

Polish priest, rabbi team up in new book on Jewish literature

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The recent publication of a new book in Poland coauthored by a priest and a rabbi is being seen as an important step towards mutual understanding and tolerance between Polish Jews and Catholics.

Introduction to Jewish Literature and Biblical Exegesis, published earlier this year in Polish by the official publishing house of the Polish Catholic Church, was co-authored by Prof. Mariusz Rosik, a Polish priest, and Rabbi Yitzchak Rapoport, the chief rabbi of Wroclaw.

While a project such as this would be highly influential in its own right, the book was also the first to be authored by a Polish priest and rabbi, while receiving the Polish Catholic Church's official imprimatur, granted by Archbishop of Wroclaw Marian Golebiewski.

The church's official recognition of the book is an encouraging development in the struggle to repair relations between Polish Catholics and Jews after decades of anti-Semitism, according to Michael Freund, chairman and founder of Shavei Israel, which works to uncover and strengthen Jewish communities around the world, and particularly those within Poland.

"The Polish Catholic Church is a very influential body in Poland," said Freund. "And the fact that the Jewish community is so small means that most Poles don't usually come into contact with Jews. That the church is publishing this book means that the Poles will now be able to learn first-hand about what it means to be Jewish, and the fact that the church is disseminating the book through its own channels will lend the book further credibility."

Rapoport is one of three emissaries who was sent to Poland by Shavei Israel, the other two being Krakow Chief Rabbi Boaz Pash and Rabbi Pinchas Zarczynski of Warsaw. The emissaries were dispatched after the chief rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, called for an increased presence among Jewish leadership, soon after he was appointed to the position of chief rabbi in 2004. The arrival of the rabbis, and their success in their respective cities, reflects a budding Jewish community.

"Ninety percent of Jews in Poland were annihilated in the Holocaust, but since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Poland has opened up and become a more democratic country," said Freund. "People feel freer and safer to express their Jewish roots."

Shavei Israel has played a significant role in strengthening the bonds between Polish Jews and their Catholic compatriots, as well as uncovering what has come to be known as "The Hidden Jews of Poland."

"During the Holocaust, Jewish children were often put up for adoption with Catholic families, and many of these children grew up thinking that they were Catholics," said Freund. "But in recent years, their descendants have been coming out of the closet, so to speak."

According to Freund, 4,000 people are currently registered as Jews in Poland, but the population is estimated to be upwards of 30,000. Through Shavei Israel's influence - dispatching the three rabbis, organizing Jewish educational programs in Polish, and holding cultural events - Freund believes the gap between the official and actual Jewish populations is closing.

"With each passing day, more and more Jews uncover the truth about their past," Freund said.

And now, with the publication of Rapoport's book, many more Jews may soon be ready to be "uncovered" in Poland.

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