**Introduction**

Until 2004, I viewed myself as an open-minded, progressive person who refrained from stereotyping groups of people. I based any negative views of people on knowledge that I believed was rooted in *history*. That summer, however, I learned that discrimination had actually played a fundamental role throughout my life: I realized that I had been raised to view Poles as an enemy, not only by parents and grandparents, but also by rabbis and teachers. Postgraduate work in Jewish studies had not altered this prejudice, but only cemented it. That year, I stood on an intellectual precipice. Do I hold true to what I *know*, or do I risk questioning that knowledge and destabilizing parts of my identity?

Our current times underscore the need for the personal re-examination of one’s knowledge of the Other. The global rise in ethno-nationalism and authoritarianism, COVID-19, and the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine force us to question why we maintain hostile views of the Other. Concerning Poles and Jews specifically, our current global crises have only solidified the need for Poles and Jews to reevaluate the knowledge each holds of Other and Self.

**An American Jew**

A Jewish woman, I am third generation American-born. My ancestors hail from the Russian Empire. My mother’s family arrived from Kyiv, now Ukraine’s capital. My paternal great-grandparents traveled here from Poswol (Pasvalys), Lithuania. After landing on American shores, both sides maintained ties to the Old World through language, religious practice, family, and culture. Yet, concurrently, they each strove to become American. While they conversed in

Yiddish at home, *most* learned enough English to speak it in public. They sent their children to public schools dressed in modern American clothes and considered religion a private matter.

I was raised primarily in the south suburbs of Chicago as a Conservative Jew. My identity meant that I felt superior around Reform Jews and insecure around Orthodox Jews. No doubt this singular internal response to the Other Jew mirrored the contentious antagonism felt across the American Jewish population in general. American Jews argued over ritual, politics, and assimilation. Our one central unifying force was the Holocaust—the Jewish genocide orchestrated by Nazi Germany during World War II.

My Jewish identity was stamped by growing up in the seventies, that time when formal Jewish educators, parents, and grandparents finally struggled more openly with the Holocaust[[1]](#footnote-2).

Together with so many Jews of my generation, I am a product of post-Holocaust angst. Many teachers presented “being Jewish” through the lens of that tragedy. The lessons they taught often differed, but the starting place usually remained the same. My Jewish identity transformed into knowing that had I been there, I too would have been forced to bear the weight of the yellow star. For me, to be Jewish was to identify with the Holocaust’s victims, to feel their suffering as my own.

Many in my generation grew to make decisions about religious and cultural affiliation based on this premise. Photographs of starving children on ghetto streets and mounds of corpses in camps urged us on a quest for Jewish survival. This knowledge and imagery united us as Jews and often informed our relationships. My future husband and I bonded over our shared desire to travel to Poland. Though we thought of it as desolate and cold, we longed to visit that place. We wanted to feel the past, to walk the streets of our ancestors, to imagine their heartache as they were torn from their homes, to envision their daily struggle for survival in the “Polish death camps[[2]](#footnote-3)

We craved a journey to Poland so that we could effectively mourn our people’s history. We both thought of this as the ultimate experience of our Jewish identity. We would journey into death to confirm that we were alive. We would raise up the past to ground the future.

**Camp Barney Medintz, 2004**

Fast-forward twenty years: Jeff and I are married and have three children. Working to create a rich Jewish family life, we welcomed Jewish summer camp into our children’s experience. In 2004, I accompanied Jeff to Camp Barney Medintz, located in northern Georgia, where he had volunteered as the physician for a week. One late afternoon, Jeff noticed three young women sitting at a picnic table, all wearing white aprons and bandanas covering their hair. Clearly, they were kitchen staff. Often isolated from the rest of camp culture, kitchen workers usually existed on the lowest rung of the camp’s social ladder. Others in camp had a propensity to ignore them. I am most grateful that on this evening Jeff did not. Rather, hearing them speak in Polish, his curiosity compelled him to introduce himself.

Much to Jeff’s surprise, he learned that these three young women were classical musicians on summer break from their respective universities in Poland. They were working at Camp Barney to earn tuition for the following semester. With an invitation to hear their music, that evening we began a journey into an impactful friendship. Deeply kind and respectful, they were at that incredible point of launching their lives, determining who they would become. After training in classical music for more than a decade, all three were pursuing other educational endeavors. Kaja was completing her fine arts degree, while Magda planned for law school. Kaja’s sister, Julia, was studying performing arts in Denmark. Unlike most overseas staff who planned on traveling after camp ended, these young women hoped to find jobs and an affordable apartment in Atlanta. We offered them our guest room, refrigerator, and help in finding work.

Interestingly, until our last day at camp, both Jeff and I naively assumed that our new friends were Jewish. How odd it was, though, for us to take it as real that these women were Jewish given that we believed simultaneously (and erroneously) that no Jews currently lived in Poland, that “land of destruction.” Apparently, we had preferred such cognitive dissonance rather than accepting that Christian Poles would be willing to work at a Jewish camp, let alone serve Jewish children. For according to everything we had heard in our own community, *all* Christian Poles were antisemites.

Once we realized our mistaken assumption, panic set in: How should we respond to their Polish Catholic origins? Do we close the door out of fear, and thereby relinquish a possible friendship? And what exactly did we fear? Certainly, they already knew of our Jewish identity. They were willing to trust us. Why could we not trust them? Emotion had jerked us into the past and hurled menacing questions at us. How did their relatives treat Jews during the war? What might their grandparents have done to “ours?” Are the “sins of the fathers” passed down to their children? Thankfully, reason reemerged and steadied our course. It forced us to remember their music and our meaningful conversations, and to see these three Polish women as individuals. It allowed us to open our door and home to them. While we had successfully disassociated our new friends from the stereotypes we held of their people, the more profound challenge would be to wrestle precisely with that deeply rooted negative perception of Poles as a whole.

**Atlanta, Georgia**

Nearly every evening after dinner, we four women—three emotionally charged by their twenties, one bracing for middle age—gathered around the table to delve into the personal: boyfriends, fiancé, husband, family, and the future. However, we cautiously evaded the taboo subject of Polish-Jewish relations. To protect our burgeoning friendship, we all avoided that area which threatened it most: perceptions of the past. And yet, resonating from beneath our guises was the sense that if we did not deal with these difficult matters sooner or later, then we would miss our unique opportunity to truly understand each other and ourselves.

In the third week of their stay, the subject of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II came up, and even then it was only in an isolated private conversation initiated courageously by Julia, then just eighteen. Standing in my narrow kitchen galley, both of us leaning against opposite counters for support, Julia bravely raised the topic of the stereotypes many Americans harbor about Polish people. She had been taught to regard Poles as fiercely brave, heroic in battle, and intensely patriotic; she saw her country as one filled with cultural and intellectual dynamism. Having to confront the American stereotype of the “ignorant, lazy, low-class Pole” shocked her. She had heard about this attitude; but experiencing it raised a visceral reaction. This anti-Polish bigotry was what I knew so well. In this moment of truth, I trembled from fear and embarrassment. I acknowledged our cruel generalizations about her people and the pain Poles feel from it. Haltingly, we then moved on to the belief among American Jews that most Poles were complicit in Hitler’s destruction of European Jewry. And me? Well, though I tried to hide it from her, I was one of those American Jews, riding the bandwagon of blame and learned hatred.

Although Julia alone engaged with me over some of this harsh terrain, I knew that a barrier had been broken for all of us. It did not take long before the five of us, including Jeff, were able to discuss their families’ histories during the war, as well as their views on the status of Jews in contemporary Poland. In the evening’s calm, I first learned of their great-aunt who had hidden a three-year-old Jewish girl during the war, of their uncle’s Jewish roots, and of a nation’s youth awakening to the richness Jews had once brought to Polish culture. They claimed that many young Poles hungered for a connection to a Jewish heritage, grabbing at any shred of evidence they might have Jewish ancestors. According to Kaja, to testify to one’s Jewish roots had become quite fashionable in 2004 Warsaw.

Listening to my new friends, I could not stave off my inner cynicism: *This can’t be—they must be making up these stories to retain our confidence and friendship.* I could take everything else at face value. But I simply could not accept on hearsay that Poles were saviors of Jews during the Holocaust and that young Poles longed for Jewish roots! While I shared how odd it was for me to hear this information, I kept my deeper disbelief guarded.

**Poland, 2005** It would not take long to discover the veracity of our new friends’ stories. Thrilled that we had welcomed their children into our home and taken care of them, Kaja and Julia’s parents invited us to be their guests in Poland. Not only would we stay in their home, but their father, Przemek, insisted on being our tour guide for a full week. Having spoken of visiting Poland since we first dated, Jeff and I jumped at this opportunity. In March 2005, only seven months since our Polish friends’ stay in Atlanta, we embarked on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to understand the Other. Would I be faced with a different reality in Poland than I had been taught? This trip would help me to ascertain whether these three women had acted as renegades by working at a Jewish summer camp or were typical young Poles.

Our friends took it upon themselves to arrange our itinerary. Neither Jeff nor I made many requests concerning our agenda, aside from visiting his grandfather’s hometown of Gdańsk and the usual Holocaust tourist destinations, including the Warsaw Ghetto, Kazimierz, and Auschwitz. Kaja asked if we might be interested in attending Shabbat services. Yes, *if there really is a service to attend*. Would we want to have Shabbat dinner with the congregation? Yes, *if a congregation truly does exist*. Jews live in Poland today, they insisted. Well, I would see it with my own eyes.

Having arrived in Poland on a Friday afternoon, we readied for a Shabbat service. After twenty minutes of European road negotiations[[3]](#footnote-4). we found ourselves at the curb of Jewish alternative life in suburban Warsaw: Beit Warszawa. Formed officially in 1995 as a liberal alternative to the Orthodox Nożyk Synagogue, Beit Warszawa expanded in 1999 into a Jewish cultural association. In this new synagogue, more than seventy-five Jews had gathered for a lecture, Friday evening services and Shabbat dinner! My jaw dropped. In Poland Jews were forming a new community—praying, learning, and celebrating Jewish life together. This revelation confounded me. My friends had been correct. What other truths of theirs were factual? How, I wondered, would this discovery affect my self-understanding?

Meeting Kaja’s and Julia’s father for the first time reinforced this sweltering conflict. Przemek presented a very different image of Poland than that with which I was raised. Given our short stay, I knew we did not have time to tiptoe around taboo subjects. If I wanted answers, I would have to be direct and ask the questions. Bracing myself, I asked him about relations between Poles and Jews. This then forty-nine-year-old university-educated Catholic Pole declared unequivocally that there had never been antisemitism in Poland!

Based on my own knowledge, such a position was unfathomable. It screamed of political revisionism. Holding my anger at bay, we continued our dialogue. Przemek did recognize that there had been tensions between Poles and Jews during the interwar period, 1918 to 1939. However, couching said conflict within an economic framework allowed him to dismiss antisemitism as the central factor dividing Poles and Jews.

I challenged his position that antisemitism did not exist in Poland, by raising what I recognized as an observable contradiction: “What about the ‘Polish’ death camps?” A kind and gentle man, Przemek’s expression morphed into anger, frustration, and pain. He made it quite clear that Poles neither designed nor operated Auschwitz. He underscored that 250,000 Poles were killed in *that* Nazideath camp. (Current research puts the number of Poles killed in too, suffered and died. Ashamed to admit it, before this day I had not been concerned with or aware of what happened to the Poles when the Nazis stormed across their borders. I had been consumed only with my own people’s tragedy and torment. The phrase “Polish death camps” outraged my Polish friend because it signified my misunderstandings Auschwitz[[4]](#footnote-5)

1. The American Jewish community and general American populace did not know how to speak about the Holocaust in the immediate postwar years. In 1961, Israel televised the trial of Adolf Eichmann and brought in Holocaust survivors to give testimony. This public forum encouraged survivors worldwide to discuss their own experiences and permitted people to wrestle with the Holocaust as a reality. See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. I want to make it clear that the Nazi death camps were not “Polish camps.” Too often people refer to Nazi death camps as “Polish” due to their location within Poland’s geographical borders. As I will discuss later, this mistake has had grave ramifications. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Given that neither Kaja nor Magda owned a car, and that public transportation eats away at time, our friends involved their and their parents’ friends in driving us. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Jonathan Webber, “Personal Reflections on Auschwitz Today,” in *Auschwitz: A History in Photographs*, comp. and ed. Teresa Świebocka (Oświęcim: The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)