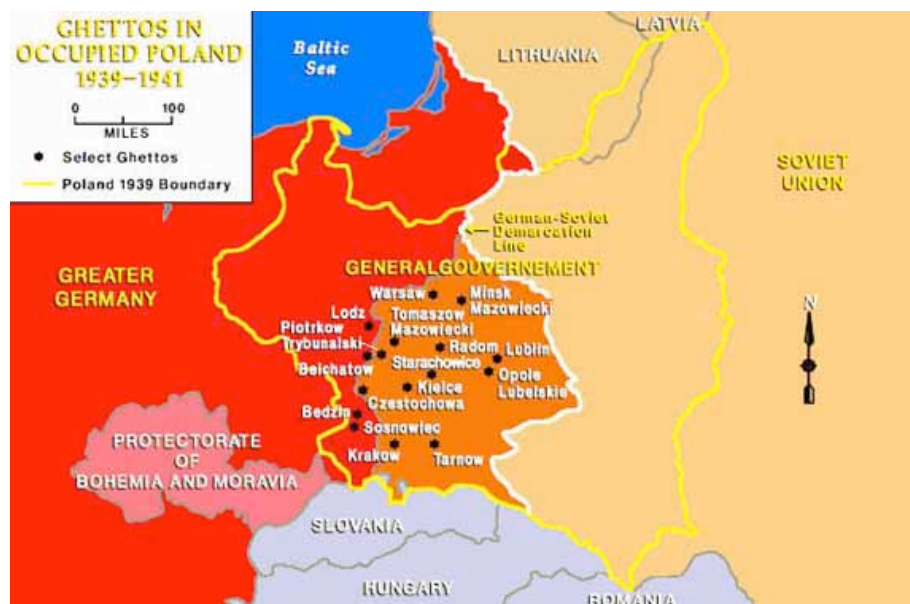
One week before the invasion, [Hitler](#) signed a secret non-aggression pact (The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) with Soviet leader Josef Stalin. Under German occupation, Poland was divided into 10 administrative districts. The western and northern districts

(Pomerania, Brandenburg, Saxony, Upper and Lower Silesia and Danzig) were annexed to the German Reich and the eastern districts were ceded to the Soviet Union. The largest district, the central section including the cities of [Lublin](#) Krakow and [Warsaw](#), was set aside as a German colony and came to be known as the General Government (Generalgouvernement).

When the German-Russian War began, the areas previously controlled by Russia were incorporated into the Soviet Union. Of the 3.3 million Polish Jews at the outbreak of the war, about two million came under Nazi rule and the remainder were under Soviet occupation.

Confinement and Extermination

To provide more "living space" for Germans, the Jews were removed from the Polish countryside and concentrated in the cities of the General Government. The first [ghetto](#) was started as early as October 1939 in Piorków Trybunalski and was followed by the creation of ghettos in [Lodz](#), [Warsaw](#), [Lublin](#), Radom and Lvov. By 1942, all Polish Jews were either confined to ghettos or hiding. That summer, the Nazis began liquidating the ghettos and within 18 months almost all of them had been emptied. Here is a brief description of what happened to the Jews in each district:



In **Wartheland**, there were nine ghettos, the largest was the [Lodz ghetto](#), which was established in 1942. By the time the last transport left the [Lodz ghetto](#) in August 1944, 74,000 Jews had been sent to [Auschwitz](#). The Soviets liberated the ghetto in January 1945 and found only 877 survivors.

In **Danzig-West Prussen**, there was a Jewish population of 23,000. Many Jewish residents were killed in the initial massacres of the war. The last transport of Jews (about 2,000 people) were sent to [Auschwitz](#) on March 10, 1941.

In **Ciechanow**, a census revealed about 80,000 Jews in 1931. Most of the Jews were expelled to Russia. Those that stayed were sent to ghettos in East Prussia. The last ghettos were liquidated in the fall of 1942 and the remaining Jews were sent to [Treblinka](#).

In **East Upper Silesia**, there were 32 communities at the outbreak of the war, consisting of more than 93,000 Jews. From May to June 1942, Jewish workers from East Upper Silesia were deported to [Auschwitz](#).

In the **General Government**, there were four districts: [Warsaw](#), Lublin, Radome, and [Cracow](#) and the district of Galicia was added. More than 2.1 million Jews resided in these districts before the occupation. The Nazis established the Judenrat, a quasi-representative body of the Jews in this district.

In [Warsaw](#), the ghetto was established on November 15, 1940. More than half a million Jews lived in the ghetto. About 300,000 Jews were deported to [Treblinka](#) on September 1, 1942. In January 1943, the Nazis tried to start another round of deportations, however, they were stopped after four days due to Jewish resistance. On April 19, 1943, the German army entered the ghetto and was met again by fierce opposition. It took several months, until June 1943, before the ghetto was liquidated. The [Warsaw ghetto uprising](#) reverberated throughout Poland and the rest of the world as an example of courage and defiance.

The first ghetto built in the district of [Lublin](#), in April 1941, held 45,000 Jews. Fifty forced labor camps were set up in Lublin for local Jews as well as Jews from other districts. In 1940-41, about 12,000 Jews occupied those camps.

The district of [Cracow](#) had a pre-war Jewish population of 250,000. The first ghetto was established in March 1941. The ghetto underwent three mass evacuations and, during the final one, 2,000 Jews were murdered on the spot.

In the district of **Radome**, eighty percent of the Jewish population (360,000) lost their homes in the initial bombings of the area. The others were deported into surrounding areas. The first deportation to [Treblinka](#) occurred on August 5, 1942. On January 1, 1943, only 29,400 Jews remained in the district's four ghettos.

In **Galicia**, the first ghetto was set up in October 1941. On October 12, 10,000 Jews were killed at a Jewish cemetery in the city of Stanislav.

The district of [Bialystok](#) was created in July 1941 and contained a Jewish population of about 250,000 persons. Between June 27-July 13, 1941, more than 6,000 Jews were murdered and the great synagogue was burned. In the final phase of the extermination process, 40,000 Jews were killed and the rest were sent to [Treblinka](#), [Majdanek](#) and [Auschwitz](#).

Concentration Camps

Poland had three major [concentration camps](#): [Lublin-Majdanek](#), [Plaszow](#), and [Auschwitz-Birkenau](#) and six extermination camps: [Auschwitz](#), [Majdanek](#), [Chelmno](#), [Treblinka](#), [Sobibor](#) and [Belzec](#). [Auschwitz](#) and [Majdanek](#) served as both extermination and concentration camps.



Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue: Fully restored to its pre-war condition, it is the only synagogue in Oswiecim ([Auschwitz](#)) to have survived World War II. Prior to the War, there were roughly twenty houses of worship in the town.

Post-World War II/ Communist Era

Eighty-five percent of Polish Jewry perished in the [Holocaust](#). Following the war, many survivors fled to Romania and Germany in hope of reaching Palestine. Those who remained attempted to rebuild Jewish life in the 200 local communities. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and ORT opened schools and hospitals for the Jewish communities in Poland.

Jews were still subject to [anti-Semitism](#) and pogroms. [The Kielce Pogrom](#) in July 1946, in which 40 Jews were killed, was the impetus for another mass emigration. At the end of 1947, only 100,000 Jews remained in Poland.

The Soviet Union's secret police essentially governed the country and Stalin's anti-Semitic regime stifled Jewish cultural and religious activities. Jewish schools were nationalized in 1948-49 and Yiddish was no longer used as the language of instruction.

Stalin's death in 1953 eased the situation for the Jews, who then were allowed to reestablish connections with Jewish organizations abroad and began producing Jewish literature. In this 1958-59 period, 50,000 Jews emigrated to Israel, which was the only country Jews were able to immigrate to under Polish law.

The last mass migration of Jews from Poland took place in 1968-69, after Israel's [1967 War](#), because of the anti-Jewish policy adopted by Polish communist parties, which closed down Jewish youth camps, schools and clubs. Following the 1967 War, Poland broke off diplomatic relations with Israel.

In 1977, Poland began to try to improve its image regarding Jewish matters. Partial diplomatic relations were restored in 1986 — the first of the communistic block

countries to take this step — full diplomatic relations were not restored until 1990, a year after Poland ended its communist rule.

Present Day Poland



Between 5,000 and 10,000 Jews live in Poland, mainly in [Warsaw](#), but also in [Cracow](#), [Lodz](#), Breslau and other cities, out of a total population of close to 40 million. Few Jews live in the eastern part of Poland, which at one time was home to large, important communities, such as those of Lublin and Bialystok. The Coordinating Committee of Jewish Organizations in the Polish Republic (KKOZRP) coordinates the activities of the different Jewish organizations in Poland. The Lauder Foundation has established a number of clubs and events for Jewish youth as well as a primary school in Warsaw. The social and Cultural Society of Jews in Poland helps with the renewal of Jewish life and culture; it has branches in all major cities of Poland and publishes the *Folks-Syzme*, a Yiddish and Polish weekly. The Union of Religious Congregations, or Kehilla, has a main office in [Warsaw](#) and has branches in all cities with a sizeable Jewish population. The Union maintains the Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and charities. Kosher restaurants can be found in [Warsaw](#) and [Cracow](#) and the JDC maintains Kosher cafeterias in the largest Jewish centers of Poland.

[Synagogues](#) can be found in [Warsaw](#), [Cracow](#), Zamosc, Tykocin, Lesko, Lanco, Rzeszow, Chmielnicki, Kielce and Gora Kalwaria, but not all are functioning today. The oldest synagogue in Poland, Stara Synagoga, built in the early 15th century, can be found in [Cracow](#). Today, it hosts a Jewish museum. The Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin was reopened in Lublin in 2007, the first synagogue to be renovated and dedicated in Poland since World War II solely through funding from Polish Jewry, without government or charitable support. Prior to World War II, the yeshiva was Europe's largest.

The leading Jewish publications are the monthly *Midrasz*, *Dos Jidische Wort*, *Jidele* for youth and *Sztendlach* for primary school children. All of these publications are printed in Polish except for *Dos Jidische Wort*, which is published in a bi-lingual Yiddish-Polish edition. Jewish Institutions include the Jewish Historical Institute, the E.R. Kaminska State Yiddish Theater in Warsaw, and the Jewish Cultural Center in Cracow.

It is also possible to visit the extermination camps of [Auschwitz-Birkenau](#), [Majdanek](#) and [Treblinka](#). [Auschwitz](#) currently houses the [Oswiecim State Museum](#), exhibiting documents from Nazi crimes. Block Number 27 is set aside for martyrology of the Jews and the millions who were killed there.



All that remains of [Treblinka](#) is a mausoleum and monument consisting of thousands of shards of broken stone.

At [Majdanek](#), there is a museum and a monument, which incorporates a mound of human ashes commemorating the 350,000 people who were murdered there.

Besides the camps, Poland also has the largest Jewish burial ground in Europe, which is found in [Lodz](#). Historic grave sites can be found in Gora Kalwaria (the Ger) and Lesajsk (Lezensk).

In June 2004, during an excavation of the site of the Great Synagogue in Oswiecim, archeologists uncovered a unique collection of Jewish treasures. Oswiecim's population was 70 percent Jewish, but was wiped out after the German invasion of Poland. It is also where the [Auschwitz](#) death camp was built. In this project initiated by a young Israeli named Yariv Nornberg, archeologists dug at the site based on the testimony of [Holocaust](#) survivor Yishayahu Yarod, who remembered the relics being hidden by the Jews before the Nazis razed the synagogue. Many Jewish ritual objects were found at the site, including three bronze candelabras, a bronze [menorah](#), ten chandeliers and a [ner tamid](#). Tiles, marble plaques and charred wood from the [synagogue](#) were also discovered. The objects will most likely go through a year-long restoration process and then be displayed in the Auschwitz Jewish Center.

On July 4, 2006, a memorial to Holocaust survivors killed and wounded in [Kielce](#), Poland after World War II will be unveiled. The city of Kielce and the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad financed the memorial. On that day in 1946, residents killed more than 40 Jews who had returned to the town after the war to reclaim their property. The massacre consolidated the perception

among survivors that they couldn't return to Poland.

Today there is greater awareness of Poland's rich Jewish past as well as of the tragedies of the Holocaust. *Zagłada*, a journal devoted to the Holocaust, was first published in 2005 by a special division of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Other publications have also been published recently dealing with the subject, most notably from the Institute of National Memory.

The Polish Jewish community is still receiving reparations from the Holocaust, however restitution is proceeding slowly. Legislation addressing the issue of private property has also yet to be enacted.

Public toilets built on the site of a Jewish cemetery in Szczelociny were finally removed in 2005 after urging from the World Jewish Congress and the *Landsmanschaft*. A memorial designed by the Polish-Jewish architect Czeslaw Bielecki, at the Radegest station, from which Lodz Jews were deported, was also unveiled in 2005.

The building of the new Museum of the History of Polish Jewry in Warsaw will be based on a design by Finnish architect, Rainer Mahlamaecki. The plot of land for the museum and an additional \$13 million were donated by the city of Warsaw to the project. An additional \$13 million was donated by the Polish government.

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Auschwitz/Oswiecim photos courtesy of the [Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation](#).

[Lublin](#) — [Cracow](#) — [Lodz](#) — [Warsaw](#) — [Luboml](#)

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