

Finding no redemption in Poland

"For me, this was an out-of-body experience. I was standing in the exact place my grandparents stood 80 years ago before they were killed."



By [DR. ALLAN TISSENBAUM](#) April 26, 2023, 11:04 am [0](#)



Allan Tissenbaum, third runner from the left, competed in the World Masters Track and Field Championships in Toruń. Photo by Shaggysphotos.com

I recently spent about two weeks in Poland. The visit was twofold: I competed in the World Masters Track and Field Championships in Toruń, and it was very important to me as a Jew who has lived with the Holocaust and its consequences to visit the country.

My maternal grandparents, Albert and Hedda De Jonge, both were murdered — one in Auschwitz, the other in Sobibor. I felt that by competing in Poland I would feel some sense of redemption. Unfortunately, that was not the case.

It did feel nice to compete well, but my overwhelming sense everywhere we went was one of great loss and grief. While there are traces of the Jewish community and valiant attempts to rebuild and re-energize, the truth is there is very little Jewish life in Poland.

In Warsaw, we went to the only surviving Jewish synagogue not destroyed by the Nazis. It only survived because the Nazis used it as a stable for their horses. Shabbat services were meaningful, but the community is very small. We were led through part of the service by Cantor Yaakov Lemmer, who has one of the greatest voices I have ever heard, and there are valiant efforts by people like Rabbi Michael Schudrich to keep the community alive and help it grow.

We spent the next five days in the beautiful town of Toruń, where I competed in the 60-meter dash. Once the competition was over, we returned to Warsaw and had a guide take us through the Jewish sites that remain there.

Warsaw was almost destroyed in World War II, but much of it has been rebuilt. The city was home to more than 350,000 Jews. The number of Jews there today is small.

We visited the site of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; there is little physical evidence of the uprising or of the Jewish ghetto that housed up to 450,000 Jews during the war. Almost every Jew who lived there was murdered in a death camp. We saw the famous remnants of the Bunker Mila 18. Most of the land where the Ghetto stood has been plowed over, and new residences were built on top of this mass grave. There is a small piece of the Ghetto wall that survives with a small memorial that is very difficult to find.

We next went to a museum of Polish Jewish history, which leads to the path the Jews were forced to march along toward the cattle cars that took them to the gas chambers. It is believed that 300,000 Jews met their end after this march.

Krakow was next. It is a gorgeous, vibrant city that, at one point, had a thriving Jewish community. The Jewish community is growing there, and a lot of work is being done through a very impressive JCC, which has greatly helped Ukrainian refugees, feeding and clothing them, and providing other services. The JCC appears to be the center of Jewish life in Krakow. It's doing a great job in outreach and making a serious attempt to grow the community and educate all about historic and present Jewish life.

We went to the Galicia museum, which had a lot of information about Jewish life in Poland pre-and post-WWII. The following day we spent at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was the extermination facility where more than 1 million Jews were murdered. Many of the prisoners were tortured before execution, beaten physically, sexually abused, experimented upon and forced to perform unthinkable acts prior to their deaths.

We walked along the ruins of the camp, but some parts were still intact. Most of the barracks that housed the prisoners, along with the gas chambers and crematoriums, were destroyed by the Nazis as they fled the advancing Russian troops. The selection platform where life or death was decided for millions was still intact. It was here that German officers determined who would be marched directly to the gas chambers and who would be made to do slave labor.

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We were then marched to the women's barracks; I know that my grandmother died in one of those barracks.

We arrived at the camps at 8 a.m. It was rainy, cold and windy, and we were out in the open, but none of us complained. It was simple to imagine being in a similar place 80 years earlier with only thin, poorly-made pajamas for cover, ill-fitting or no footwear and suffering from malnutrition. Most of the prisoners received less than 200 calories per day. They had no real hope for any improvement in their living conditions — with the exception of death.

The timing of our trip was not lost on us. We were there during Passover — one of the many historic times the Jewish people had to overcome slavery and attempts at mass extermination. Given the current unprecedented rise in antisemitism, this should give us all pause to stop and reflect.

Leaving Auschwitz, I felt like I was leaving part of my past — but at the same time, I felt much more connected to this part of my history. What happened to the Jewish people and all others who suffered at the hands of the Nazis is unthinkable. We can never let anything like this happen again.

Before I went to Poland, I thought that I would find some personal redemption by competing as a Jew and hopefully coming away with a medal. But the biggest sentiment I felt after being in Poland

was the sense of such great loss — 3 million Jews lost their lives there, and there can really never be any redemption. **PJC**

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