

NO DEPRESSION

Ana Egge on Lessons in Poland From a Past That Haunts the Present

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In the summer of 2020, I applied for The Common Good Masterclass for Artists hosted by Western States Center in Portland, Oregon. As a singer-songwriter with little experience with this sort of thing, I thought it was a long shot that I would be accepted, so I was very excited when I got in. We met online for four months of learning and exploring the unique ways we, as artists, can work toward the common good in the face of big challenges our democracy faces today. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this work would eventually lead our group on a trip to Warsaw and Krakow, Poland, this past June.

As my trip to Poland neared, I would inevitably mention it in conversation with friends and acquaintances. They'd ask, "Are you playing there? Are you singing?"

No, I'm going with a group of artists from across the US that I've been working with learning about antisemitism.

"Do you have ties to Poland? Wait, is your family Polish? Are you Jewish?"

When my answer remained *no*, they became more confused.

"Then why are you going?"

My answer was simple: *To learn more about the rise of authoritarianism.*

The main purpose of our trip was to learn more about the history, legacy, and contemporary role of antisemitism in Polish society — because this critically misunderstood and underestimated form of racial bigotry also threatens the fabric of our society in the United States today.

Before World War I, Poland was a nation where Jews belonged and were a vital, integrated part of society. On the eve of World War II, 3.5 million Jews lived in Poland, comprising 10% of the population. Before the Nazis invaded Warsaw, there were 400 synagogues. Only one survived, because the Germans



were using it to stable their horses. Now, there are 10,000 to 20,000 Jews in Poland and just six synagogues.

Our group on this trip comprised musicians, songwriters, and visual artists as well as a playwright, designer, muralist, poet, and game designer. And over the course of the six-day trip, we visited six historical sites. Each day we had breakfast at the hotel then boarded our chartered bus for a guided tour. Usually, we'd break for lunch and then gather again in the afternoon with a guest speaker. Our days were packed, and gathering for dinner to talk and process what we were learning and experiencing together was so refreshing and necessary.

Some of the guest speakers included historians, civil rights lawyers, scholars, museum directors, and more from places like the Forum for Dialogue (the largest Polish NGO that works to foster Polish-Jewish dialogue), "Never Again" Association (Poland's leading anti-racism organization), and The Center for Research on Prejudice at the University of Warsaw.

One particularly memorable, if emotionally intense and exhausting, experience came during our trip to the Polin Museum in Warsaw (The Museum of the History of Polish Jews). We had a guided tour that took about 2 1/2 hours — an overwhelming amount of history and horror crammed into a short amount of time.

At one point I felt light-headed and thought I might actually pass out. The nausea was so debilitating that I had to sit down, lean over, and put my head between my legs. I wondered how I was going to handle going to the death camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau in a couple of days.

When the tour was over, I went outside alone to lay down in the grass for a few minutes. It was a beautiful day. I was in the shade and could feel the breeze. A woman passed me walking her dog. What I'd learned in school — that the Holocaust was something that happened long ago and far away — no longer felt true. It was so close, so present.

This was just from the museum, though, something presented to us as history. The microaggressions we experienced in the present were also unsettling.

One day, we witnessed an anti-vax parade in Warsaw. Our guest speaker that day, Michal, asked us if we knew what the message on their signs — "No to 447" (written as the number with a line through it) — meant. None of us did.

"That's funny," he said. "The marchers might be surprised by that because to them it's an American conspiracy to make Poland compensate Jews for land that was stolen from them during and after World War II."

Walking back to the hotel later that same day I saw graffiti on a low wall with the slogan, "No to 447." There was another time when a white Polish man wearing a T-shirt that said The White Race (co-opting The North Face logo) was asked to leave our hotel lobby.

And then there was the time in line at an indoor ATM machine when I felt the need to put my own body between a looming, tall, white, aggressive Polish man and one of my female Jewish American cohort friends. Afterward she thanked me for acknowledging what was happening in the moment.

Now More than Ever

Between the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a refugee crisis due to the wave of immigrants from Syria and Ukraine, our group almost didn't even make it to Poland. However, our hosts at the Forum for Dialogue urged us to stick to our plans and come. They reminded us that now more than ever, the need for open minds and hearts to visit and learn what is happening there was only growing.

"If you initially planned to come as a witness to the past and its effect on the present," Hana said to us via Zoom, "now that need for you to come as a witness is a thousand-fold."

Simply put, the more I learn about antisemitism, the more I notice it all the time. The more I'm aware of it in our culture and, sometimes, in myself.

And why is it so uncomfortable to talk about? Maybe because I don't have much experience talking about it. Maybe I'm insecure because I'm not an expert and I don't want to offend anyone. There are a million reasons, just like there are a million reasons it can be uncomfortable to talk about any other kind of racism and discrimination.

Perhaps we're all on the spectrum somewhere in regard to our biases, having absorbed all kinds of prejudice towards Jews, people of color, LGBT people, women, Muslims, and people living with disabilities. But we won't shake ourselves free of them without experiencing some discomfort. Maybe that's just another thing we all have in common.

As I reflect on this trip now, around the Jewish High Holidays, I think about Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. A time of annual introspection. A time for accepting responsibility for our actions through prayers and confession.

To atone for deeds committed against another person, Jewish tradition teaches, you must confront that person directly and apologize. Perhaps we all can find inspiration in this ancient practice of acknowledging how our actions affect each other and take some sort of step toward reconciliation.

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