

The Preservation of Jewish Heritage as a Factor Stimulating Regional Development

The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland was established through an agreement between the Association of the Jewish Communities in Poland and foreign Jewish organizations in 2002. Its mission is the preservation of the material heritage of Polish Jews. It is not an easy task in present Poland, where the Jewish Communities have no more than about 4,000 members, whilst there are about 1,200 Jewish burial grounds.

While developing a working strategy, the only way that has been assumed to ensure the protection of Jewish historical monuments is the commitment of local communities to their active preservation. Therefore, to get projects under way, local self-governments, NGOs, schools and universities have been invited to co-operate. The Jewish monuments in Poland are a priceless testimony of our common past. Their present purpose should not depart from their original purpose, planned and conforming to Jewish religious law, to preserve their dignity, while adapting to the local community's needs. As a result of the Foundation's projects, preservation can become a stimulating factor for local communities, and can begin to act as a magnet for tourists, thus invigorating regional economic growth.

1. The Chassidic Route

One of the Foundation's present projects is: the Chassidic Route – the development of a heritage tourism trail presenting the multi-cultural heritage of Poland and Ukraine.¹ Its aim is to create a cross-border tourist route from south-east Poland to west Ukraine. The Project involves local self-governments and non-governmental organizations from 17 communes of the Lublin Province in Poland and the Sub-Carpathian Province in Ukraine.

The most worthwhile spot on the route is the city of Zamość: the Renaissance synagogue, part of the UNESCO World Heritage listed district, which will house a professional, high-quality Chassidic Route Tourist Information Centre and a multimedia Museum of Jews from Zamość and the Zamojskie Region. The building will

¹ The project is developed thanks to the financial support of the European Union Interreg III, PHARE 2003, A Programme.

also be a home for the local non-governmental organizations dealing with cultural issues.

2. The “To Bring Memory Back” Programme

The project in Zamość is accompanied by an educational programme, ‘To Bring Memory Back’.² In the school year 2005/2006, the programme covered 140 schools and in 2006/2007 the number will total 100.

The programme offers High Schools students from all over Poland an opportunity to learn and experience the multi-cultural history of their town or village, as well as the Jewish tradition and culture; they undergo numerous awareness trainings sponsored by the Foundation. The students are involved in some public actions aimed to restore the memory of the cultural tradition of their area. They collaborate with local self-governments, NGOs, enterprises and the media. An inseparable part of their activities is the preservation of local Jewish burial grounds.

3. The Internet Portal: Polin – The Heritage of Polish Jews

Another important undertaking is the launching of an Internet portal³, presenting the history of Jews in Poland (www.polin.org.pl). The activity will gather together academics and students from different Polish universities, e.g. from Krakow, Łódz, Warszawa and Wrocław.

The website will offer historical data on Jewish monuments and Jewish communities in particular localities. The target plan is to reach the number of 1,200 informative notes (first, on the localities in the Lublin Province and Sub-Carpathian Province). The data will be accompanied by significant audio-visual material: historical and contemporary photographs, a three-dimensional panorama of major monuments and locations, and also information on the current activities for the remembrance and preservation of the Jewish legacy.

The materials to be displayed are collected and prepared by the students and graduates of Jewish history studies, (many of them see this work as a prelude to further and deeper research into the subject). The website will not only deliver

² The programme is sponsored by the Civic Initiative Fund and Leopold Kronenberg Bank Foundation, as well as the programme, The Patriotism of Tomorrow.

³ The work is possible thanks to the financial support of TaskForce for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

reliable data on the Polish Jews and their history, but, in addition, aspires to become an area for stimulation of the scientific community.

The preservation of the Polish Jewish heritage poses a major challenges, both organisational and financial. The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland would be unable to embark upon its work if it were not for the backing of numerous partners countrywide – self-governments, schools and educational centres, local community leaders and many persons of good will. The project directly and indirectly engages thousands of people – the inhabitants of the areas where Poles and Jews cast their own lot together with each other for many centuries. Their commitment allows us to cherish hope that the tangible traces of Jewish culture will be duly respected and preserved for generations to come.

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