

Robert Ogman:

Report – Study trip to Warsaw, Poland about the Warsaw Ghetto

In September 2009, the Osteuropa Institut at the Freie Universität offered a study trip to Warsaw, Poland on the topic of the Warsaw Ghetto, as a supplement to a seminar on the same subject. The week-long excursion sought to deepen our historical knowledge of the Shoah and to introduce us to the post-war discussions about Polish-Jewish relations in Poland. For this latter topic, we were advised to prepare ourselves by reading “Uncomfortable Truths: Poland and its relationship to the Jews,”<sup>1</sup> which focused on the major discussions since the Second World War.

A packed week of program of meetings with scholars and students, museum planners and researchers, as well as with politicians, was complemented with our interaction with the living city itself, as well as a visit to the memorial site of the former extermination camp, Treblinka, and the town of Sokolow Podlaski, where we met students for a discussion about Jewish history in the High-School curriculum.

Warsaw—

After settling in at the hostel, the twelve of us were introduced to the city via a walking tour of Warsaw University, the old city Center, the city palace, as well as the street cafes, theaters, and shopping boulevards.

We also had a glimpse at the towering Palace of Culture, the Communist-era skyscraper that dominates the skyline. From the backside of the building hung a huge banner portraying the head of a soldier with the single bold word, painted in a dripping-red print, “Honor.”

We were reminded that our excursion coincides with Poland’s 70<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the beginning of World War Two, the German and Russian invasions of the country, and the loss of Polish national sovereignty. This was the

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<sup>1</sup> “Unbequeme Wahrheiten: Polen und sein Verhältnis zu den Juden.” Editors, Barbara Engelking and Helga Hirsch. Suhrkamp, 2561. 2008.

first sign that we encountered of the country's public display of national mourning and remembrance.

The former Warsaw Ghetto—

On the second day, we were given a tour of the section of the city where in 1940 the Nazis built the Jewish ghetto. Our guide, Jagna Kofta, who works as an educator and tour guide for groups of school classes, led us to some of the memorial sites and locations of historical events. While 90% of Warsaw was destroyed in the war, this area was completely flattened, and only a few original houses remain.

A memorial trail is lined with large black stones, engraved with information about significant figures who lived or worked in the vicinity, and who are known for their social or political contribution to the county or to the Jewish community. The main site of remembrance is that of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial, to honor the Jewish resistance of 1943. The memorial is a large black wall on an open plaza, with sculptures of notable leaders of the uprising, poised with weapons in their hands and with faces of determined resistance. On the plaza itself the construction is underway for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is to open in 2011.

Warsaw University, Polish-Jewish Historiography—

On the next day we visited Dr. Jolanta Zyndul, Professor at the Mordechai Anielewicz Center for Research and Teaching of History and Culture of Jews in Poland at Warsaw University, where we were given a background into Shoah-historiography in Poland. Despite centuries of flourishing Jewish-Polish life in the country, a divide dominates the historiography between a "Polish" historiography and a "Jewish" one. There are however contemporary efforts to develop Polish-Jewish historiography, Zyndul explained, motivated by the view that one can hardly represent Polish history without including the significant role that Jewish-Poles played within it. Therefore, they argue, only by writing about Jewish history in Poland can one adequately complete Polish history itself.

### Jewish Cemetery and the Jewish Historical Institute—

With the guidance of Jürgen Hensel from the Jewish Historical Institute, we were given a tour of the Jewish cemetery, which provided a look into the history of Polish Jewry. Being that the Warsaw Jewish community was the largest on the European continent, numbering 350,000 before the war, the cemetery is an enormous area, with layers of historical figures and ordinary Polish Jews alongside one another. We visited the graves of some of the leaders of the Ghetto Uprising, the grave of the inventor of Esperanto, the attempt amongst socialists to found an international language, the memorial to Janusz Korczak, the pedagogue and children's book author, and many more authors, political and intellectual leaders, scientists, and religious figures amongst the 250,000 graves. At the Jewish Historical Institute, Hensel explained the history of the Ringelblum-Archiv, which is housed at the Institute. Emanuel Ringelblum was a Jewish-Polish historian who was confined in the Warsaw Ghetto. Anticipating the worst, he worked together with writers, social workers, historians, and others to document the life and destruction of Warsaw Jewry, by collecting letters, photographs, diary entries, and taking personal testimonies, and hiding them in milk containers and metal boxes, and burying them underneath the ground. Ringelblum did not survive the Shoah, but his documents were found after the war and are known as the Ringelblum Archive. They are responsible for bringing to public the conditions of the ghetto.

### Memorial Site of the Treblinka Extermination Camp—

The main destination of the transports out of the Warsaw Ghetto were to the Treblinka extermination camp, where 8-900,000 predominantly Jewish people were murdered. Museum director Edward Kopówka introduced us to the small exhibit of found objects, drawings and photographs of the former camp.

The Nazis had closed the camp in 1944 and laid a farm on the land, but today the area has been transformed into a memorial site with a symbolic graveyard of hundreds of stones laid out in a wide circle over the terrain, many engraved with

the names of cities, towns and villages, from which the victims had lived before their deportation to Treblinka. Atop many of the stones, rest small rocks placed there by visitors in the tradition of Jewish burial rites.

#### Sokolow Podlaski—

In the small town of Sokolow Podlaski we met with a group of public school students to learn about how Jewish heritage is taught in the history lessons at the Polish High Schools, but the main focus was the tour of the town by Anna Kurylek, which showed us how the remnants of Jewish heritage can be found still today throughout the town of Sokolow Podlaski itself.

In the middle of the town we were shown a park where the Jewish cemetery once existed, but which was destroyed in 1942 during the German occupation. A memorial stone was laid in 2009 to remember the 4,000 strong Jewish community, who made up a majority of the town's population at the time, and which had lived there since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Down the road we were brought into a pharmacy, where we viewed a plaque set into the floor to remember the synagogue that once stood in that place. And across the street we viewed the foundations of a building that was constructed out of the uprooted gravestones of the old Jewish cemetery.

#### Workshop on Polish and German War Memory—

Back in Warsaw at the History Meeting House, we participated in a two-day workshop with students of Warsaw University, focused on the outbreak of World War II in Polish and German memory. The workshop included sections on war propaganda and images of the enemy, as well as wartime experiences and survival mechanisms of Warsaw residents amongst other topics. With the use of written accounts of Polish civilians, media reports and military propaganda, participants were given the opportunity to work with original source material. Additionally, small group activities provided the chance for the Berlin and Warsaw groups to exchange personal experiences about how the historical

narratives of the war were transmitted through the family, school, media, and society.

Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year--

As the final night of the excursion fell on Rosh Hashanah, a few of us joined the services and dinner of the progressive Jewish congregation, Beit Warszawa, along with many other international guests, and Rabbi Schuman spoke with us informally about the current Warsaw Jewish community.

The weeklong Warsaw excursion brought us into interaction with diverse societal actors – from scholars and museum directors, to students and politicians – and gave us a multi-level snapshot of the various ways contemporary Polish society is engaging with the history of the Second World War. It broadened our experience in the transnational dialogue on European and Eastern European history, and will help us move forward in our continued studies on this and related topics.