

LAYERS OF MEMORY:

A Journey Through the Palimpsest of
Jewish History in Eastern Europe

Poland with Optional Lithuania
Study Tour 2026





In 2025, the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre launched its inaugural study tour to Poland—a journey that brought participants into direct encounter with sites of profound Jewish life, immense cultural creativity, and the catastrophic violence of the Holocaust. Over those days, we met people who are working with extraordinary dedication to reclaim, protect, and revitalise the traces of Jewish presence in these lands. Building on the depth and resonance of that experience, we now invite you to join the **second edition** of this exceptional programme. This year, our journey will once again take us through **Poland**, with an **optional extension into Lithuania**—two places of immense significance for Jewish civilisation, where the richness of what once

existed and the magnitude of what was lost remain inextricably interwoven.

Nowhere else in such a literal and visible manner do traces of Jewish life stand side by side with those of the Holocaust and destruction. In today's Poland and Lithuania, the presence of the void created by the Holocaust is almost palpable—because nowhere else in Europe was Jewish life as developed, as deeply rooted, or as culturally rich as it was in these historic lands. And nowhere else is the evidence of devastation so lasting and so pervasive. These landscapes form a kind of **historical palimpsest**, where remnants of a vibrant civilisation, the scars of wartime annihilation, and the marks left by decades of silence coexist upon the same surface.



GLÓWNE MIEJSCA - GETTA, OBOZY PRZEJŚCIOWE I WIEZIENIA, Z KTÓRYCH DEPORTOWANO ŻYDÓW I WIEZIŃIÓW INNYCH NARODOWOŚCI DO KL. AUSCHWITZ.
 MAIN SITES - GHETTOS, TRANSIT CAMPS AND PRISONS FROM WHERE THE JEWS AND PRISONERS OF OTHER NATIONALITIES WERE DEPORTED TO KL. AUSCHWITZ.

What the Holocaust did not destroy was often left to decay, forgotten or overlooked for decades. Instead of remembrance, a shared amnesia took hold—allowing further loss of what fragments of the broken world had somehow remained. Yet beneath the silence, memory endured.

The political and social realities shaped by the Second World War pushed many physical remnants of Jewish life into obscurity. What the Holocaust did not destroy was often left to decay, forgotten or overlooked for decades. Instead of remembrance, a shared amnesia took hold—allowing further loss of what fragments of the broken world had somehow remained.

Yet beneath the silence, memory endured. Today, the landscapes of Poland and Lithuania reveal their layered histories openly: pre-war centres of Jewish civilisation, sites of



wartime terror, places marked by post-war neglect, and contemporary spaces where Jewish life—though changed—has begun to find new forms of expression. In this **palimpsest of memory**, the past and present coexist, often in stark and moving contrast.

Returning to these places—where **presence and absence exist side by side**—requires courage, emotional readiness, and a willingness to encounter complex layers of history. This journey will guide participants through these intertwined narratives, creating space for honest conversations, personal reflection, and encounters

with those shaping Jewish memory and revival today: Jewish community members, local activists, scholars, and cultural leaders.

Led by Jakub Nowakowski, Director of the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre and former long-time Director of the Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków, the programme offers expert **insight into the region's Jewish past, its difficult post-war legacy, and the ongoing work of remembrance and renewal.**

We will be honoured to walk this path with you—a journey into history, memory, and the living present.

DRAFT PROGRAMME

(subject to change)

Day 1 – Arrival in Warsaw

Introduction to the complex history of Jewish Warsaw and orientation session.

Day 2 – Warsaw

- **Jewish Historical Institute**
Explore one of Poland's foremost centres for Jewish scholarship, archives, and heritage, housed in the rebuilt pre-war Judaic library and dedicated to preserving and interpreting the history of Polish Jewry.
- **POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews**
Visit this award-winning museum that traces a thousand years of Jewish life in Poland through immersive exhibitions, innovative storytelling, and powerful historical narratives.
- **Walk through the former Ghetto area**
Take a guided walk through the area of the former Warsaw Ghetto, where fragments of walls, memorials, and urban traces reveal the scale of destruction and the resilience of those who lived there.
- **Umschlagplatz, Mila 18, Ghetto resistance sites**
Visit key points of memory, including the Umschlagplatz, Mila 18, and other sites tied to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, honouring acts of resistance and courage amid devastation.

Day 3 – Lublin, Zamość (overnight)

We will drive toward southeastern Poland, stopping in Lublin's Old Town to visit **Brama Grodzka**, a remarkable cultural institution dedicated to restoring memory of the vanished Jewish city.

We continue to **Zamość**, a Renaissance "ideal city," where Sephardi Jews—invited by the city's founder—built a thriving community. Overnight in Zamość.

Day 4 – Belżec, Łańcut, Zbylitowska Góra Arrival in Kraków

Morning visit to **Belżec**, one of the primary death camps of Operation Reinhard and the site where most Jews from southern Poland, including Kraków, were murdered. Continue to:

- **Łańcut – renowned synagogue, beautifully preserved**
Discover the exquisitely restored Łańcut Synagogue, one of the most beautiful surviving synagogues in Poland, renowned for its rich interior décor and remarkable preservation.
- **Zbylitowska Góra – mass-execution site**
Stand at one of the region's most haunting sites of mass execution, where memorials and forest pathways mark the place where thousands of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.
- Arrival in Kraków.

Day 5 – Kraków: Old City, Kazimierz, Ghetto

Jewish Kraków was one of the most important centres of the Ashkenazi Jewish world, a place where scholarship, spirituality, and everyday communal

life flourished for centuries. Its historic district of Kazimierz still preserves a remarkable constellation of intact synagogues, alongside the revered

grave of Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the Remuh), one of Judaism's greatest legal scholars. Walking these streets offers a rare encounter with a landscape where layers of Jewish history remain visible, resonant, and deeply meaningful.

Exploring the layers of Jewish Kraków:

- Medieval and early-modern Jewish settlement
- Sites of religious, cultural, and communal life
- Former Ghetto across the river

Day 6 – Czarny Dunajec & Nowy Targ

Visit Czarny Dunajec, home to the only surviving synagogue in the Polish mountain region—a rare trace of the many Jewish communities that once lived there. Misused after the war, later abandoned, it has recently become the focus of a struggle between local activists seeking to turn it into a museum and

local politicians who oppose the plan.

Continue to **Nowy Targ**, once a major centre of Jewish life where the physical city survived but its Jewish community did not—an encounter with absence as a historical reality.

Return to Kraków.

Day 7 – Auschwitz-Birkenau & Shabbat in Kraków

A half-day study tour of **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, the most infamous site of the Holocaust, where the remnants of the camp bear witness to the magnitude of Nazi crimes.

In the evening, **Shabbat dinner** in Kraków—a juxtaposition of memory and resilience, loss and renewal.

Day 8 – Reflection Day & Jewish Culture Festival

Visit the **Galicia Jewish Museum** for a curated learning session and group reflection.

In the evening, experience the closing open-air concert of the Jewish Culture Festival—a powerful testament to renewal and contemporary Jewish creativity.

OPTIONAL EXTENSION: LITHUANIA

Day 9 – Arrival in Vilnius (Vilna)

- **Jewish Vilna:**

Visit the site of the former Great Synagogue, once the heart of Jewish religious and cultural life; explore Vilnius's Jewish museums that preserve the city's rich heritage; and learn the stories of the "Jerusalem of the North," a centre of scholarship and creativity devastated during the war.

- **Ponary**

Visit Ponary, one of the most haunting sites of mass murder in Eastern Europe—a deep encounter with memory and human loss.

Day 10 – Šeduva

- **Shtetls of Lithuania**

Discover the shtetls of Lithuania, small towns that once flourished with vibrant Jewish life, learning about their cultural richness and the destruction that befell them during the war.

- **The Lost Shtetl in Šeduva**

ground-breaking new museum and memorial complex

Return to Vilnius.

Day 11 – Departure

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The programme includes:

- Accommodation in **4- and 5-star hotels**
- All breakfasts and selected group meals
- All guiding services
- Transportation throughout Poland and Lithuania
- All museum and site entry fees
- Expert educational sessions

Not included:

- International flights
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses

The full itinerary and cost breakdown will be shared soon. Pricing will decrease as the group size increases. Maximum number of participants: 35.

**For expressions of interest and more information:
admin@holocaust.org.za**

We would be honoured to accompany you on this meaningful journey—one that engages both history and memory, past and present, loss and renewal. Together, we will explore landscapes shaped by centuries of Jewish life, confront the devastating impact of the Shoah, and witness the vibrant revival unfolding today. This will be a deeply personal and intellectually rich experience, and we look forward to travelling these paths with you.