



American Jewish Committee

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American Jewish Committee

Statement

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The Museum of the History of Polish Jews
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Poland like other countries in the region has experienced its share of anti-Semitism in recent years. There have been attacks on Jewish targets and desecration of cemeteries and other Jewish sites. Attitude surveys have revealed negative attitudes toward Jews despite the fact that their numbers are only a tiny fraction of the population.

Prior to the Holocaust there were over three million Jews in Poland, and they were an integral part of Polish life and culture. But those Poles who knew this firsthand are elderly and passing from the scene. A younger generation has grown up largely unaware of this legacy.

Sadly, Poland is well-known as the place where the Nazis established its most lethal killing centers. Auschwitz, Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor are names that evoke the German campaign to murder the Jews of Europe and have become places of Jewish tragedy and martyrdom. The Polish Government has assumed the sacred obligation of maintaining these places of memory. The State Museum at Auschwitz and Birkenau is committed to preserving this site as the Nazis had left it and to tell the story of what happened during those nightmare years. It now receives over a million visitors a year.

One cannot understate the importance of Holocaust memory and education as a means to remind people of what prejudice and intolerance can do. Many programs today that seek to combat anti-Semitism draw on Holocaust education and encourage students and teachers to visit the Nazi death camps. These experiences can result in powerful and lasting lessons.

But as important as Holocaust education may be, it offers only one narrow and painful chapter in a long and rich history of Jewish life in Europe—and especially in the history of Jewish life in Poland.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will offer a much-needed correction to this limited history. Jews have lived on Polish soil for a millennium, and Jewish life as we know it today in the United States and throughout much of the world can be traced to its religious, cultural, social and educational development in Poland. Based on the plans that have already been developed for the Museum, we can be assured that it will provide a detailed and engaging presentation of this long and rich history. And as we know now from experience in other places, such a museum of Jewish heritage can be a very effective teaching tool that will reach both young people and adults, school groups and individuals, and local residents and visitors alike.

A milestone in the development of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews was reached when the Government of Poland and the City of Warsaw decided to allocate considerable monetary resources to its construction. Certainly this was a critical step in making the project financially viable. But beyond this, it was also a tangible assertion by the country's leaders that the story of Jewish life in Poland was an essential component of Polish history. This is a message that is increasingly being recognized, and it is reflected, for example, in the growing popularity of events such as the annual Jewish cultural festival in Krakow.

There remains a small but active Jewish community in Poland. We have worked closely with its leadership and applaud its revival. Theirs is a daunting task to reestablish Jewish communal life after the Holocaust and decades of Communist suppression and to serve as the caretaker of what remains of Poland's Jewish heritage. In small but symbolic ways they also serve as a reminder to forty million Poles that Jews and Judaism are a living and continuous civilization. But when it is complete, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will be able to amplify this message greatly, while demonstrating its historical place in Poland. And although not its stated purpose, it will surely play a significant role in confronting and combating anti-Semitism.

We wish to commend the Members of the Helsinki Commission who have recognized the special value in supporting this Museum and we strongly encourage Congress and the Administration to follow through with the appropriation of funds to the project.