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Dark Tourism: "Antisemitism"

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Suzan Czocschke

Antisemitism

One of the first things I saw when we arrived in Poland was a six-pointed star with a line through it spray-painted on the side of a building. That immediately sent a chill through me and reminded me of something that Esther Sénot, an Auschwitz survivor who had spoken with us in France, had said. During an emotional exchange she had commented that the current situation in France reminds her of the early 1940's.

So there I was in Poland, on my way from the airport to the hotel, face-to-face with antisemitism. Talking later with Dr. Edyta Gawron from the Department of Jewish Studies at Jagiellonian University, apparently the graffiti is tied to the insults of rival soccer teams and is not considered antisemitic by many in Poland including the director of the Jewish Studies program at Jagiellonian; however, as an outsider looking in, seeing it on buildings throughout Kraków I certainly didn't see it that way and I'm quite sure the small Jewish population there doesn't either.

It was this uneasy juxtaposition of past and present, positive and negative, and the lingering tension in the Christian community towards their few Jewish neighbors that really jarred me in Poland: walking through a street market where vendors were selling Nazi war medals next to Torah yads – the pointers used to follow the words in a Torah scroll as it is being read; listening to various Poles make subtle (or not-so-subtle) comparisons on the suffering of Poles versus the suffering of Jews during the war; and visiting Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues – the former pristine and richly appointed, the later requiring special access, undergoing major renovation, and for the most part operating as museums and cultural centers, but not houses of worship.

Despite this, the memorials to the Shoah we visited in Poland were very visible including the towering Memorial of Torn-Out Hearts built during the the Soviet era at Płaszów – the concentration camp made famous in Steven Spielberg's epic *Schindler's List*, and the more recent Ghetto Heroes Square Memorial in the Podgórze district, with its 70 large bronze chairs representing the 70,000 victims from Krakow who died in the Holocaust. It was here where 15,000 Jews were crammed into an area previously inhabited by 3,000 people in a district consisting of 30 streets, 320 residential buildings, and 3,167 rooms.

There were no "hidden in plain sight" memorials here like there were in France; so it seems as though Poland is committed to facing its past. But just when I started thinking that Poland was making progress, I would pass another piece of graffiti –

a six pointed star with a line drawn through it, and I would realize that even nearly seventy-five years after the Holocaust began in Poland, the lessons to be learned from what so many Poles did to their neighbors are only now beginning to be understood, and for some, those lessons fall on deaf ears.