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Jewish heritage in Poland jeopardized by lack of funds

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Too poor and too few, Poland's several thousand Jews lack the resources to preserve their heritage, still in jeopardy after the destruction wrought by the Nazis and decades of communism.

"It's urgent. If we don't react now, in 10 years, there will be even more ruins," laments Monika Krawczyk, head of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ).

Prior to World War II some 10,000 synagogues and houses of worship served Poland's community of more than three million Jews, while today there are just several hundred -- often in very poor repair.

Jan Jagielski from the Warsaw-based Jewish Historical Institute has found only 321 former houses of prayer inside Poland's post-WWII borders.

Of the 1,056 pre-war Jewish cemeteries he has catalogued, 280 are empty while 376 were demolished to make way for buildings, parks, a football stadium in the town of Kleczew, or quite simply for farmers' fields.

"The majority of these sites have been included on the list of historic monuments at some point after World War II but nothing was done (to preserve them) for 60 years," explains Krawczyk.

It was in the immediate post-war period that Jewish sites which escaped Nazi destruction suffered the most. Vast numbers of buildings were either completely destroyed or transformed beyond recognition.

In Praga, a rough and tumble district of Warsaw, a synagogue relatively undamaged during the war was levelled in 1961 to make way for a public park. In the Polish countryside, it was common for buildings previously housing Jewish synagogues or houses of worship to be turned into fire stations or warehouses for pesticides or fertilizers.

-- There was ignorance about Jewish traditions --

"There was anti-Semitism, but above all there was ignorance about Jewish traditions," says Jan Jagielski, commenting the post-war destruction.

Along with Poland's 10 Jewish communities -- compared to 3,000 before the war -- the FODZ has launched a long struggle to regain all pre-war Jewish communal properties, or at least to obtain compensation for synagogues that were changed into ordinary buildings long ago.

Unlike Romania which decided to return all Jewish communal properties at once, restitution bids in Poland must be made on a case by case basis and often become bogged down in red tape.

In Bialystok, north-east Poland, local authorities sold a synagogue to a building company in the 1990s. The FODZ dropped its restitution claim, but has been pursuing a compensation claim for the last seven years.

It was just this summer that the foundation was able to take over Poland's most impressive Baroque synagogue in Lancut, south-east Poland.

While being listed as a historical monument, this masterpiece, was closed to the public, except in special cases until now.

Once buildings are recovered, the FODZ is often under pressure to renovate them by the same state historical monument authorities who did nothing to save them for years.

In Zamosc, the birthplace of the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg and the celebrated Yiddish author Isaac Peretz, the FODZ has begun the restoration of an ancient synagogue built in 1610.

Although Norway is financing 85 percent of the project, raising 500,000 euros (639,000 dollars) to cover the remainder of the work is proving difficult.

"We have just 75,000 dollars (59,000 euros) up to now," laments Monika Krawczyk.

She admits to sometimes becoming discouraged. "It's a mission", she says. "We must pay homage to 800 hundred years of Jewish history in Poland. Unfortunately, for the next 800 years we will not have such a vibrant community here."

"Everything was here, it is the centre of the Jewish world of art, philosophy and law. We must preserve it with care."

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