

Reflections on Experiences in Poland with the Forum For Dialogue

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Grodzisk Mazowiecki – June 2015

The large graffiti letters on a wall near the center of Grodzisk Mazowiecki had been scrawled by an artist. The Polish words, not defaced, said: “I miss you Jew...” This sign was not the first stop on our visit to Grodzisk, but it became a backdrop for our whole visit to Poland. It was stunning to see such a public admission that a once-important group no longer lived in Grodzisk, and that it mattered.

After meeting the students at their school, the young people guided us through their town, showing us traces of what had been Jewish life in their community. The students were proud to begin our tour at the Jewish cemetery, which they had recently repaired. While they painted the fence and gate and cleaned around many of the tombstones, they learned the meaning of many of the symbols that proliferated on the monuments. They shared what they had learned with us, and some of us then read and translated the Hebrew inscriptions to them. Our mutual sharing helped us create strong bonds.

Our tour included a walk on a bridge over the railroad tracks. From there, we could see the train station from which the Jews of Grodzisk were taken away to the Warsaw ghetto, never to return home. We stood in the doorway of an apartment where a Jewish family once lived. The slanted mark on the doorpost was a clear sign that a mezuzah once covered the spot. We saw the last remaining sukkah on a second floor balcony, where a Jewish family once celebrated the bounties of the harvest. Amidst the stores in the central shopping area, we stopped at the place where the synagogue once stood.

The students in Grodzisk had learned about the Jews who used to live there and what happened to them. They learned the meaning of the traces of Jewish life that remain all around their town, minus the Jews who enlivened the places. Some of them did not understand that we, their guests, were Jews, because we did not look like the stereotypical prewar Jews, whose pictures adorned their classroom. Our presence was another step in their learning that the Jewish people are alive. It was clear to us that these young people had developed an affectionate appreciation for the ghosts in their town, and for Jewish traditions, which had recently come to life for them. Their enthusiasm and pride in their newly acquired familiarity with the Jewish background of their

town endeared them to us. The visit was illuminating for all of us visitors, as it brought to life a fuller understanding of the work the Forum for Dialogue is conducting all across Poland. With young people knowing enough to miss the Jews who are no longer there, the prospects for a positive relationship between Poles and Jews in the future increases exponentially.

Chęciny – September 2016

The pathway to the old cemetery in Chęciny was long overgrown. An alternate path led us to the crest of the hill near the ancient castle, which dominates the town's skyline. The only way to reach the weathered tombstones was down a steep cliff, which no one in our group of visitors dared to attempt alone. The nimble, sturdy young people from the school we visited in Chęciny, however, supported us down the hill so that we could pay our respects to the people who lay beneath these long abandoned monuments. And they spirited us back up the hill again, where we stood and recited memorial prayers for our Jewish kinsman, whom none of us knew personally.

Our visit to the cemetery capped a remarkable day with these charming young people, whose town was once home to a vibrant Jewish community. The students guided us through their town, showing us the places where Jewish life flourished. There was the tanner's workshop on the town square; the slot in its doorpost where the mezuzah parchment had been placed was clearly visible. They showed us the public pump, which stands opposite the abandoned mikveh, where the local Jews used to wash and purify themselves. They showed us the old synagogue, now in disrepair. The two-story building has been

used over the years as a theater and gathering place. The mayor has secured funds to restore the building and create a Museum to tell the story of the Jewish community that once existed in Chęciny. As we visitors experienced a steep climb – down to the cemetery and back up again, the young people in Chęciny experienced their own steep climb, as they gained an understanding of the Jews who once lived in their town, through the guidance of the Forum’s educators. The young people in Chęciny now have many visible reminders of the vanished Jews, in their town and in the secluded Jewish cemetery. They are ready to share their respect for Jewish life, as they help to shape a Poland, which cherishes the heritage of its Jewish past, as it builds the future.