



The writer, Orit Arfa, at the Nozyk Synagogue

Israeli Warsaw rising

Despite the offensive Polish Holocaust law, Israelis living in Warsaw seek opportunity – and understanding

**Text and photos
by Orit Arfa, Warsaw**

STANDING NEAR one of the few standing remnants of the Warsaw Ghetto wall, Israeli tour guide of Jewish Warsaw, Guy Sadaka, assured his group that he would get to their persistent questions about the controversial Polish law that, until its amendment in late June, would punish anyone ascribing responsibility for the Holocaust to the Polish nation.

The law almost shattered Israeli/Jewish-Polish relations, breaking out on social media with an explosion of both anti-Jewish and anti-Polish hate speech. But earlier calls for boycotts of Poland among Jewish groups at the height of the row didn't deter these 20 or so Israeli tourists from visiting Warsaw this spring.

As one tourist put it, "Should I not visit America because of Trump?" While another

one said, “It was disappointing, but it’s still an attractive place to be. Very cheap, great vacation, pretty sites.”

Still, the “Polish law” was the “elephant” on the grounds of the former Warsaw Ghetto.

Sadaka addressed it at the final stop, the Nożyk Synagogue.

“The Poles are 100 percent right in that they say you can’t say ‘Polish death camps’ but only ‘German death camps,’” Sadaka said with the synagogue’s Star of David overhead. The synagogue survived the German firebombing of Warsaw on account of it having been used as a Nazi barn. Sadaka continued to stray from the collectivist Jewish kvetch that the Poles revealed deep-seated antisemitism by seeking to downplay any role they might have played in Jewish genocide.

“The Poles are also right in that there was no Polish national policy that helped the Germans destroy the Jews.” The seed for the law, he said, was planted after president Barack Obama’s gaffe uttering “Polish death camps” in 2012, while honoring a Polish hero. The uproar over the law, Sadaka said, stemmed in part from a lack of education – on both sides.

Jews and Israelis, he argued, learn little about Polish Righteous Among the Nations, like Irena Sendler, who rescued many Jewish children, or about the Warsaw uprising in which Poles fought the Germans to the end. The Polish government served in exile in London, warning Winston Churchill of the annihilation of Jews. A joint decla-



Israeli tourists dancing in a Warsaw nightclub

ration on June 27 by Poland and Israel, in the wake of the law’s amendment, acknowledged such, along with calling for “a return to civil and respectful dialogue in the public discourse.”

Sadaka is among the estimated 500 to 700 Israelis living in Warsaw, a veteran of 15 years. In 2015, an Israeli television segment on the decline of Israeli immigration to Berlin ended with a young Israeli predicting Warsaw as the next “Berlin.” Cost of living is still about a third of the cost of Tel Aviv. Warsaw is behind on the gentrification that has caused Berlin real estate prices to skyrocket in the past ten years. That rough-around-the-edges postwar, post-Communist vibe attracts creative types and especially young Poles, who want to make it in their own big city.

But members of the “Israelis in Warsaw” Facebook group lashed out at me when

I sought interviewees for this article and used the term “new Berlin.” Israelis living in Warsaw don’t come for a hipster scene or the cheap “Milky,” one member said. He was, of course, referring to the controversy over a 2014 Facebook post, which encouraged Israelis to make “aliyah” to Berlin for its affordable living, as exemplified in its dirt-cheap chocolate putting.

Facebook numbers speak for themselves. This Facebook group has over 700 members compared to Berlin’s several competing groups for Israeli Berliners (a sign of robust inner politics) totaling over 10,000 members.

There’s no typical profile of an Israeli who chooses Warsaw. Some come for professional reasons (I encountered an actor and a dancer) and others seek to connect with their Polish roots, such as Inbal Neumark.



Uri Wollner



Inbal Neumark

I met Neumark, 30, and Andros Tetrao, 35, at “Tel Aviv,” a happening vegan restaurant owned by a local chef named “Malika” of possible Jewish origin. Many Polish Jews came out of the woodwork after the fall of Communism, when Jews in spiritual hiding were free to rediscover and express their Jewish (or half-Jewish) roots. Warsaw boasts several Israeli-themed hip restaurants: Bereq (owned by a local, non-Jewish celebrity restaurateur), Florentin, and the Shuk, among others.

Over a shared platter of humus, *baba ganoush* and vegan cheesecake, Neumark, a Holon native, relayed her empathy for Poland. She holds a Polish passport, thanks to her grandparents’ ancestry. Ever since Poland joined the EU, Poland has seen a spike in Israelis seeking to redeem Polish citizenship, itself a complicated process.

As a university student, Neumark participated in the Polish-Israeli Youth Exchange (PIYE), a program run by POLIN, Warsaw’s Jewish museum, which in her case was conducted in cooperation with Tel Aviv University. She found herself feeling more connected to the Polish students than to her Israeli counterparts, triggering her path to

Warsaw and reconciliation with her Polish roots.

She works in part as a tour guide, focusing on sites of Jewish interest and World War II.

“World War II history is something that occupies me,” she said. “I felt that I could really relate to Warsaw. The city was almost completely destroyed – 85 percent – and they had the choice of not rebuilding it at all, and they chose to rebuild it, but everywhere you go there are scars of what happened here.”

She said the city takes pains to honor the Jewish life that once was through memorials.

Tetrao, a real estate analyst from Arad, came to Poland first to meet up with friends from studies at Ben-Gurion University.

“For me, Poland was always a bit like a Jewish cemetery, but when I came here for the first time and saw my friends, I discovered a whole new world,” Tetrao said. “They had people here, culture, buildings. It wasn’t black and white, and I said to myself, ‘I’d like to live here.’” Not long after, he met his future Polish wife.

Both Neumark and Tetrao wonder if the

level of antisemitism in Poland is any less than in Germany, which they believe has engaged in more effective PR efforts atoning for its past.

“I don’t know how the Germans did it,” Tetrao said. “But they did it so good in how they removed blame from themselves.”

But Poland’s reputation plunged even further in the eyes of the Jewish world with the introduction of the “Polish law.” Neumark and Tetrao disagree with it, preferring instead education and diplomacy, but believe Poles and Jews alike have overreacted.

“The reaction to the law on both sides was much worse than the law itself,” said Neumark.

The “Polish law” was a series of irksome laws passed by the dominant nationalist-religious coalition concerned with bolstering Polish national pride. Other laws include one that closes shops on Sundays and a strict anti-abortion law, which was the subject of major protest rallies that week.

And Jews arguably feel much safer in Poland today than in countries like Germany and France, where the threat of Islamic terror is omnipresent. Poland has defied EU calls to absorb Muslim refugees.



When it comes to cost of living, Warsaw's affordability is also surpassing Berlin's. Tetrao ended the interview by pitching some lucrative real estate investment opportunities – once Berlin's mainstay. In the city center, a 50 sq m apartment starts at about a half a million shekels. Neumark rents a shared apartment for the equivalent of roughly 1000 shekels per month.

Aside from owning a tour-guiding company, Sadaka facilitates the purchase of investment properties for Israelis in Warsaw – a growing business.

"Businessmen discovered Poland as an attractive destination, and now it's the capital of Eastern Europe," Sadaka said. "The economy is flourishing, the currency is stable. Even though you have a right-wing government, the country is stable, and everything connected to cuisine, and culture, is blossoming."

Still, this won't translate into a mass Israeli migration. Poland doesn't offer as many incentives or social benefits for Israelis to work or live, such as free or highly subsidized education. The Polish language is, by all accounts, much harder to learn than German, and less practical. The cor-

porate world, however, is making its mark. Israeli companies such as SuperPharm, Mei Eden, Egged, Elite Coffee, and others have business interests in Poland.

The slow trickle of Israeli immigration has spurred the opening of a "Hebrew library" at Warsaw's stylish Jewish Community Center (JCC), which also offers an Israeli-style Sunday brunch called "Boker Tov," serving *shakshuka*, humus and other Israeli classics.

THE HAFUCH (cappuccino) comes from Cophi, a coffee business owned by Uri Wollner, originally from Kiryat Ono, grandson of Polish Holocaust survivors. As a medical student in Warsaw about 15 years ago, he met his wife on a dating app. She happened to be from a family of Righteous Gentiles, "but that wasn't on the CV," he said. They now have two daughters, whom they send to the Lauder Morasha Jewish day school whose student body consists mostly of non-Jewish locals.

I met Wollner at "Cophi," both a café and showroom on a trendy street. After finishing medical school, he decided to follow his passion for the world of coffee. He offered

me a *hafuch* with an array of milk flavors I'd be hard pressed to find even in Tel Aviv: hazelnut, milk, coconut, almond, soy, and lactose free.

"I don't know if Warsaw is the new Berlin. In my personal opinion it's much better," he said. "Warsaw itself is big, on the one hand, you have 2.5 million people, but the center is small, like Tel Aviv. You can get wherever you want on foot, and you have a lot of young people and foreigners, and it's a nice mix. In general, the Polish people are hungry for innovation and new things."

He believes starting a business is much easier here. Case in point: Cophi shelves were filled with an experimental run of coffee-themed socks he produced locally to sell online and at coffee fairs. The Polish law doesn't make him feel any less comfortable. The antisemitism he encounters is of the ignorant fare, old stereotypes of Jews, not the more frothy, deadly "Free Palestine" brand.

"You have to understand what a lot of people don't understand. Poland was a very strong country, but during the last 200-300 years, it has been f---ed time and time again. So it's been implanted deep in the culture of the Polish people that they were screwed. And the biggest screw was the Nazi Occupation, which was immediately followed by communism."

Wollner and his wife said they are toying with the idea of moving back to Israel.

"There are a lot of disadvantages to Israel that are clear for everyone, but in the midst of this you still find a lot of beauty. Like on Saturday, you'll have lunch here and breakfast there, and then in the evening go to the beach and have coffee on the side. Here you go to one place, spend your day, and come back. There's less of a *carpe diem* lifestyle."

Sadaka said he considers himself a minority for longing to go back to Israel. He remains mostly for the sake of his 10-year-old son from his Polish ex-wife, he said.

"Even with the easier life you have here," he said, "it's not worth it compared to living with your friends and your family, who love you, and in the land you love." ■