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New life in Krakow's Jewish quarter

By Andy Jarosz



Singer-songwriter Shachar Gilad performs at the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kazimierz. (Miroslaw Mrozilla Mrozik)

Wander through Kazimierz, better known as the Jewish quarter of Krakow, Poland's second largest city, and signs of the area's cultural heritage are everywhere. The [Old Synagogue](#) dominates Ulica Szeroka (Wide Street), where wooden tables from traditional Jewish restaurants spill out onto the pavement. In the evenings while the sound of traditional Jewish klezmer music emanates from the bars and cafes of the surrounding alleys.

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Kazimierz attracts a steady flow of tourists curious to see the places in which the city's Jewish community once thrived, and for years they came to a neighbourhood that largely resembled an open-air Jewish heritage museum, almost frozen in time. But recently, the district has seen a cultural revival with new businesses opening up along its cobbled

streets and even a trickle of arrivals moving to Krakow from Israel to set up new businesses. For the first time in nearly 75 years there are signs of something developing in Kazimierz that appeared to be forever lost: a living Jewish community.

For a long time this regeneration seemed impossible. The neighbourhood became run down after World War II and while many of Kazimierz's grand buildings survived (Krakow was one of the few cities in Poland that was spared major damage), they fell into neglect under the communist regime. Then, after director Steven Spielberg decided to use the old buildings and streets as the setting for his epic 1993 film *Schindler's List*, an influx of tourists came to see the area for themselves, and the renewed interest sparked an increase in businesses looking to cater to curious visitors.

But despite the growing number of sightseers, there were still less than 1,000 Jewish residents in Krakow, with no more than a handful living in Kazimierz, the historic heart of the city's Jewish community. Six of the seven synagogues of Kazimierz were no longer in use and with too few people to sustain Jewish bakeries, restaurants or cultural centres, it was very difficult to observe a Jewish way of life.

Enter Tanya Segal, the first female rabbi in Poland and the current leader of the Progressive Jewish community in Krakow. Originally from Moscow, Rabbi Segal came to Poland by way of Israel in 2007 as part of her religious studies. She saw the need to create an active and engaged Jewish community in Poland and had a vision of developing a place in Krakow where people could live in accordance with their traditions and celebrate their Jewish culture.

The first steps had already been put in place. The [Galicia Jewish Museum](#), opened in 2004, set about preserving the Jewish history of southeast Poland through photography, while the large open space at the heart of the museum would later function as a cultural centre. At the same time, the [Jewish Community Centre](#) (JCC) opened in the centre of Kazimierz in 2008, creating a valuable space for educational programmes and religious celebrations for the city's Jewish population. Sabbath dinners every Friday evening, for example, attract both Krakow residents and visiting tourists, providing an opportunity to showcase the work of the JCC to a wider audience.

Under the guidance of Rabbi Segal, [Beit Krakow](#), a progressive Jewish community based in Kazimierz, was set up in 2009 and has provided visitors and the local community with more than 500 cultural and religious events celebrating contemporary Jewish life in Poland. While the events are focused around building a dynamic Jewish community, a positive sign is the growing interest in Beit Krakow activities beyond the local Jewish population. Lectures on Krakow's Jewish heritage and recent exhibitions of contemporary art have attracted many visitors and residents who are curious to learn about the city's historical and modern-day Jewish community.

As part of Beit Krakow's wider objectives to promote modern Jewish culture in the city, Rabbi Segal also serves as the artistic director of the [Midrasz Lab](#), a bold project that brings classic Hebrew texts to a contemporary audience using theatre, dance and music. Events are held in the Galicia Jewish Museum and are open to all, with high profile international performers, including Israeli choreographer Rena Schenfeld (described by the New York Times in 2009 as "one of the most important artists of our generation".)



TRAVEL

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The [Galeria Szalom](#) in the heart of Kazimierz is a colourful contemporary art gallery promoting the work of local artists. Around the corner is the [Olive Tree](#), an authentic kosher restaurant with a modern, upmarket ambience. Unlike many of the tourist-focussed restaurants in Kazimierz that serve only classic Eastern European dishes, the Olive Tree's owner (who recently came to Krakow from Israel), offers a menu dominated by contemporary Mediterranean cuisine such as lamb kebabs and hummus.

Visit [Krakow](#) today and you might be struck first by the crowds of tourists who come to explore Kazimierz's past. They might be visiting the Old Synagogue, eating a kosher meal in a traditional cafe or taking in a tour of the Schindler's List locations. But look around and you will see signs of a more modern Jewish Kazimierz. As Rabbi Segal points out, the new generation cannot recreate the world in which their parents or grandparents lived. They come with their own expectations of how they want a Jewish community to look and function, and through their determination are creating a new future out of Kazimierz's tangled past.

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