

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

### Jewish Life and Jewish Studies in Poland

*Tad Taube, Chairman of Taube Philanthropies, and Shana Penn, Executive Director of Taube Philanthropies, sat outdoors in the sunny Bay Area in California to talk about the impact of philanthropy and why it makes sense to support Jewish life and studies in Poland. Marcin Wodziński, historian and head of the Taube Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław, joined them from slate-gray Wrocław in southwestern Poland on 31 December of 2020.*

Marcin Wodziński: **Let me begin by asking you both, as the heads of a foundation with global reach, about the personal philosophy, the guiding principle, behind your philanthropy.**

– Tad Taube: The guiding principle of our philanthropy is to make sure that whatever we do has impact. There is a lot of money in the world of philanthropy, millions, billions, committed that don't have any effect on anything. So once we establish that we will only pursue opportunities that have impact, then I would say that our number one guiding principle is to do what we can to build Jewish peoplehood, a greater understanding of Jewish issues and Jewish culture. Jewish survival obviously is a major component of what we do. In addition to the Jewish part, we also are very interested in the welfare of our societies which means that we address a lot of issues involving children, the education of our young people, and medical progress in areas that have been dangerous to humanity. Every foundation that I have ever been involved with has giving guidelines. Our guideline is that we have no guidelines.

**Meaning that you are open to all serious proposals?**

– TT: Anything that makes sense. Every once in a while we will run into something that we haven't really focused on before, and if it's something that we find to be helpful and attractive to creating a better world – if I can use those words – we will pursue it.

**Can you tell us what the most difficult or unfamiliar part of donating to Jewish projects in Poland is, compared with doing so in the United States, in Israel, or elsewhere.**

– TT: Probably the most difficult part in Poland is the interaction that we have politically with the Polish government. There are no interaction issues in the United States or Israel. But in Poland the whole area of Jewish philanthropy is something that is fairly new and we have to forge some new ideas, some of which are not necessarily acceptable. This is possibly most apparent in the case of the Polin Museum, our most visible and influential project in Poland. It is so big that it does attract a lot of attention from the Ministry of Culture, and from the government, in general.

– **Shana Penn:** In certain ways, the concerns and needs are not so different or unfamiliar especially regarding the interests of people who were not raised with a Jewish identity to make meaning of their Jewish heritage and to participate in a

Jewish community and cultural life. This process of de-assimilation, a term coined by Barbara Spectre of Paideia, has become common not only in a post-communist context, but also in the US, partly as a result of assimilation, interfaith upbringings, as well as other factors. The differences from the start of our work in Poland were quite dramatic because unlike in the US or Israel, there was only a nascent infrastructure of Jewish programs to serve the diverse needs of people of all ages and backgrounds who were “coming out of the closet” to explore their Jewish roots. A challenging part of our work in Poland, which we hadn’t anticipated, is that because many American Jews have negative stereotypes about Poland, we have had to spend substantial time advocating for the legitimacy of Jewish renewal in Poland. This is something we don’t have to do when we support Jewish life in the Bay Area or Israel.

### **How do you respond to people who criticize or question your support for Polish Jewish projects?**

– **TT**: The main reason we give is that it is part of our legacy. In the United States, probably 75 percent of all Jewish people trace their history back to Poland. Poland has really been the centerpiece of Jewish life up through and including the Holocaust. It was the center of development of our culture and our history, the cradle of Hasidism, and other forms of Jewish worship. The case is pretty strong. If people are interested at all in their culture, and in their heritage, it is not that hard to sell the idea that Poland is really where it all began. I’m talking about the post-Biblical period.

– **SP**: One of the things we learned is that ‘seeing is believing,’ and so we encouraged travel to Poland, by seeding a study tour program, Taube Jewish Heritage Tours that is managed in Warsaw. It enables people to come and explore on their own in guided study tours that focus on the breadth of Jewish life in Poland, past and present, and does not focus exclusively on the Holocaust. Also we see the Polin Museum, the Jewish Culture Festival, and the JCCs as important gathering points for Jews from outside of Poland.

– **TT**: The Museum is really a major magnet. We feel the same about our Jewish studies program in Wrocław. When we all met to discuss it for the first time twenty years ago, we didn’t think it would develop in the way that it has.

– **SP**: Yes, and now it is said to be the best Jewish studies program in Poland, and one of the best in Europe.

– **TT**: And the physical part is really impressive. The University gave you such a wonderful space for the program.

– **SP**: It is gorgeous.

### **I am really pleased to hear you say that. My next question is closely connected to the previous one: why of all the worthy goals in the world did you choose to support Jewish studies in Wrocław? How did you hear about us, what brought our program to your attention?**

– **TT**: That’s a good question, because when we first met you, there was no program. You were responsible for developing it. I don’t know if you remember when we arrived in Wrocław in the middle of the night in November, it was freezing...

– **SP**: The program did exist, but it didn’t have a library.

– **TT**: It did have a library – in a closet, with books in boxes.

– **SP**: I recall it all began twenty years ago when Alex Lauterbach in Los Angeles asked us to support the shipping of Jewish studies books to your library in Wrocław. That's when our support began, and that's when Jewish studies took off. We had no idea that it would grow so much. And it wasn't until you convinced us to come and visit that cold November that we saw the potential. We believed your vision, and we could see that you could make it happen.

**Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław was only a minor then, not a major. There were only four positions, and a few PhD students. In large part thanks to your support, we now have eleven positions, and a BA, MA and PhD program. I'm very proud of this. But how do *you* see the significance of academic Jewish studies in Poland? Again, why are they worthy of your support?**

– **TT**: It's all a matter of culture and heritage in Poland. I think that the Jewish studies effort that you have put forth in Wrocław is part of the matrix of Jewish life in Poland that we like to show off at this point.

– **SP**: The value of Jewish studies, and especially your program which has such good relationships with Jewish institutions throughout the country, is that you are creating cadres of Jewish professionals and educators to work at, for example, the Polin Museum, where they don't have enough educators with backgrounds in Jewish studies. The same goes for the Jewish Historical Institute, community groups, the Jewish Community Centers, the Galicia Jewish Museum. They all need staff members who have degrees in Jewish studies. It's also important to us that people from outside of Poland can come here to learn about their heritage, that they can come to your Department and take an MA program in English that focuses on areas that your Department is especially strong in, like Hasidism, gender and women's studies, Yiddish literature and culture.

– **TT**: We love what you are doing at the Taube Department of Jewish Studies. We think there is an opportunity to spread your wings and go global. We wish you all continued success and we are delighted about what is happening there.