

**Geoffrey Rolat, USA**

## ***My Identity***

Growing up, I clearly remember many conversations between my father, my aunt Rose and my uncle Leon. These conversations were almost exclusively in Polish. There were words that kept repeating themselves: Czestochowa, Umschlagplatz, Moebellager, HASAG, Aleja, Wilsona, Garibaldi. I had no idea what they were or what they meant. I asked and my father explained. But how does a young boy 5, 6 or maybe 7 years old understand the meaning of what happened in these places, how was I supposed to comprehend the horrors that took place at Umschlagplatz or HASAG. How was I supposed to understand the grandeur of aleja. How was I to compare Wilsona or Garibaldi to the streets that I was familiar with in New York.

In 1967 after celebrating my Bar Mitzvah, my father took me on a trip to Europe and Israel, but especially to Poland to see where he grew up, where he lived and almost as important, where my father saw my grandfather for the last time, where he was separated from his mother and where my uncle, Jerzyk Rozenblatt was killed. I saw HASAG, I saw Moeballager, I visited Umschlagplatz. I went to the cemetery and saw the place my Uncle was killed as a partisan and where he is buried. I walked down aleja, i visited the home where my father grew up on aleja in number 6. I saw where the new synagogue sat on Wilsona. The words and the stories started to have meaning. I was able to feel all I had heard about Czestochowa before the Second World War and during. I saw the building that housed my great grandfather's, Avraham Rozenblatt, school. I saw the homes where my family lived. I finally had pictures to put together with the stories I grew up listening to.

Looking back, I left Poland after that trip with memories of a dark, dreary communist country. A place where a Jew couldn't identify himself as a Jew. A place, really without a future.

Over the years, I followed the news, I knew about what took place in 1968, I followed the stories of the many Righteous People in Poland, the Christians that risked their own lives to save one or many Jews. I was excited when Lech Walesa started the Solidarity movement that led to the fall of communism. I became interested when my father returned to his homeland and started doing business here. Finally about 30 years after my first trip I returned to a free and democratic Poland. What a difference from the Poland I remembered.

My recollections from that visit reminded me, although communism was gone and democracy was taking root, there was still a feeling of anti-Semitism, there was still obvious racist graffiti on many structures. But, more important there was a re-birth of Judaism that was obvious. People were talking about Judaism.

Over the last 10 years, I have visited Poland frequently and the experiences have been truly enlightening. In 2003, my father returned from one of his many trips to Poland and was truly excited by a man he had met in Czestochowa and was telling me about a meeting he had with Professor Mizgalski and as the months wore on I listened to the stories of what was to become the Museum exhibition Coexistence-Holocaust-Memory. I started sharing this information with my then 9 year old daughter, she too was extremely interested in the work my father was doing and we started to prepare for a trip to Poland for the opening of the museum exhibition. It was a great experience for me to walk the streets of Czestochowa with my daughter and father as I had done over 35 years earlier.

There was a huge difference though, this time I walked the streets of a city that was beginning to embrace their Jewish neighbors and more importantly, was interested in the rich history of their Jewish neighbors before the Holocaust.

I have visited Czestochowa many times since that trip and on each trip I developed a greater respect for the community. I have spent many hours sitting with the youth of the city answering and asking questions about Judaism and my Jewish identity. I have sat in coffee shops with my peers in the city discussing the past, present and the future. The one thing that resonates strongest is the way the culture is changing. Like in America, I don't sit as a Jew having a conversation, I sit as a peer and the fact that I am Jewish has no bearing on the conversation.

My father never ceases to tell me that his family, maybe a minority at the time always considered themselves Polish Jews rather than Jews who happened to be Polish. In America, I am an American who happens to be Jewish. You see, Judaism is my religion, Jewish culture is my heritage. I am proud of both but neither affects my national identity. I can't say I always felt that way while visiting Poland, but I do today and only because of the remarkable changes happening daily in this country. As much as it is important for me to carry the message that we must never forget what happened during the holocaust, as much as it is incumbent on me to share that message with my daughter and her peers, it is quite obvious to me that most in this room and many in this country today also feel the same way.

Today as I walk around Czestochowa, I feel and see the vibrant life my father talked about before the war. Every time I come back to the city I see and feel the pride of the citizens and like my father says, it is like coming home.