

## The Gate To Poland's Jewish Life

Small theater and educational organization in Lublin, founded by non-Jews, keeps memory of Polish Jewry alive.

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Jewish Travel Guide



My itinerary in Lublin a few years ago included a few hours one spring afternoon in something called the [Brama Grodzka Theater](#).

I was in the eastern Polish city to lead the seders, as a volunteer, for the small Jewish community at the newly restored yeshiva that, when it was built in 1930, was the largest one in Europe. Back then, on the eve of the Third Reich, Lublin ranked as one of

the major cities of Jewish scholarship in Europe; its new yeshiva was built and headed by Rabbi Meir Shapiro, founder of the Daf Yomi Talmud study movement.

I've visited Poland seven times, from north to south, but had never heard of Brama Grodzka, which my schedule – drawn up by a staff member of the [Joint Distribution Committee](#) who served as my escort and interpreter during several days in Lublin – described as a center for keeping Jewish memory alive.

The name means the “Grodno Gate” in Polish; the gate in the wall that had surrounded Lublin's Old City, in the direction of Grodno (now part of Belarus) to the North, had separated the city's Jewish and non-Jewish sections.

Locally, the gate was known as the “Jewish Gate” – in its day, it had joined, or separated, depending on one's perspective, Jewish Lublin and Christian Lublin.

In 1990, shortly after Poland cast off Communism, a few young Poles, none of them Jewish, as far as they knew (never a certainty in a country where, since the fall of anti-Semitic Communism, citizens of putative Catholic or secular vintage are daily discovering their “Jewish roots”), founded Brama Grodzka. The organization's mission was to sustain Jewish culture and Jewish memories.

The institution's official name is Brama Grodzka – NN Theater Center, but everyone simply calls it Brama Grodzka. (The NN is from the Latin, *nomen nescio*, which means “no name.” Hence, the No Name Theater.)

The founders' work was in the spirit of a growing number of philo-Semitic Poles, like Krakow's Janusz Makuch, who established the well-known, annual Cultural Festival that brings tens of thousands of Jews and non-Jews to the city's Szeroka square, and Poznan's Archbishop Stanislaw Gądecki, who in the late 1990s founded the annual Days of Judaism to build bridges between the majority Catholic and minority Jewish communities. All of their efforts aimed to honor Poland's Jewish past and strengthen its Jewish future.

I'd never heard of Brama Grodzka, which shares the same attitude and mission. I'm not the only one who wasn't familiar with it; the place draws only about 5,000 visitors each year. But Lublin, off of most tourists' itinerary, admittedly isn't a must-see stop.

After a late-ending seder the night before, I wasn't particularly enthusiastic about going to an unfamiliar institution, about a mile's walk from my hotel. But with an afternoon free on yom tov, when shopping or jogging or traveling by car or tram were out of the question, I had no better options.

Monika Elliott, my young escort-interpreter, a dancer-turned-community-activist from Warsaw, led me to Brama Grodzka. Along the way during the impromptu walking tour of the onetime Jewish streets of the city, she pointed out where a prominent synagogue once stood, where a notable rabbi once lived, where the Jews who constituted about 40 percent of the city's population once shopped in the market square.

Up a manageable hill we walked. At the still-extant walls, which resemble those of any majestic European city that houses such signs of a vibrant past, the streets turned to cobblestone. On the street, college students were holding hands and tourists were snapping away.

The stone buildings and narrow passages reminded me of a more-familiar Old City – Jerusalem's.

Nothing at the entrance to Brama Grodzka, a nondescript building just past a covered arch over the road, suggested that we were entering Poland's best-kept secret.

We heard klezmer music as soon as we stepped in. In a gallery that displays dozens of black-and-white photos of the Jews who had walked these streets in the decades before the Holocaust, we heard taped voices. Of Jews. Jews schmoozing and yelling and whispering. We had stepped into Lublin's Jewish past.

Witold Dambowska, one of the founders, greeted us.

He told me the Brama Grodzka story, talked about its multi-lingual myriad of lectures and exhibitions and performances, and led us to a room-size diorama of pre-war Jewish Lublin. The detail was exquisite. Tiny shuls and shops and homes. Tiny streets with tiny people. You could almost hear the people's voices.

Witold – a Catholic, he said – spoke with the élan of a Jewish docent in a Jewish museum. He was a torrent of facts about Brama Grodzka, about Lublin's Jewish history, about everything Jewish.



“You can tell me the truth,” I said in a pseudo-whisper. “You’re really Jewish.”

Witold smiled. He’d probably heard such comments before.

“Ikh bin a goy, aber ikh hab a Yiddishe neshama,” he said – I am a gentile, but I have a Jewish soul.

He spoke better Yiddish than I do!

A Yiddish-speaking Pole?

It’s part of his overall Jewish education, he said. He’s not the only person at Brama Grodzka who can red’n in der mamalosh’n.

Today, Brama Grodzka employs some 30 men and women, all of whom share Witold’s passion for keeping the spirit of Jewish Lublin alive.

“Brama Grodzka is a unique place in that non-Jews have taken upon themselves to preserve Jewish memory and culture,” says Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who serves as Poland’s chief rabbi and earlier headed the [Ronald S. Lauder Foundation’s](#) educational and cultural activities in the country. “They have been doing this for more than 10 years, making them among the first non-Jews to do so (today it is much more common). Their creativity and dedication is an inspiration for all.”

Brama Grodzka’s latest project is “Lublin 2.0” ([makieta.teatrnn.pl](#) and [przewodniki.teatrnn.pl](#)), an “interactive reconstruction of Lublin’s history,” four virtual models of the city and its architecture: from the 14th, 16th and 18th centuries, and from the 1930s.

“In the ’90s, when we commenced our activities,” the Brama Grodzka website ([tnn.pl](#)) states, “we ... did not know the history of Lublin’s Jews. We were not aware of the fact that the huge empty area near the Gate is all that remained of the Jewish town. In the place that used to be full of houses, synagogue and streets, now is an enormous parking lot, new roads and lawns.

“A considerable part of this area has been covered with concrete,” the website continues. “Under this concrete shell, the foundations of Jewish buildings and the memory of the Jewish town are buried.”

That is the story of any Polish city, town, village or shtetl, where the Shoah left only ghosts and memories behind.

But only Lublin has a Brama Grodzka.

“Today,” states the website, “the Gate leads to the non-existent town – the Jewish Atlantis – and is a place where ... old photographs, documents and testimonies can be preserved for posterity.”

Throughout the country, young Poles, whether out of guilt for the deeds of their forebears or out of nostalgia for the neighbors they never knew or out of a desire to build a more-inclusive society, are making efforts to connect with some element of Yiddishkeit. They're studying Hebrew, attending synagogue services, restoring Jewish cemeteries.

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Each year, more cities host cultural festivals and educational seminars and renovations of various Jewish venues.

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With a fervor that borders on insistence, I urge friends traveling to Poland to make the trip there. It's a few hours from Warsaw or Krakow, but well worth the time and expense.

I also urge my friends who go to Poland to take time from their travels, which often center around the memorials to death (the camps, the ghettos, the graves), to see the Jewish life there. The new schools. The new Jewish clubs. The new kosher restaurants. The places where Poles who every day decide to become part of the Jewish people can feel at home.

Lublin, as I saw at the seders I led, has only a small Jewish population, several dozen Jews at most, with scattered, isolated Jews in the surrounding villages. The city's Jewish community is so small that it's under the umbrella of Warsaw's larger Jewish community.

Everywhere I go in Poland, I see examples of the Jewish renaissance that transformed a moribund community into a vibrant one.

But I bless the day that I also witnessed the role that some non-Jews are taking, at Brama Grodzka, to foster the Jewish revival.

Only in Lublin.

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