

## Klezmer in Kraków: Kitsch, or Catharsis for Poles?

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*In the beginning we felt such a tension in this place, such a pressure on our minds. All the sensitive people must have felt it, too. These walls clearly wanted something to be done.*

Jerzy Bawół, p.c.

*There's a cultural revolution going on in Poland, and it's not politically inspired. In line with the adage "You don't miss what you had until it's gone," Poles—especially the young—have gone nostalgic for klezmer.*

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### Representing Jews in Kazimierz, Poland

The road signs in Kraków pointing to Kazimierz call it “the Old Jewish Town.” But how Jewish is this place now? The houses and the synagogues are still here, but the population of this Jewish *shtetl*, which at the same time was part of Kraków, is now gone. Before World War II around seventy thousand Jews were living in Kazimierz, and now the whole Jewish community in Kraków amounts to only 180 people (Szulc 2002). As Suzanne Weiss (2003) puts it: “In Krakow you can find a good kosher meal, a number of klezmer bands, Jewish cabaret, art exhibits and folk dancing. The only thing you probably won't find—unless you look very hard—are Jews.”

With the disappearance of Jews from Kazimierz, the city district quickly degenerated and the whole area fell into disrepute for being particularly dangerous. In 1945, after the district had been completely emptied and desolated, the post-War authorities started to settle the local proletariat there. The synagogues were used for storage, the houses were not renovated for decades. Kazimierz slowly turned into the poorest and most neglected district of Kraków (Szulc 2002). Members of Poland's most famous klezmer group,

Kroke, recollect that in the early 1990s they were scared to walk around the district when they were coming home after the concerts. In a way it became a “modern” ghetto. That is, in contrast to the traditional European ghettos as areas designated for Jews, it became more like an American “ghetto” or slum, in which the poorest groups in society lived in un-renovated, deteriorating buildings in an area seen as devoid of restaurants, cafes, or cultural activities.

After the collapse of the communist regime it did not take long for the tourist industry to rediscover Kazimierz. As soon as the restitution process began and ownership relations were cleared up, entrepreneurs realized the potential of the Jewish Old Town for tourism. The ensuing influx of tourists has enlivened the Jewish district, but also brought about certain paradoxical situations. Suddenly, one could visit a “Jewish” restaurant, that was owned by non-Jews, serving non-kosher food with waitresses wearing Christian crosses around their necks, as non-Jewish Ukrainian groups played watered-down popular versions of “Jewish” music for non-Jewish (mostly German and Austrian) tourists.

This situation naturally raised questions about whether this was “kitsch” or, even worse, the cynical appropriation of Jewish culture for mere profit. For some American Jews, Kazimierz became a sort of “virtually Jewish”<sup>1</sup> Disneyland. The renowned klezmer vocalist Elisabeth Schwartz finds the popularity of Yiddish culture in Europe disturbing:

It makes me uncomfortable in the same way philo-Semitism from non-Jews makes me uncomfortable . . . So I look at Jewish music festivals in Europe with a prejudiced eye, because there is always the stench of racism (or reverse racism) underlying the enthusiasm for klezmer; they love the culture but not the people who created it. I am rarely at a loss for words but only two came to me: Jew Zoo. (Schwartz quoted in Strom 2002:242)

In his book *Fiddler on the Move*, ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin mentions the Kraków klezmer scene, which he classifies as a “phantom klezmer community,” which makes use of the authenticity of the space (the Jewish district) to produce music of only “presumed authenticity” (2000:85). Slobin suggests that in this context cultural tourism is taking place. In this case, the “tourists” are the non-Jews who engage the heritage music of the exotic others—Jews—in a process that resembles entertainment rather than a historical presentation. Even though Slobin oversimplifies the picture of the Cracovian klezmer revival, pointing only to its alienating quality of a tourist attraction in a city void of Jews, he is correct to observe that the European revival of Jewish music is a very special phenomenon, which deserves more attention.

According to Slobin (2000:35), one of the reasons for this is the fact that the European klezmer scene reflects the complexities of the relations

between Jews and non-Jews and that it attracts musicians and audiences for a number of different reasons. Previous studies of European klezmer have not paid enough attention to these multiple motivations lying behind the Kraków revival and the diverse results of the exposure of Poles to the Jewish heritage. A number of authors have expressed their concern with the way Jewishness is represented through the various events of the klezmer revival in Europe (Ottens and Rubin 1999; Slobin 2000; Broder 2004), but none of them has noticed the positive potential of such heritage productions. Although they sometimes might have an alienating effect, such representations can also play an important symbolic role as catalysts of reconciliation between cultures.

As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:157) notes:

Heritage productions tend to conflate their effects with the instruments for producing them. But, a hallmark for heritage productions—perhaps their defining feature—is precisely the foreignness of the “tradition” to its context of presentation. This estrangement produces an effect more Brechtian, more alienating, than mimetic and makes the interface a critical site for the production of meanings other than the “heritage” message. The interface—folk festivals, museum exhibitions, historical villages, concert parties, postcards—are cultural forms in their own right and powerful engines of meaning. Messages of reconciliation, of multiculturalism or biculturalism, or of development—messages other than heritage—are likely to be encoded in the interface.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett might be correct in stating that the recreation of Jewish culture in Kraków may alienate some people, because of the “absence of actualities” in the place where the culture is recreated (1998:149). In this way Jewish music becomes a “foreign” element, belonging to the *space* of its production (Kazimierz) but not to the *time* of its presentation. Nevertheless, we show in this article that even if the Kraków klezmer scene is displaced in terms of time, the revival still provides a “powerful engine of meaning” on its own. The new Kazimierz is much more than a museum or a kitschy attempt at making money from tourists. It is a living, pulsating cultural center, which greatly influences the identities of the organizers of cultural events, the musicians playing, and the audiences attending these events. Not only are these people forced to reflect on their own identity, they become more interested in Jewish culture, history, and religion and are automatically confronted with issues dealing with Jewish-Polish relations, anti-Semitism and conflicting interpretations of history.

After briefly discussing the positive transformation of Kazimierz from a dilapidated slum to a cultural center, we analyze the manner in which klezmer music has influenced the identities of Poland’s most prominent klezmer musicians, that is, members of the bands Kroke and the Cracow Klezmer Band, whom we interviewed in April 2004. During that same month we also interviewed other Polish klezmer musicians, from both prominent

and unknown groups. Then we show that the Polish organizers of Jewish cultural events in Kazimierz also must confront the same issues of identity as the klezmer bands. Finally, we present results of a survey that we took of participants in the Kraków Jewish festival in July 2004, to ascertain whether the music influenced their identity or whether they merely experienced it as music.

### **The Metamorphosis and Rebirth of Kazimierz**

Even though some critics might see Kazimierz as nothing but a commercialized attempt at earning money from a "Jew Zoo," our interviewees see Kazimierz as an exciting and inspiring place where the past and the present meet. They realize the message of the past, which is encoded in that place, and the present development of Kazimierz as a new organism, which is no longer bound only with Jewishness. In a certain way, the manner in which Kazimierz is perceived corresponds to the way Jews and the role of Jewish revival are imagined.

One of the key events which helped to resurrect the forgotten Jewish district is the annual Jewish Festival which has been taking place there since 1988. Janusz Makuch, the head of the festival, told us that Kazimierz has become a symbol of Jewishness in Poland, because the Jewish district was not destroyed during the war and has been preserved almost in the same architectural form. Kazimierz was not even used as the ghetto during WWII; rather, the Jews were transferred from Kazimierz to the neighboring district of Podgórze. Therefore, Kazimierz has remained almost intact. Makuch believes that Kazimierz has still the energy of its past life, which inspires now its revival. As he stated:

Thanks to the fact that Kazimierz has never been destroyed . . . seven synagogues and all of the architectonic essence is still here. However strange this may sound, in these walls there is still the energy of the people who used to live here; and I believe in what Kuncewicz<sup>2</sup> wrote, that bodies burn, but souls don't. We face a mystery here, there is a positive energy for us here.

Jerzy Bawół of Kroke also believes that Kazimierz has a special spirituality that caused the rebirth of the district in recent years. As he told us, "[In the 1980s] you could sense this energy here, as if something pressed on you from without, as if it was waiting to be set free . . . then the energy sprang out and blossoms here now."

Kazimierz has also been a major source of inspiration for Leopold Kozłowski. As the only surviving member of a klezmerim family decimated by the Holocaust, his legitimacy as an "authentic" Jewish musician is beyond question. Although he had been dealing for many years with other genres

of music, in the 1990s the “last klezmer” began playing again in Kazimierz and has had since then an instrumental role in the revival of Jewish music in Poland. Kozłowski recalls,

I fell in love with Kazimierz when it was still sad and empty, when these houses were still silent. At that time in Szeroka Street they opened the first restaurant “Ariel” . . . [Its owner] once asked me: “Mr Kozłowski, how about we organize some concert?” And this is when I gave, after a long pause, my first klezmer concert. (Kozłowski in Szwarcman 2003: 42)

Not only have Polish and Polish-Jewish *klezmerim* fallen in love with Kazimierz, many American klezmer musicians have also become fond of the town. Coming to Kazimierz gives them a chance to explore their own past and to help rebuild Jewish culture and engage in a Polish-Jewish dialogue by participating in Jewish cultural events. Although we do not have space to discuss this in detail, here it suffices to note that every year the Kraków Jewish Festival attracts many of the world’s most renowned Jewish musicians. Some of the most famous klezmerim, such as Michael Alpert and David Krakauer have become regular performers. The most popular American klezmer group, the Klezmatics, has also performed repeatedly in Kraków. It is also telling that several top American-Jewish klezmer musicians, such as David Krakauer and Frank London, have chosen Kraków as the place to record their live records.

Perhaps Michael Alpert best displays the special feeling of awe that American Jewish musicians often feel in Kazimierz, when he comments while lunching with violinist Itzhak Perlman at a Jewish restaurant in the beginning of the film “In the Fiddler’s House”:

It is unbelievable for us to come here and play in Poland, because this is bringing it back to where the music comes from, affirming the culture that was largely destroyed here. Not letting it die and to reaffirm the present state of Jewish culture—of Yiddish culture—in the World. I mean everything: this music comes from Poland; this food we are eating—which is Jewish food . . . Our food comes from Poland.

To be sure, the film itself contributes a bit to myth-making about Kazimierz, as the music that Alpert and Perlman hear in the background is a doina, which comes from Bessarabia rather than Poland; likewise, the food served at the “Jewish” restaurant is not kosher, and much of the East European-Jewish food culture in America comes from countries other than Poland. Of course, somebody like Alpert is extremely knowledgeable about these facts and is aware that his statements in the film are somewhat simplified. The point is that this passage shows that leading Jewish musicians, such as Alpert and Perlman, feel a strong attachment and cultural tie to Poland. Thus, we are witnessing

an international process of heritage production in Kazimierz, which includes the active participation of Jews as well as Poles.

Kazimierz has not only inspired the Polish, Polish-Jewish, and the American-Jewish musicians, but has also inspired the audiences of Jewish events in particular and the Polish cultural elite in general. Kazimierz has become the most popular meeting place now for Kraków's students, intellectuals and cultural figures. Pubs, cafes, and restaurants are open until late at night, making it the insider's alternative to Kraków's Main Square.

Kazimierz has also become Poland's center for the revival of Jewish cultural and religious life. The Jewish community retrieved the synagogues, and two of them, the Tempel Synagogue and Kupa Synagogue, were renovated with city funds to serve both religious and cultural events, while the Jewish Cultural Center and recently, the Jewish Galicia Museum opened their doors for concerts, exhibitions and lectures connected to Jewish culture. Under these conditions, Jewish culture has been able to proliferate. Janusz Makuch, the head of the Jewish Festival, says that it started in 1988 as a result of a certain process of change:

It was connected to the liberalization of life and the questions about what Poland really was. When I went to school, in my history textbooks the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto wasn't even mentioned. I didn't know the names like Anielewicz or Zuckerman.<sup>3</sup> When the process of democratization began, I started the quest [for identity] and I began to discover the magic of this place. I travel the world now, but this place makes me feel that if I had proposals of transferring the festival to Barcelona or Paris, I wouldn't want to. The festival wouldn't have the same dimension, the same spirit that it has in this place.

But Kazimierz today is not only about Jewish culture. It is a lively district where all kinds of music and all kinds of events find their stage. It has become an open cultural space for activities, which have sometimes nothing to do with Jewishness. The members of Kroke see this as a positive development for Kazimierz. The living Kazimierz gives the connotation with the living country, which is not only the setting of the concentration camps, as a lot of Holocaust tourists see it. Kroke thinks it is great that the Jewish district has become an inspiration for all kinds of artistic activity. At least it is alive now, resuscitated from post-War neglect and starting a new life as a place. The past of Kazimierz will always be connected with Jews, but its future will be the reflection of the city: pulsating with life and stimulating.

Jerzy Bawół of Kroke acknowledged, however, that it is painful for some people to come to Kazimierz and see how it has turned into a popular nightlife venue: "I know that many people think that we tread on the holy soil here, but what can we do? Make a museum everywhere?" Tomasz Lato (also of Kroke) added: "At least people coming here see that there used to be a synagogue here, that there is a Star of David there. And [the synagogue]

is here and it [always] will be.” Bawól concluded the discussion with a sad reflection: “It is a part of life . . . If we wanted to honor the past, we would have to close all of Poland and put a sign on it ‘One Big Cemetery.’”

So life goes on in Poland and in Kazimierz as well. The country, tired of commemorating, mourning, and remembering the ancient and more recent miseries, yearns for a little normalization. The rebirth of Kazimierz goes also in the direction of making it a place of the living again, not only a place of the dead.

### **The Polish Klezmer Musicians**

Some critics of the klezmer revival in Kazimierz see it as nothing more than the pure commercial exploitation and appropriation of Jews. Ottens and Rubin (1999) are particularly critical of the Polish klezmer musicians. They watch the phenomenon of world music with certain resentment and say that through the hybridization, which is the inherent process of world music, klezmer is undergoing some detrimental changes. They claim, “In this way, what was historically city wedding music stands at a turning point where its inherent complexity and virtuosity turn in to a neo-primitivism performed by amateur musicians” (1999:309). They further (1999:302) bemoan:

In Krakow . . . in Café Ariel at Szeroka Street, the place in the heart of the former Jewish district, by the kosher tourist menu, one can listen to some “klezmer music” that doesn’t deserve its name. By now there are four to five young klezmer bands in Krakow, one of them supposedly performed for the entertainment of a picnic of Berlin motorbike riders in the concentration camp in Auschwitz.

Even though many local groups do provide naïve renditions of klezmer at the restaurants in Kraków Jewish district, such music constitutes only a part of the scene. Unfortunately, Ottens and Rubin (1999) did not systematically investigate the Cracovian klezmer milieu, nor did they interview any of the Polish musicians. Instead, they engaged in a journalistic battle with one of the Kraków’s best known bands, Kroke, whom they accused of impersonating Jews and appropriating their music (see Ottens and Rubin 2004).

It is interesting that some scholars consider the ethnic backgrounds of the practitioners to be so important for the music’s alleged “authenticity,” in spite of the fact that some of the most famous American groups have several non-Jewish members. For example, both Klezmatics and Brave Old World, which are probably the two most important American klezmer groups today, have non-Jewish members. It is also ironic that although Joel Rubin has become a fundamentalist, claiming that only Jews can play klezmer and only at traditional religious events, the very group which he once founded, Brave Old World, has not only recruited a non-Jew to replace Rubin on the

clarinet (Kurt Bjorling), but has also gone on to become one of the most innovative and least traditionalist in its style. Some of the most important Jewish-American klezmer musicians openly scoff at the notion that the ability to play klezmer music could be determined by biology or ethnicity. For example, Frank London (2002:210), who, among other activities, plays trumpet in the Klezmatics, writes: "Suffice to say that if (as some allege) only Jews can authentically play klezmer, then only people born 150 years ago in Europe can play classical or Romantic music, and Yo-Yo Ma should throw away his cello. But rumor has it that he too is starting to play klezmer."

If the origin of the musicians does not matter for the quality of the music, does the musicians' ethnicity let them experience the identity-inspiring property of klezmer? It is interesting for our purposes whether the musicians playing in Kazimierz and their audiences go through a process of identity transformation. If they do, then an interesting process is taking place, which makes the Kraków Jewish revival something much more than mere trivial kitsch.

Interviews with the least prestigious restaurant groups suggest that, in some cases, their interest in Jewish culture is superficial and their main motivation is pecuniary. Even the names indicate that the musicians have not taken the historical-cultural context of the music seriously. An obvious example is the group "The Saints," whose members were surprised to find out that Judaism does not even allow for saints and sainthood! The group members admit that they have nothing to do with Jews and that they treat the music in purely professional terms.

However, even in this case, the musicians justify themselves by claiming that they are partially carrying out the function of reinforcing the identities of the largely Jewish audiences. In their opinion, Jewish tourists want to hear the most popular klezmer songs, which perhaps evoke memories for them. We can add that younger Jews and even non-Jews often become more interested in Jewish music and Jewish culture after hearing these amateur concerts. After all, nothing is special about the notion that audiences come into contact with a specific music form first through hearing amateur performances at pubs, restaurants, discos, parties, and the like. Then after they have whetted their appetites, they go on to listen to more "serious" music. In this globalized world, almost every large city has amateur pub groups playing rock, jazz, blues, country, etc. The difference here, as we will show below, is that Czechs listening to country music at Prague pubs are not likely to fundamentally rethink their own identities or their relations with other ethnic groups, in the same way that Poles listening to Klezmer do often become interested in Jewish culture and rethink relations between Poles and Jews. Further, Jewish tourists in Kraków might first get exposed to klezmer music through the most amateurish Krakow groups and then become more

interested in their own Jewish heritage and identity, while American tourists in Prague would hardly go through the same experience after hearing an amateur Czech group playing country music.

The most professional Cracovian klezmer groups have already reached world renown, as can be observed in music shops. For example, a specialist “multi-culti” music store in Prague, considers only two groups to be important enough to have their own section in the klezmer department. One was the American-Jewish group the Klezmatiks. But right behind them was the Kraków group Kroke. Kroke has toured the world, played in countless music festivals throughout Europe, and recorded music for one of Steven Spielberg’s films. Meanwhile, another famous Kraków group, the Cracow Klezmer Band, has recorded several records under John Zorn’s record label *Tzadik*, which lists the records of the Cracovians under “Radical Jewish Culture.”

To be sure, many have questioned the authenticity of these groups. In fact, all of the Jewish-American musicians with whom we have spoken and even some non-Jewish and non-American musicians have questioned whether Kroke or the Cracow Klezmer Band really “sound Jewish” or whether their music merely has “Jewish elements.” However, the authenticity of these groups is not relevant here. What *is* relevant is that by claiming to be playing Jewish music, these groups must confront certain issues surrounding their identity and Polish-Jewish relations, which make their music more than a question of music. In addition, the Polish and non-Polish audiences (including Jewish ones), by listening to these groups, often become more interested in Jewish music (even music that one might theoretically consider to be “more authentic”) and through this music eventually become more interested in Jewish culture and their relationship toward Jews and Judaism.

For example, when asked whether performing klezmer music has caused him to reflect on his identity, Jarosław Bester, accordionist and composer in the Cracow Klezmer Band, replied in the affirmative, saying:

What we play is the direct picture of the inner soul of each of us. It is some kind of a quest. Each of us has an inner nature of a man who suffers . . . The necessary element is this combination of crying, longing for something, which will never come back, but used to exist. We don’t even know the way it is used to be, this is often just our imagination mixed with the picture of the present-day world, the real world, the world which is sometimes so brutal, permeated with existential difficulties that we all face. This is what this music is about.

Our interviews show that klezmer music has also influenced the identities of the members of Kroke. They identify themselves very strongly with their profession and they relate their musical work to the ethos of the traditional klezmorim. Consequently they see themselves as the modern klezmorim. An important part of this image, of their subjective self-identification, is the fact that they have Jewish ancestry. It is not perhaps the dominant one, and it

does not influence their ethnic identity so much as their professional identity, but it is nevertheless important. It becomes salient in the situation in which their legitimacy as klezmerim is questioned.

The bassist in Kroke, Tomasz Lato, gave an account how his colleague found out about his Jewish roots. He started with a declaration of the band's identity:

We feel we are klezmerim. When we started to play klezmer we didn't know anything about our ancestry. It came to light that we are of a Jewish descent only after we had been playing for some time. The first one to get to know about it was our violinist. And it was a big shock for him, who had been brought up in the Christian faith, to have learned that he had Jewish ancestors. Our families started to talk to us about these things only after we had been playing klezmer for several years. It started like this: Tomek's uncle came to him once and he asked: "You know what? Tell me why you actually play this music?" "Because I like it," Tomek answered. "So now I'll tell you why you like it." And they got down to family's genealogy and this is how he found out.

Even though this discovery had quite a strong emotional impact on the musicians, who, up till then, had not known anything about the past of their families, they stress that the fact that they know the truth now does not change anything in their lives. They refer the Jewish element of their identity only to their work. However, the situation of a conflict with somebody who criticizes them as non-Jewish musicians appropriating the music and not deserving the name of klezmerim triggers in them a counter-reaction in which their Jewish background becomes salient. Jewishness becomes the means of identification when it is questioned and denied in the debate over "appropriation".

Some observers of the klezmer revival in Europe, like Ottens and Rubin (1999, 2004) or Slobin (2000) discuss the provenance of the Polish klezmer musicians and their relation to Jewishness. Slobin comments on Kroke's newly discovered Jewish identity: "At some level they represent the vanished Kraków community they partly manifest through two band members' recent discovery of Jewish family background, but here we have perhaps the most extremely attenuated notion of 'community' one can imagine" (2000:83). The question of how the Polish musicians define their identity vis-à-vis Jewishness is indeed very interesting, and the issue is far more complex than just the critics of musical "appropriation" want to see it. Nevertheless, we can point out that Kroke had already spent several years performing and putting out records before they discovered their Jewish roots. Thus, although this discovery might have influenced their identity, it was neither their reason nor justification to begin playing the music.

Not only do the Polish klezmerim relate their music to their identity, they partially develop their identity in their defense against accusations of

“appropriation.” For as soon as they begin playing klezmer, they must guard themselves against the criticism that they have no right to be playing “somebody else’s” music. Ottens and Rubin (1999) go so far to claim that only Jews playing klezmer music at religious weddings are “really” playing klezmer. Everything else is a cheap imitation, because the music cannot be truly authentic outside of its original context.

An issue, which is also partially related to the “appropriation” problem, is the question of how to label the music. Since the two most popular Cracovian klezmer bands have drifted away from the classic klezmer repertoire, they often face the question as to whether what they play is still klezmer and whether they should still use that label. Since both of the bands still relate themselves very strongly to the Jewish tradition and Jewish inspiration for their music, they interpret this form of questioning as indirect attack on their legitimacy. This is a bit ironic, since they themselves admit that they no longer play klezmer, although they claim that their music still has Jewish roots. However, in their view what is important is that they had the right to play klezmer when they played it and it is wrong to claim that they cannot play Jewish music because of their background. The leader of the Cracow Klezmer Band, Jarosław Bester, responds to such a question with an argument, which, unexpectedly, brings up the question of their non-Jewish provenance and their right to play Jewish music.

It has become common in Poland these days to criticize bands like ours . . . The criticism comes from the Jewish community, which does not perhaps criticize us directly, but which asks the question why certain bands stick to the label klezmer if they don’t play klezmer. I reply to such an accusation with another question: Shouldn’t those people be grateful to ones like us that in the place where the Jewish culture is still dead, such bands like us introduce a new stream of Jewishness through the music? Perhaps we are not Jewish, but we propagate Jewish culture. This is beneficial for the Jewish culture that there are groups in Poland, which play good, not amateur, klezmer music.

He emphasizes the right to play klezmer once more by claiming that Poles have a particular right to klezmer because the genre is part of Poland’s cultural heritage and contains a Slavic element that Poles can identify themselves with:

[Klezmer] is Polish, because it’s from Poland! It was created here, on this spot; it was born here so it’s Polish. It’s like when we have a Polish Jew: whatever he does will be Polish and Jewish at the same time, but Polish, not Israeli. A German Jew, an Austrian Jew will always identify themselves with the country, with the land they live in . . . In my opinion the Hasids could create this exceptionally mystical music here, because of the “Slavic softness.” These nations with a soul, like the Slavic nations, create such conditions. Such a prayer, epiphany, and ecstasy are characteristic of the open, warm, and friendly nations.

Similarly, Jerzy Bawół of Kroke remarks:

I understand that some horrible things were going on here and still are, but what we're doing here is the natural consequence of and the link to the past. The fact that Jews were here was an enrichment of our culture. We have to continue it because it is whatever we want to call it, a part of Polish culture. This outlook on the world, this way of thinking and way of being is something that many Poles recognize instinctively. I might be even subconscious but you hear the music, which is *yours*.

It is interesting that members of both groups partially defend their right to play klezmer music on the notion that it is part of *Polish* culture, rather than merely claiming that all musicians have the right to choose what music they want to play, regardless of ethnic background. The mere fact that they claim that they, as Poles, have a special right to play this music shows how the klezmer revival involves examining Polish-Jewish relations. Klezmer is clearly more than music for them, and it is not merely a question of whether non-Jews should be able to play the music; it is also a question as to whether *Poles* have a special right to play this music in a way that French or Italians would not. They are not merely playing a style of music that they like, but they also claim to be on some kind of mission to bring back and perpetuate a lost culture—a culture that they believe to be a part of Polish as well as Jewish musical heritage. Thus, we see that their decision to play klezmer music brings them into the complicated discourse about Polish-Jewish relations. They tend to see the relations in a positive light, going so far as to claim that klezmer music is also part of a Polish tradition. Because of the way they construct their identity, they also look at Polish anti-Semitism as something foolish, but extremely exaggerated. The Cracow Klezmer Band, for example, refers to an almost idyllic vision of Polish-Jewish relations, bringing up the myth about Polish religious tolerance under King Casimirus the Great [Kazimierz Wielki] (1310–70). Jarosław Bester claims,

Kazimierz was the Promised Land for the Jews when it was founded by Casimirus the Great. It owes its name to the king, too. Poland used to be tolerant; many people forgot about it. Once we met a Jew in the States who had emigrated there before World War II and he said, "For me the Bible was Mickiewicz<sup>4</sup> and Sienkiewicz,<sup>5</sup> not the Torah."

This, of course, is obviously a much idealized view of Polish-Jewish relations. It infers that Poles were the benefactors of Jews; the two groups coexisted without any problems; and it implies that Jewish emigrants still identify themselves with their old country.

Furthermore, while admitting that the West might view Poland as an anti-Semitic country, Bester counters:

But anti-Semitism occurs when some national minority is directly and physically attacked. If it's just some hooligan writing some stuff on a wall, it's just

a proof of their stupidity, nothing else. Let's take into consideration one more thing: eighty percent of those people who shout anti-Semitic slogans don't know anything about Jewish culture. A Jew in Poland is still imagined like in the Nazi propaganda: an old Jew swinging in prayer, dressed in a long traditional coat and with hair locks.

Thus, Bester thinks that Polish anti-Semitism is only a Western myth about Poland. The anti-Semitic graffiti is just hooliganism and is not aimed against any concrete persons.

Although the Cracovian groups have a tendency to downplay the existence of anti-Semitism, it is also interesting that they see their music and the Jewish music festivals as a way to fight anti-Semitism and improve Polish-Jewish relations. Kroke's Jerzy Bawół provides a good example. He hates Polish anti-Semitism, which he claims is mainly expressed in the stereotypes in the language. He thinks, however, that when Poles really meet Jews and Jewish culture, as during the Kraków festival, anti-Semitic prejudices disappear as Poles have fun together with Jews. In his view Polish anti-Semitism is absurd and actually harmless. Together with Tomasz Lato, Kroke's bassist, they stress how peaceful and safe Jewish festivals in Poland are (p.c.). Lato states,

A German journalist once asked us whether we feel safe if we go around without bodyguards. If they could see our festivals and concerts, with basically no security measures! Last year the ambassador of Israel and a couple of other ambassadors were here [at the festival] and there were perhaps just a handful of policemen. Shevach Weiss [the former Israeli ambassador to Poland] was dancing here, in Szeroka Street, without any security!

Similarly, Bawół said, "I don't think that something like that would be possible anywhere else in Europe!"

In summary, our interviews question the view that Polish klezmer music in Kazimierz can be simply written off as an attempt at commercializing and appropriating Jewish music and turning it into meaningless kitsch. While it is possible to witness such amateurish, tourist-oriented performances of "klezmer" in Kazimierz, and some might even question whether the Cracovian groups really "sound Jewish," the generalizations about the worthless, commercialized character of the klezmer revival in Kraków tend to be superficial and miss the interesting social processes that are taking place. The revival has a deep impact on the identities of the Polish musicians involved in it. The contact with the music makes them rethink Polish-Jewish relations and face the questions of Polish anti-Semitism. Moreover, even though they do not always fully sympathize with or understand the Jewish point of view, especially in the evaluation of anti-Semitism in Poland, the intensity of the identity transformation processes revealed by the in-depth interviews suggest that the klezmer revival in Kraków is something more than just tourist entertainment.

## **The Polish Organizers**

We interviewed three important personages from Kraków, who have been very active in promoting Jewish culture: Janusz Makuch, the head of the Jewish Festival; Father Jarosław Naliwajko, a Jesuit and organizer of a klezmer music concert in a Catholic basilica in Kraków; and Joachim Russek, the head of the Jewish Cultural Center in Kraków. Again, our interviews suggest that their interest in klezmer music has influenced their own personal identities and has forced them to think about Polish-Jewish relations.

Janusz Makuch, the head of the Jewish Festival recalls that the festival originated through the activities of a small group of enthusiasts that included Jews, half-Jews, "one-quarter Jews," and non-Jews. They all devoted themselves to studying Jewish cultural identity, which became part of their own identity:

In the beginning, the festival was a means of a manifestation, of searching for our own way, our own identity . . . With time, the festival has become a deeply conscious process of mental, cultural and even religious changes. I've met people who, thanks to the festival, became religious.

Makuch stresses that not only Jews were involved in the identity search, which brought about the Jewish Festival.

While Makuch began by becoming interested in Jewish culture in general, the Jesuit priest Father Jarosław Naliwajko, became interested in Jewish culture first through its music. He remembers that when he heard klezmer music for the first time he became both fascinated and shocked by what he heard: "It was such an experience for me that I wanted to share it with people." This urge led finally to his involvement into the klezmer world, to his work for Polish-Jewish dialogue and his work as "the first klezmer chaplain," as he puts it. Klezmer music then got him interested in Judaism and dialogue with Jews.

These cases clearly indicate that the festival and the revival of Jewish music, though they have mainly to do with Jewish identity, they do not only influence the identity of Jews. The musical experience of klezmer also has an impact on individuals of all backgrounds, inspiring them to look for their cultural and religious roots, or to engage in some kind of social or cultural action. In this respect, klezmer becomes for Kraków much more than tourist entertainment.

The mere fact that the cultural workers are dealing with another culture, forces them to redefine their own identity. As Barth (1969:15) and Tajfel (1972:295) claim, the contrast between the in-group and the out-group makes the identity of the members more defined. In other words, we realize better who we are when we juxtapose our own identity with "the others." Consequently, Jewish culture can serve the Poles as a catalyst of their own

identity. The exposure to a different heritage and religion does not make the Polish musicians or cultural workers any less Polish, but the other way round: it makes their own identity more salient. This salience does not lead to a conflict, though, but rather to a fruitful reflection on one's own nation, religion, and/or culture and perhaps instigates the willingness to change something in the Polish-Jewish relations.

Joachim Russek, the head of the Jewish Cultural Center, tells a story that clearly reflects this relationship. When he went to Israel for the first time he was very surprised that many Hebrew words have Slavic origins and he was able to understand them. This experience of the "others" who suddenly appear so familiar symbolizes for Russek the core of interethnic relations.

In my case, of a person dealing with Jewish culture . . . I can see myself better in the mirror being a Pole and having contact with Jewish culture. I can see more of myself and clearer in this way. I understand more of what is mine because this other culture, which I try to keep in touch with, serves as a mirror to me . . . Such an experience teaches you a lot, because it shows how the picture of "the other" that we have is stereotyped and simplified. But it's just because we know so little. If we know more about "the other" it turns out that no matter what differences there are between us, there will always be more similarities. And this is a fantastic experience.

Father Naliwajko believes that the klezmer revival provides an important meeting platform for Jews and Poles. Contact with Jewish music provokes Poles to reflect on the troubled Polish-Jewish relations; consequently, the role of klezmer in Poland is very particular, because it might be the only contact with living Jewishness available in Poland. Naliwajko told us:

When there are no Jews on the horizon, there is no problem. One doesn't think about hatred, concentration camps, and the Holocaust. Only when you experience it through klezmer music, when you get to know Jews and their culture, you start to reflect on it—on the question of guilt, responsibility, and anti-Semitism. That makes you question your identity too.

Janusz Makuch, who organizes the Jewish Festival, also believes that the Jewish cultural revival in Kazimierz influences Polish-Jewish relations and the battle against anti-Semitism:

I cannot think about the Festival in this way that it's just these nine days, and then it's over and nothing more is happening. I believe that the Festival resonates a lot here. It is in a way an end product of a process which has been going on here for some time, and it is also a perpetual process and it should last . . . It is a process affecting this country. I don't know if it makes people wiser, and less anti-Semitic, I cannot say because I'm not objective, because I'm too deeply involved in the Festival phenomenon.

Even though he does not deem himself "objective" enough to know whether the festival induces Poles to be less anti-Semitic, he is clearly hopeful. The

hopeful spirit of the festival, which he organizes, is stated clearly on the festival's homepage (<http://www.jewishfestival.pl>), which states:

The number of Festival guests grows from year to year, and television coverage brings the Festival to viewers across Poland and Europe and around the world. To all of them, we address the main idea of the Festival: dialogue as a pathway to mutual respect and understanding. Each year, the Festival's celebration of life commemorates the past, traces of which can still be found in Kazimierz, Cracow, and Poland.

The Festival is a span of the symbolic bridge where Poles and Jews meet to strengthen the process of understanding and reconciliation. The Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow is, after all, a symbol of tolerance, pluralism, and the faith that we have a chance, through the celebration of Jewish culture and the celebration of life, to build mutual relations based on truth and respect.

In summary, our interviews with the organizers of Jewish cultural events in Kazimierz indicate that just as with the Polish klezmer musicians, these activities have had a profound impact on their identities and have forced them to face and reconsider the complicated history of Polish-Jewish relations. Again, the music is more than music and the culture is more than culture.

### **The Polish Audiences**

Our interviews with the practitioners of "virtual Jewishness" have indicated that they believe their activities not only influence their own identities, but also influence the identities of their audiences. In July 2004 we handed out questionnaires to participants of the Jewish festival to see whether the audiences only saw the festival as music for the sake of music or whether it meant more to them. Our target was the participants, who were the most interested in the music. Therefore, we handed out the questionnaires to participants of the two dance workshops (one on Jewish dancing and one on Hasidic dancing) and participants of the klezmology workshop (in which klezmer musicians were interviewed about their music), as well as to the audience of a late-night jam session at the Klezmer Hois restaurant, where the most famous international klezmer musicians at the festival gather to improvise in front of a smaller audience than those attending the regular concerts. In all, we received 137 responses, of which 105 were from Poles.

Our results suggest that the Polish audiences experience klezmer as much more than music. For example, nearly two-thirds of the Polish respondents claimed that the music has made them much more interested in Jewish culture, and nearly ninety percent admit that klezmer has made them somewhat more or much more interested in Jewish culture. To be sure, those attending the festival are likely to already be interested in Jewish culture, but it is still amazing that nearly ninety percent claim that klezmer music has made them *more* interested in Jewish culture than they were before.

Further evidence that klezmer is more than music for the Polish audiences comes from the fact that the vast majority also engage in other Jewish cultural activities than attending klezmer concerts or workshops. Well over eighty percent of the Polish respondents attended at least one type of Jewish event during the previous twelve months before attending the festival. These events included attending lectures about Jews or Judaism, reading books about Jewish history, culture or the Jewish religion, attending services at a synagogue, and/or attending an exhibit that had a Jewish theme. It is true that this question does not make it clear whether they attended such cultural events before becoming interested in klezmer music, but the replies nevertheless show that the audiences are not just superficially listening to the music in order to get some kind of “world music” experience. They have become generally interested in Jewish culture. In combination with the first question that shows that klezmer music has increased interest in Jewish culture, we can at least conclude that klezmer seems to have strengthened a general interest in Jewish culture that goes beyond merely listening to music. In fact, it would not be much of an exaggeration to claim that the klezmer revival in Poland has led to an upsurge in interest in Jews and Jewish culture. Even though national surveys show that anti-Semitism remains relatively high and stable, encompassing about thirty percent of the population (Władyka 2003), and even though some political and religious movements have espoused anti-Semitic views, the klezmer revival might potentially build a counter-movement.

Nevertheless, Polish-Jewish relations still remain complex, and even if the klezmer revival has caused a growing interest in Judaism and Jewish culture, and even if this growing interest is bound to raise questions of identity among the audience, this does not mean that the Polish audiences have come to completely agree or sympathize with the common Jewish perceptions of Polish-Jewish relations. For example, similar to the Polish klezmer musicians, it turns out that Poles attending the festival are much less likely than non-Poles to view anti-Semitism in Poland as a major problem. Only thirty-one percent of the Polish respondents believe that anti-Semitism has been a very big problem in Poland during the last one hundred years. Not only does this figure contrast radically with the common perception of Jews around the world—including those who have emigrated from Poland—it also contrasts with the common view of non-Poles, as nearly seventy-eight percent of the non-Poles canvassed believe that anti-Semitism has been a very big problem.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a surprising majority of Polish respondents (51.5%) believe that Poles suffered as much as Jews during World War II, which obviously sharply contrasts the mainstream view among Jews, who see themselves as the group which suffered the most during the War. Even more surprisingly,

the Polish participants are not even more likely to sympathize with the Jewish viewpoint than Poles, who did not attend the festival, as the percentages of Poles believing they suffered as much as Jews is about the same as the national average.<sup>7</sup> Thus although Polish audiences listening to klezmer in Kazimierz have become much more interested in Jewish culture, it does not mean that they necessarily have come to share the common Jewish view of recent history and of Polish-Jewish relations.

## Conclusions

The empirical material presented in this article opens a new perspective on Kraków and its Jewish district as a real space for Polish-Jewish interaction. This interaction results not only in a thriving cultural life and artistic exchange between various groups, but it also inspires very intensive processes of identity change in the people directly experiencing the Jewish heritage through the klezmer revival.

All of the groups included in this research—i.e., klezmer musicians, cultural workers, and the audiences—express a belief that the Jewish music revival inspires and changes their identity. Moreover, it makes them more interested in Jewish culture in general. The klezmer phenomenon in Kazimierz serves, therefore, as a gateway to Jewishness for many people who encounter it for the first time. Consequently, the revived and rebuilt Kazimierz, apart from being an attractive tourist venue, presents a new and unique platform for the meeting of Polishness and Jewishness.

The negotiation between the two groups and two viewpoints in Kazimierz is not in all respects ideal. Not all of the people, having experienced Jewish culture, automatically sympathize with the Jewish perspective on Polish-Jewish history. Stereotypes and national myths are not easy to eradicate even in such an intensive encounter of cultures. However, the very process of change observable in Kazimierz gives hope that Polish-Jewish relations can come into a new phase and that the klezmer revival can initiate a counter-movement against the Polish deep-rooted anti-Semitism. And this very hope and the enthusiasm of all of the people creating the Jewish culture revival in Kraków make it clear that klezmer in Poland is something more than mere kitsch.

## Notes

1. The expression "virtually Jewish" was coined by R.E. Gruber to denote the particular European context of the Jewish revival which takes place in the absence of Jews. *Virtually Jewish* is also the title of Gruber's book (2002).

2. A Polish writer and literary critic.

3. The leaders of the uprising in Warsaw's Ghetto in 1943.

4. One of the most celebrated Polish poets (1798–1855).
5. An extremely popular Polish writer (1846–1916) belonging to the school canon of Polish literature, the winner of the literary Nobel Prize in 1905.
6. It should be noted that not surprisingly the percentage of respondents claiming to be Jewish was higher among the non-Poles (46.9%) than among the Poles (13.3%). Even though among the non-Poles Jewish respondents were more likely to answer that anti-Semitism is a very big problem than non-Jews (85.7% vs. 69.2%), both groups were much more likely to see anti-Semitism as a very big problem than Polish respondents (31%).
7. One could criticize the comparison, since the national survey is from 1996. However, the 1996 survey shows that the percentage of Poles believing that they suffered as much as Jews had actually increased by fifteen percent from the previous survey in 1992 (Krzemiński 2002:46).

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