

GALLERY גלריה

Ofer Aderet

In 1938, at 7 Rynkowa Street (Market Street) in Warsaw, stood the Gruber Yossel tavern – translated as “Fat Yossel.” It opened at dawn, drawing porters and wagon drivers for breakfast, which included herring, groats, meat, a roll or a bagel, and, of course, vodka. From noon until evening, patrons drank tea or beer and nibbled on small dishes. In the evening, the tavern attracted prostitutes and pimps, and at night it became a meeting place for high society – officers, ministers and even a prime minister – who emerged from nearby restaurants and nightclubs looking for somewhere to continue their night out.

Details about Gruber Yossel’s tavern appear in “A Guide: Jewish Warsaw 1938,” an exceptional book published in Hebrew by Magnes Press in 2025. Its author, Benny Mer, undertook a task no one before him had attempted: compiling a tourist guide to a place that no longer exists – Jewish Warsaw on the eve of World War II. Almost every site featured in the guide was completely destroyed in the years that followed.

“Many cities have changed their face over the past century,” Mer writes in the book’s introduction, “but it’s hard to find a place that has changed its character and appearance as radically as the former Jewish quarter of Warsaw.”

Gruber Yossel was open almost around the clock, except on Shabbat, as Yossel Leizer Ledowsky was a God-fearing Jew. Yossel himself died in 1932 at the age of 42, but the tavern gained a kind of eternal life when it was immortalized in a famous Polish waltz titled “A Ball at Old Joska’s.”

Those searching for traces of the place today may be pleased to discover that a restaurant bearing his name – Gruby Josek – operates in Warsaw not far from the original location.

“This cool restaurant is a nice example of the dialogue between past and present,” Mer says. “Part of the charm of Poland in general, and Warsaw in particular, lies in that dialogue. The ‘is’ of today’s Warsaw is also a ‘not’ for me. I am constantly moving between here and there – between today’s Warsaw and the Warsaw of the past. I literally feel what lies beneath my feet.”

Not everyone shares this view. The dialogue Mer describes is limited in scope. An entirely different city was built on the ruins of Jewish Warsaw, and no effort was made to reconstruct its monumental Jewish buildings. This stands in stark contrast to the reconstruction of Warsaw’s Old Town, which became a major attraction for tourists from around the world.

“Jewish Warsaw was intentionally not rebuilt,” Mer says. “For various reasons, something entirely different was built there.” Among the reasons were decades of communist rule in postwar Poland, marked by antisemitism and the suppression of religious and national symbols. The fact that Warsaw was almost entirely emptied of its Jews also played a



Clockwise from left: Benny Mer; Warsaw’s Wolowa Street in 1938; and Kercelek Market, where the city meets the countryside.



Avishag Shaar-Yashuv, The Polish National Archives

# A new tourist guide tells us how to visit a city that was erased

## Benny Mer’s guide to Jewish Warsaw on the eve of World War II resurrects a fascinating world of streets, voices and tastes

decisive role. On the eve of World War II, about 378,000 Jews lived in Warsaw, constituting roughly one-third (29 percent) of the city’s population. The city buzzed with Jewish political and cultural activity and attracted Jewish intellectuals from around the world. According to Yad Vashem data, 370,000 of Warsaw’s Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. Today, only a few thousand Jews live in all of Poland, depending on how Jewishness is defined.

Only in recent decades, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, has a renewed Polish interest in the Jewish past emerged – sometimes as an economic or tourist gimmick, and sometimes out of genuine longing and a desire to confront a significant and forgotten chapter of history. The revived “Fat Yossel” is part of this trend, but with all due respect to the Jewish tavern, the most prominent building erased from Warsaw’s postwar landscape was the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street, built at the end of the 19th century and destroyed by the Germans at the conclusion of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

A model of the synagogue can be seen at ANU – Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv. On its ruins, an office tower was erected in 1991. The long delay in its construction – which began three decades earlier – was later explained in Poland by a “curse” allegedly placed by rabbis on the site.



Franciszkanska Street in central Warsaw, 1938.

The Polish National Archives

### A Polish obsession

Mer was born in 1971 in Tel Aviv to a religious Zionist family. His father, born in 1932 in a shtetl north of Warsaw, survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union and spoke Yiddish throughout his life. His mother was born in Belgium. At age 13, Mer moved with his family to Bnei Brak, where he studied at a yeshiva high school. He later studied Yiddish at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and went on to become a writer, editor, translator and journalist. He also edited Haaretz’s literary supplement. Since 2017, he has been editor in chief of Magnes Press.

Mer is currently writing a doctoral dissertation at the Yiddish Center at Bar-Ilan University. He has published several books and translations, including in recent years “Smocza – a biography of a Jewish street in Warsaw” – and a translation of Moyshe Zonshayn’s “Jewish Warsaw.”

“After finishing them,” he says, “I was left wanting more. I still didn’t understand Jewish Warsaw, and I still could not truly see it before my eyes.”

In an effort to get closer to a place that once existed and will never return, Mer immersed himself in newspapers, history books, literature, travel guides and memoirs. The core of the work involved an almost endless excavation of historical Jewish newspapers in Yiddish, Hebrew and Polish, published in Poland in the early 20th century and accessible through the National Library website.

“Every day, nine Yiddish newspapers were published in Warsaw,” he says. “There were also journals and periodicals, including literary magazines. The sources are endless.” Mer began the project during the protests against the judicial overhaul that preceded October 7 and continued working on it during the war in Gaza.

“It became an obsession that helped distract me,” he says. “Assembling this million-piece puzzle answered a psychological need born of existential anxiety – perhaps one day this place, Israel, will no longer exist. And who will remember us then? Who will map the streets of Tel Aviv?”

Mer made two extended research visits to Warsaw, equipped with a map marking the former streets and the few remaining traces of Jewish Warsaw. “I wandered around and checked the terrain,” he says, noting that only about five percent of old Warsaw remains intact. “It’s a kingdom of words and memories,” he adds, “which doesn’t truly exist today.”

cisely the combination of all these that best reflects our Warsaw.”

At the end of the street, the visitor imagines a small square with a notorious reputation. The guide describes it this way: “The Pletzl area is the center of Jewish Warsaw’s underworld – thieves, pimps, brothels and all the rest – but above the surface of the square you are unlikely to see them. Instead, you encounter the familiar hustle and bustle of Jewish men and women selling bagels, ice cream, lottery tickets, cigarettes, cakes, watermelons in summer, and potatoes, yellow peas and hot tea in winter. Worshipers, matchmakers, brokers, the unemployed, and street musicians are also not lacking.”

Further along, the reader arrives at “the bustling market area,” described as “the meeting place of city and village, animals and humans, Yiddish and Polish, fresh and rotten, elegant and shabby – the cries of vendors, the clucking of chickens, the honking of wagons and cars, the whistles of police officers, and the grunts of pigs.” Vegetarians with weak hearts are advised to stay away. Still, the guide offers one compelling reason to venture in: the famous treasury of curses, delivered in both Yiddish and Polish by the fishmongers.

In 1938, a shop named “Tel Aviv” operated at 2 Nowolipki Street, selling products from what was then British Mandatory Palestine, including foodstuffs, wines and etrogim (citrons). At 15 Nalewki Street, a cafe bearing the same name also operated. “Tel Aviv was probably a sexy name,” Mer says, “reflecting the interest Warsaw residents had in what was happening in Eretz Israel.”

### Eating well and sleeping cheap

Institutionalized commemoration of Jewish Warsaw today focuses primarily on the Holocaust rather than on the Jewish life that preceded it. This includes Nathan Rapoport’s Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Muranow; remnants of the ghetto wall and a series of monuments erected in 2008 along its route; and the vast Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street (the Gesia Street cemetery). A memorial plaque marks the entrance to Mordechai Anielewicz’s bunker at 18 Mila Street, where archaeological excavations in recent years have uncovered items

used by the ghetto fighters. These artifacts are slated to be displayed in the future Ghetto Museum currently being established in Warsaw. An exception to this destruction-focused narrative is the Polin Museum, founded in 2013, which documents a thousand years of Jewish life in Poland and does not focus solely on its annihilation.

Despite the erasure of Jewish life from Warsaw’s physical landscape, Mer insists that “it’s impossible to walk through Jewish Warsaw today without constantly encountering its past.” This encounter, he suggests, is more emotional than tangible. “Even more than physically, it is expressed in literature, prose and historical studies,” he says, referring to “a tremendous thirst to know the past and, in a way, to embrace it – that is, not to deny it, not to turn one’s back on it.”

Ultimately, however, he sees no room for comparison between Jewish Warsaw of 1938 and that of today. “There’s no way to even begin comparing these communities,” he says. “Then it was a massive community – one-third of the city’s population. Today it’s a small community, not concentrated in any one area.” Even so, he adds, “I’m no longer just looking for yesterday in Warsaw. I also enjoy the nice patisseries and everything the city has to offer today.”

Food is undoubtedly one of the carriers of memory in Jewish Warsaw. In contemporary restaurants in the Polish capital, menus often include “Jewish” dishes such as pickled herring “Jewish style” and tzimmes, a sweet carrot stew.

“Jewish Warsaw has no dish of its own,” Mer’s 1938 guide explains. “Everyone who came there brought dishes from home, so everything can be eaten here – especially if it’s kosher and tasty.” The culinary tour he leads covers the Jewish kitchen in all its shades and flavors, from salted fish with onions to fruit compote.

Alongside food, the guide also recommends culture. Options include live music or music played on a gramophone, cinemas, and the Warsaw Fotoplastikon – a stereoscopic theater that presents three-dimensional slides and “charms viewers with changing exhibitions.” The venue still exists today and attracts lovers of retro culture.

After the tourist has eaten and enjoyed himself, he also needs a place to stay. “A Jewish hotel usually resembles a boardinghouse and is located on one floor – more or less – of a residential building,”

the guidebook notes. Those seeking a cheaper option can choose from a variety of *haymishye pensyonen* – home-style boardinghouses – sometimes referred to as *pensyon de vants*, literally a “bedbug boardinghouse.”

In the chapter titled “How to Get There?” the guide lists ships sailing from British Mandatory Palestine to Romania, from where passengers continued to Warsaw by train. The main shipping line departed from Haifa, passed through Piraeus and Istanbul, and ended in Constanta. An airline also operated between Poland and Tel Aviv. The flight lasted 16 hours and included stops in Lviv, Chernivtsi, Bucharest, Sofia, Thessaloniki and Athens. “The airplane has 14 seats and flies three times a week,” the guide notes.



The book cover. Magnes Press

The book quotes impressions from a passenger on this route, published in 1937: “Yesterday I was still walking in Tel Aviv, and today I am sitting in Warsaw, writing this note... Lot Airlines has done something bordering on the Messianic era.”

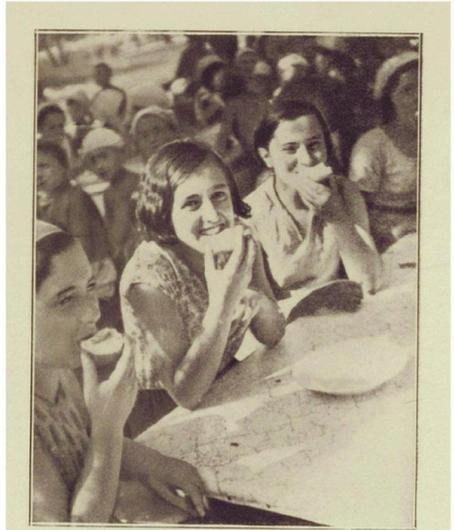
The contemporary reader, leafing through a guide that presents itself as having been written in 1938, already knows the tragic fate awaiting the world it documents. People at the time also lived under the growing tension preceding the outbreak of war. “That end hovers over the book,” Mer says. “But people certainly lived full lives even under the shadow of that awareness.” He leaves it to others to draw parallels to Israel today. The book, he emphasizes, does not address the Holocaust itself, but rather the Jewish life in Poland that was cut short because of it.

“Anyone who speaks today of Poland as one large Jewish cemetery obscures the life that was there and still is,” Mer says. “Anyone who does that turns the story of Polish Jewry into a mere prelude to the Warsaw Ghetto. This approach plays into the hands of those who claim that we have only one place, between the river and the sea.”



The Warsaw Fotoplastikon

Adrian Gryczak



Girls eating at the Medem Sanatorium. Medem Sanatorium brochure