Introduction
Po-lin. “Rest here.” The legend says that during the 11th century, when Jews escaped the violence in Western Europe looking for a safe home, they reached the forests of Poland and heard the birds whisper “Po-lin” – “rest here” in English. Poland is pronounced Polin in Hebrew. And as the birds guided, Jews settled in Poland with favorable conditions under the Polish monarchy and stayed there for more than 1,000 years. Poland came to have the largest Jewish community in Europe. Poland changed Judaism forever with the rise of Jewish and Zionist ideological movements, became a center of religious learning, and included vital figures who contributed to every aspect of Jewish life. Bearing that in mind, I decided to jump into the still-molten lava of Polish Jewish life.

Piercings, Tattoos, and a Kipa
I did not know what to expect on the flight from Tel Aviv to Warsaw. The flight was half full and the population was generally older. There were a few soldiers behind me on vacation who made jokes about their embarrassment about going to Poland for vacation instead of Thailand, a popular destination for young Israelis. In front of me sat a very interesting looking man in his late 20s. He had a shaved head (unveiled when he removed his hooded sweater), a beard, piercings, and many tattoos covering his whole body. To my surprise, under the hood was hiding a kipa and on the back of his neck was written in very large Hebrew letters Shma Israel. He turned to me and asked me in Polish and then English if I was comfortable with where he had put his sweater. What I heard was, Welcome to Your Summer in Poland. He was so full of paradoxes, so daring and at the same time quite intimidating. He did not fit any particular stereotype. People could easily observe in him so many different images, mirroring the multifaceted identity of every Jew living in a non-Jewish country.

The New Old Town
The first thing I did was learn the way to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the site of my summer internship. The museum looks stunning from the outside. The rectangular, turquoise, glass building won many awards for its inspiring architecture. I went on to see the old town, the university area, palaces and parks. Warsaw has a genuinely unique feeling to it. The city is so beautiful and convenient. I can see how people can fall in love with it.

I walked by myself the whole day. I was worried beforehand that I would feel lonely, but I actually felt happy that I was by myself during the first day. I got to learn the city, think, and get comfortable without relying on anyone but myself. It was a refreshing feeling of independence. I walked for hours in the scorching
In the old town, there was a sort of improvised water fountain designed to ease the heat. The fountain sprayed everyone in the street with rejuvenating water. I saw kids running through it and older people joining them by revisiting their youthful joy; in such a picturesque old town it was simply a marvelous scene.

The old town was completely destroyed during the Second World War, and it has been completely reconstructed since then. I think that it is a remarkable achievement to be able to reconstruct destroyed history in such a delightful manner. It offers an interesting comparison to the overall reconstruction of wounded communities and history throughout time and human effort. In conversations I had with locals, many of them criticized the reconstruction of the old town because of its lack of authenticity, but does preserving an old town have to be authentic? Is it not enough to rebuild it with respect for what was there before? The Jewish community was also “reconstructed,” but does it mean it has to be the same? This question accompanied me throughout my entire journey in Poland.

In contemporary Warsaw Jewish influence definitely still exists, intermingled with characteristics of Polish culture. Prior to my arrival I received three official Warsaw brochures: one about the city in general, another about the old and the new towns, and the third about Jewish Warsaw. Why would a city with a Jewish population of less than one percent publish an official brochure about Jewish Warsaw?

What I learned is that Jewish life is so strongly intertwined with the Polish state that it cannot ever be erased from it. Even that first day, as I was touring the city, I noticed that one of the main roads is Aleje Jerozolimskie, or Jerusalem Avenue. I was standing on that avenue next to a huge artificial palm tree standing bold and strong in the middle of the avenue, installed there to resemble the trees in Israel, and serving as a token to the memory of the Jewish settlers who historically settled in Warsaw and specifically around the same avenue.

Much of the tourism in Poland focuses on the Jewish history in the country, and it is extremely challenging for a country to preserve and acknowledge dark memories without being perceived in a negative light.

The relation of post-war Poland towards Jews changed over time. After the Second World War Poland was under the Soviet sphere of influence, and thus a communist regime emerged in Poland. In the beginning, Jews were often attacked by their neighbors, but were able to receive important roles in the communist construction of the country. After Israel’s Six-Day War in 1967, the attitude of the government towards the Jews shifted radically, as the Soviet Union changed their allegiance from supporting Israel to supporting the surrounding Arab states. Jews were seen as Zionists and therefore not loyal to Poland, and the anti-Zionist campaign of the Polish government led to the persecution of Jews, and ultimately caused a mass emigration of Jews out of Poland. Many of the Jews who did stay after the Second World War, however, were communist Jews who saw themselves primarily as Poles. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Poland’s communist regime fell, and the country changed massively under democratic rule. The new democratic regime wanted to disassociate itself from the communist commemoration of the Second World War, and so changed the historical narrative. Jews were also able to follow their
religion more freely, and thus the political circumstances allowed for the Jewish community to reemerge.

Education? Yes, I Speak Hebrew

I came to the museum to intern for the education department and was assigned to work under the Israel coordinator. I introduced myself, and once she realized that I am fluent in Hebrew, she informed me that I would not be doing any of the things I thought I would. She provided me a list of applications for the Polish Intercultural Youth Encounters (PIYE) exchange program, and directed me to rank them by certain criteria and to be ready to recommend a select few in a meeting the following week.

The project is an exchange program designed to improve Polish-Israeli dialogue among university students. It was fascinating to read Polish students’ approaches towards problems and developments in Jewish life in Poland and in Israeli-Polish dialogue. Some focused on creating programs of cooperation while others saw it as an opportunity to explore a new exotic destination. Both options are important to reducing the historical burden between the societies. Hands-on programs facilitate discussion and thus bridge the cultures. The lighter view of an exotic destination depoliticizes the historical burden and has a naive and positive essence which can also be beneficial. It will also benefit the Polish image as Israelis just like me will get to live in Poland – an experience much different than the common memorial trips to the death camps Israelis often take. Just as my view of Poland shifted to more complex nuances than simply bad or good, the same might occur for the Israeli students who stay in Poland, thus allowing for a fair, well-rounded personal perspective to take shape.

My Summer Companion – The World Cup

The next week consisted of excitement for work and intense World Cup watching with the Polish residents of the hostel where I was lodging. The project in the museum gave me a strong feeling of satisfaction. On my way to the hostel, I would stop in a grocery store to buy bread, cheese and one of the many Polish beer brands. Then, I would sit and enjoy a lovely evening with my new best friend – the World Cup. There, along with strangers, we would comment about the games in a mix of extremely broken English and hand gestures. The end of the conversation always led to the lack of ability of both the Israeli national team and the Polish national team, which usually came with a beyond-frustrated sigh that meant “ah it’s so fun to bond over our shared disappointments.” The people in the room changed, but the recurring theme of working males in their 30s and 40s set the tone for my dates with the World Cup.

I learned a lot from these people about the perspectives of Catholic Poles of different social classes towards current Polish affairs and ideas about Jews. It was very difficult to communicate with them due to the language barrier. Whenever I was asked where I was from, I first examined how shady they looked. It is that confusing paranoia of anti-Semitism that has followed me since childhood, probably a connection to the way my parents were brought up, and the suffering of their parents. Then, depending on my five-second judgment, I would either say “Boston” or “Israel.” When I said Israel, the response was usually either that they had been on a religious trip there and that the country is beautiful, or “it’s horrible what they [the Nazis] did to you.” The second response I found particularly interesting. In this response they tried to put all the blame on a mutual enemy. They tried to rid themselves of guilt and in that way adopt a pacifying mutual victim narrative. I am not one to judge the personal narrative of the people I talked with, nor do I think Poland has one common national narrative about that period. Honestly, before going to Poland I expected much worse responses to the fact that I am Jewish, and thus the friendly responses were a pleasant surprise that shows a more open-minded era in Poland.

Welcome to Makabi

Sitting in the hostel waiting for another World Cup game, I unexpectedly got a phone call, already strange because no one but my boss had my number. The person introduced himself as Jan, an acquaintance of my father and a son of a good friend of my father. I had no idea who he was but was thrilled by the prospect of meeting new people. He told me that he was meeting a few friends in Plac Zbawiciela, the square with the large colorful rainbow structure, and asked whether I wanted to join. I did not want to sound over-the-top enthusiastic, so I calmly said that I would be happy to, but on the inside it was a celebration.

He introduced me to two of his friends and then asked me if I play football (known in the U.S. as soccer). I replied that of course I do. And he said, “Great, Welcome to Makabi.” And so my adventure with Makabi began on that crazy, surreal night. I followed him around and he explained to me things about Warsaw and about Jews there. We went on to his friends’ apartment to meet them, and I was introduced to an exciting, young, hip social group. More surprising was that all of them were Jewish. I never had imagined that there would be such an effervescent group of young Jews in Poland. Next thing I knew, I became a part of that amazing social group – a part of Makabi.
In the hostel we stood there, hugged in a circle, Jews and non-Jewish affiliates, all a part of something close to our hearts: Jewish life. Players and supporters of Makabi sang happy Jewish tunes together, with some real words and some added-on soft mumbling. Random hostel guests looked and smiled in embarrassment, but we did not care because we were in the middle of something so powerful and collective.

The story of Makabi Warszawa begins many, many years ago, in a very different period in history. Makabi Warszawa was a Jewish athletic organization that had a significant role in Jewish life at its time. The Warszawian organization was formed in 1915, following similar initiatives of Jewish groups a few years earlier in other cities such as Krakow and Lvov. Makabi Warszawa at its prime had almost a thousand athletes participating in 18 different sports. The club participated in various national competitions. In football, for instance, Makabi played, at its best, in the second division of the Polish national league, a pretty impressive achievement for a relatively new team playing in a country where football was and still is an extremely popular sport.

In 1936 Makabi Poland consisted of 40,000 Jewish athletes. Forty thousand. All this was crushed to the ground with the invasion of the Nazis. Jewish sports, as well as Jewish life as it had been known until then, ended. These were the consequences of political and “racial” inflammation that happened in my grandfather’s generation. If a glimpse of Jewish life did survive the war and communism in Poland, Jewish sports completely ceased to exist. Officially Makabi Warszawa stopped its action in 1939.

The young social group wanted to change that. They wanted to reopen Makabi. It was not that all of them are huge nostalgic sports fans, but each and every one of them wanted to find a place for Judaism in their life. A few weeks after my first interaction with them, I went to another Shabbat dinner. Jan told me, “Do you see all the people in this party? They are all Jewish now but many of them were not born Jewish.” The suppression of the communist government and the Holocaust made many people fear exposing their Judaism, and thus prefer to create a different identity. Many of them have learned at a later stage of life that they have Jewish roots. That is a radical shift in their identity, and suddenly they are a part of a collective group they knew nothing about in a society filled with stereotypes about that group. The discovery of their Judaism, along with the need find their place within Jewish life, gave rise to such social initiatives. A lot of these young activists did not find their place in the official Jewish community, but wanted to support and create their own outlet for the Jewish community. In turn, they created Makabi, and while for them it fills the need for belonging, it also helps empower the community, creating another dimension for the Jewish community.

The flagship of the initiative was to be the highly publicized derby between Makabi Warszawa and ZKS Krakow, two teams halted by cruelty, playing in the same historical venue where the teams played 70 years ago. The match would take place right at the end of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow. That was our first attainable goal. That was the main topic of conversation. And that was our biggest source of pride. The pride in making a bit of historical justice, and the pride in giving back to the community.

We molded into a team. We had two volunteer non-Jewish coaches who were beyond fantastic. The practice started with football and ended in a social gathering of the team. Ages differed but everyone felt accepted. That was the key for the beauty of Makabi. Every Friday someone would host a Shabbat dinner, and Makabi truly became a center for young Jewish life, beyond the boundaries of sports. Time went by, and the big event was rapidly approaching.

Two days before the match, we all arrived in Krakow for the festival and for preparation. The ZKS Krakow captain let six of us stay at his home while he was absent until the match day. Amazing hospitality, especially considering the fact that he did not know us at all, but that is the friendly spirit of rebuilding Jewish sports together.

The day after our arrival, following a dinner organized by the Polish Jewish youth organization ZOOM, we all went to do Havdalah in the hostel where some of the other members were staying. I am not a religious person, and I am not used to doing this tradition. Havdalah is a ceremony at the end of the Shabbat to separate the Shabbat from the mundane week. In the hostel we stood there, hugged in a circle, Jews and non-Jewish affiliates, all a part of something close to our hearts:
I was wearing a Makabi Warszawa shirt with the name “Mehl” on the back, playing a game in front of a live Jewish community in Krakow, the place where my grandfather had one of his proudest Jewish ceremonies, his bar mitzvah, and where he suffered for years in the ghetto, losing everything and everyone, but not his hope. Despite the seemingly small event in comparison to the huge World Cup that was being played in Brazil, the drive of each team would not fall short of any World Cup match.

The game didn’t start badly for us, but our shots were off, and the first half ended at 0-0. The fans were screaming and chanting songs praising each their own team, and at the same time teasing the other team with friendly banter. The Krakow team came prepared for the second half and scored two quick goals. One of our leading players helped us recover with two goals of his own. The second half ended 3-2 with our opponents in the lead. I thought the game was over, because I had yet to master the Polish language. I put my hands on my head as a sign of sheer disappointment – and then someone told me not to worry; we have a whole third left! A quick comedic moment of lingual misunderstanding. Little did I know that we were playing three thirds. Wow I was happy. We came back to the match in a storm, and quickly equalized. We gained composure and scored two more goals, leading to our 5-3 victory. We were on top of the world. We knew that we had made history happen, and no one could ever take that away from us.

We shook hands with the Krakow team, took a picture with them, gave flowers to their captain, thanked them, and went with...
Until this trip, I avoided the Holocaust subject altogether because it was painful. I always felt as if the topic of the Holocaust is a dark cloud that I would not be able to treat with the right amount of respect no matter how much I tried, yet I always felt a bit guilty for pushing it aside. This is only the beginning of something that has the potential to do a lot of good. We have long-term goals that will make Makabi accessible to people of all ages in a variety of sports. All of this in hopes of helping people to enjoy being a part of a flourishing community, and to feel they can easily connect to the community, even if only through sports. The focus is on building. One block after another. The idea is not to dwell on the past; it is to build on it in order to create something new and great to help the community. A Jewish community is not only a synagogue and religious studies. It is also sports, cultural events, music, arts, social gatherings, and communal accountability. These are only a small part of a whole world that was destroyed and needs to be created in a fresh and new way, changing the architecture but keeping the context. Makabi is here to create hope and unity, and thus “revival” is the wrong word. It never died, it just slept.

And now, Makabi has woken up.

The Depths of a Dark History

After the big game, I was looking for new adventures and learnings. Makabi’s pace slowed down, and my supervisor in the museum, Nili, went to Israel for a month. I was still hungry for knowledge and so I went to the Virtual Shtetl department to meet Albert Stankowski, another acquaintance of my father. I introduced myself and told him that I would love to volunteer in his department.

In my new work, I jumped right into the depths of history. My work involved translating community cards with information about the history and preservation of Jewish heritage in various Polish towns. I also worked on a project involving the gathering and organizing of interview tapes and transcripts – identifying where they were located, finding out whether the museum had permission to use them, and locating lost documents. The museum did not have all the interviews, and did not have permissions to use many of these interviews. Many of the survivors have already passed away, and collecting the permissions for usage only became tougher. I contacted a few people and we found many of the lost interviews. All the data needed to be found and sorted, and so I had to go to the depths of these interviews to find out current information or leads to family members who are still alive. Once organized, the data was sent to the Polish Institute in Israel, in order to continue finding relatives to gain permission and thus make these interviews usable as historical accounts for the museum and complementary institutions. Our work was important because personal accounts give a glimpse into parts of history from the perspectives of the people who lived through it.

Collective memory is often created with an ideological or cultural bias. A thousand personal interviews shed light on historical incidents from many different personal points of view. The personal memories of the survivors represent the stories of these exact survivors. It is a unique and genuine way to pass history on to the next generations, in hopes of never allowing mass systematic inhumanity to ever happen again. Personal stories go beyond state borders, but they mostly touch individuals with a personal connection – and that is the challenging part. There is rich information in these stories about the Jewish communities before the war, family connections, courage, and of course firsthand stories of the Nazi killing machine; information vital to battling modern extremism.

Reflecting on all the stories of survival I read, I came to realize that I did not remember any one of them in particular. It all became a huge blur of stories that became secondary to my family’s story, which I remember in great detail. I was a witness to these personal accounts by reading them, but witnessing is burdensome. I wanted to remember the details of these stories, but before every story I read I had to take a deep breath and put all my emotional energy into it. It drained my emotional energy, but I still could not remember the particular stories.

In order to truly connect and try to comprehend what really happened, I needed a family story. It is too much to
Reading and listening to his story, I joined his journey. I needed the ground of thousands of historical stories of survival to allow me to have the emotional capacity to explore my own family’s story of survival.

But what about entire families that were completely erased from the face of earth? Where will their voices be heard? A family relation to them is often non-existent, and thus their existence is deemed to be forgotten. Or the people with no family relation to Holocaust survival? The greatest challenge is opening up to the stories of the forgotten and the distant, but as an individual journey it is very difficult. Institutional commemoration provides a space for stories of people with no familial continuation, and provides space and access to a collection of stories. Institutions have the power to connect all the stories together, teach people who fortunately have no family connection to the Holocaust, and keep the stories of everyone alive.

The other project with Albert was translating the stories of towns in southern Poland that once had a significant Jewish population. I learned when Jews arrived in these towns, and obtained a somewhat better-rounded image of the good times and the bad times for Jews. I say somewhat because the focus was on the destruction of the community in the Holocaust as well as current historical Jewish sites (such as synagogues and cemeteries) that remained, with an analysis of their condition. Most of these Jewish communities had hundreds of years of history. Many of the towns had a very significant percentage of Jews in their population and the conditions for Jews generally went in waves of better and worse throughout the history. Jews often lived well and developed religiously and culturally with strong religious leaders, many newspapers and intellectuals, and formed strong central organization such as, for example, the Council of Four Lands from the 16th to the 18th century.

A bit before starting that project I read my family story and discovered that most of my family came from southern Poland. I was eager to know more about the places they came from. In order to finish my preparation for the trip with my parents, on my last day of work before the trip I translated the community card of Jaroslaw, the city where my family from both my father’s and my mother’s sides once lived. I was starting to count down the days until we would begin that part of my journey, and soon it came!

**A Bittersweet Slovakian Birthday**

We started in Krakow, the picturesque city where Jewish culture is highly commercialized and noticeable everywhere. We first walked around the Jewish quarter, marvelous in its image and preservation. My father stopped us next to a beautiful synagogue and said, “This is the synagogue where my father had his bar mitzvah…. Well, that is what I understood from him.” Nothing is completely clear, as his father’s generation did not share too many details about
One day he walked over this same bridge, and was stopped by the Nazis, who shot him down for the sole reason of being a Jew. We were standing in the same place. The same bridge that connects and divides the parts of the city as well as our hearts.

Their past, and thus my father lives in a lifelong puzzle trying to figure out the truth, combining his father’s few anecdotes with hearsay, and connecting them to the locations we visited.

After enjoying a summer morning, and hearing the trumpeter playing his beautiful tunes at the end of every hour, we crossed the bridge to a different part of town, the place where the ghetto was. At the bridge we stopped. I read in my father’s story that my great-grandmother was German and speaking German, he was a Jew and thus automatically destined for immediate death. One day he walked over this same bridge, and was stopped by the Nazis, who shot him down for the sole reason of being a Jew. We were standing in the same place. The same bridge that connects and divides the parts of the city as well as our hearts. Surrounding us was all this beauty, a river underneath us, but so many lives were destroyed there. We went on to see a few more family sites, and continued to our next destination, Jaroslaw.

Both my father’s family and my mother’s family has roots in Jaroslaw, a small town in eastern Poland, which once had a significant Jewish population. It was named after Prince Jaroslaw, who had owned the land since the 11th century. During the 19th century, Jews were 25 percent of the population, among them my family. On my father’s side, his mother’s family lived there before moving west to Bielsko-Biala for employment purposes. On my mother’s side, her father’s family moved from Jaroslaw to build a house in the small scenic town of Kežmarok, in the Tatra Mountains of Slovakia. I never knew that my Slovakian part was based in Poland, as my grandfather and his parents were German speakers, but history creates surprising connections.

Jaroslaw was pretty, with many well-preserved old buildings. The Jewish history, though, was almost completely erased from the map. The town had two large synagogues, one next to the other. One is preserved and now serves as a school, and the other is an abandoned, grey, broken up building. My family was religious, as most Jews were at the time. It is hard to grasp the fact that they celebrated Jewish life right on that street, and now except for a little sad sign, there is nothing that remains of their culture in Jaroslaw.

We went to find the Jewish cemetery. We drove off to the outskirts of the town, to the surrounding farmlands, and there we asked around where the cemetery was, so that hopefully we could locate the gravestones of buried relatives. We discovered that it is only accessible through an elderly lady’s house, but no one would tell us exactly where it was, and no one seemed to be happy about us poking around. It reminded me of the Polish movie Aftermath, where in a similar kind of village two Catholic Polish brothers try to rescue Jewish gravestones that were used as road pavement during and after the Second World War, but in return faced a lot of hostile and violent reactions from the other town residents due to the inability of the townspeople to cope with their dark history. We gave up searching as we started feeling uncomfortable with the situation. We kept on joking that people will soon run after us with axes, but just as my grandfather used to tell these sour jokes, this was our sour joke.

The next destination was Kežmarok. My father navigated through the mountains confidently, and using his Polish, which is surprisingly similar to Slovakian, we were able to find everything we were looking for. My grandfather on my mother’s side was born and raised there, in that beautiful town. A year before my grandfather passed away, he left a brief note about how he survived the Holocaust. I only learned of that note during my time in Poland.

The river is flowing right next to the football field, just as my grandfather described in his writing. We went to his house, which, similarly to the story of my grandmother in Poland, was taken over by locals after my grandfather’s entire family was murdered. At the age of 14 he left everything behind, got fake documents with a fake name, and used his German language skills to work at a distant farm, and hide. My mother says that he always felt guilty for surviving the Holocaust while the rest of his family did not.

We walked around the town and could not comprehend how in such a peaceful place people were so evil. We decided to stay another day to understand the beautiful pieces of his childhood. We traveled around the mountains and the forests, and the thought that chased us was in which...
distant farm he survived, and how people survived in these dense forests. The day in Kežmarok happened to be my 24th birthday, and it was the most surrealistic birthday of my life. I celebrated my 24th birthday in the place my grandfather could not stay for 24 years, and while our homes in Israel are constantly under threat. The emotions and worries chased me, only to be contrasted by the incredible scenery and the comfort of being with my parents on that day.

We left Slovakia, and after a day of enjoying stunning Zakopane, distressed a bit from the family emotions, we got to the industrial city of Bielsko-Biała. I saw a grey city that lacked any distinct character, and a place that I could never see myself living in. My father, on the other hand, saw an incredible historic golden city. He saw the place where his parents’ few childhood stories occurred, and thus romantically imagined them running happily throughout the streets. Bielsko and Biała used to be two towns that were separated by a very narrow river. Over time they merged into one city.

My grandmother came from Biała and my grandfather came from Bielsko. Despite the Jewish community being quite small, my grandparents did not know each other at the time. It might have been because my grandfather went to a public Polish school, as his mother could not afford to send him to the Jewish school where my grandmother went. My grandparents only met in Israel. Each had a brave and heartbreaking story by the time they reached relative safety in Israel. My grandmother realized when they met that she knew his sister. She recalled that he was known as a little rascal around the neighborhood, and had to be that way, as he was one of the only Jews in a Polish school; there was no way on earth he would let others bully him.

Our first destination was my grandmother’s house, which was also taken away by Polish residents after the war. Then, we went to find my grandfather’s house in the city center of Bielsko. The street names had changed, and pictures were rare, and thus we were not sure exactly which house it was. My father wanted to know as many details as possible to recreate the clearest memories. Though I thought at the time that the exact did not matter, in retrospect, these details are the most important, because that is the difference between a stranger’s home, and my grandfather’s home, the difference between fiction and reality. We found a tourist bureau in hopes of finding the exact location of my grandfather’s house. The lady working there made a few phone calls and took my father’s email address and said that she would research it and send him the exact information. I hope she keeps her word.

There were two Jewish cemeteries in Bielsko-Biała; one was completely destroyed by the communist government after the war and the other still existed. The names of many important segments of Jewish history were gone. Our strength is in our words. Using them will preserve the rich life, capture moments, and keep us aware of the good and the bad that has happened, and thus they are our most powerful tools to try to make justice.
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The End is Just the Beginning

This summer ended but my father’s lifelong journey of discovery is now my own as well. I owe that to my family and to myself. Witnessing did not come naturally to me, nor does it come naturally to anyone. Yet it takes a focused effort to understand and preserve history in order to avoid the repetition of the dark times. Personal stories preserve history with emotion. Not bound to the collective narratives, they nevertheless comprise a collective narrative. Collective narrative, in turn, is important in order to preserve history and memory on a larger scale. People draw upon both collective and personal histories to base their morals and values. History is in no way easy to process, but should not hold back the community. Instead, it will be much more beneficial if it serves as a seed for future growth.

I learned in Poland that it is possible to refocus the route of a community. The Jewish community in Poland serves as a social and religious center for many different types of people, each fitting in their own way. The community could not possibly serve such a function openly under the communist regime, but times and circumstances have changed. The individual initiatives and organized communal efforts that fit the current needs and conditions of the community are the basis for its growth; but the present programs could never be completely detached from the Jewish community’s history. Conditions did change, and the community suffered a deep wound, and thus flexibility, acceptance and tolerance are essential for community building. Initiatives such as Makabi exemplify the essence of an accepting community; it is an organization that provides alternatives and reaches out to others. An organization that comes to better the community and provide a fresh stream of young social activism. Young Jewish social activism in Poland. Remarkable.

The Nazis did not succeed in destroying Jewish life in Poland, and that is the tiny piece of historic justice we are able to offer to the Jews that suffered in the Holocaust. The systematic killing of millions of innocents due to their religion or ethnicity cannot possibly ever be justifiable. Making justice is impossible. Yet, offering some peace of mind is possible. Makabi and the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews represent that possibility. They are the hope, the continuation of the Jewish people, and the continuation of Jewish history in Poland. That is what is in our power to offer to all the innocents who suffered or died. The most precious possession of a human being is hope. The worst thing is to take that away. The Nazis violated in the Holocaust the living conditions that give rise to hope. They attempted to kill off hope. The hope represents justice seeking, and therefore fulfilling the need for hope and celebrating existence in Poland, of all places, is a powerful response to generations of justice seeking.

Jewish peoplehood did not die, and continues as a strong communal center with many bases, all interconnected. This story is not about death. It is a story about hope.