

30 YEARS OF THE RONALD S. LAUDER FOUNDATION IN POLAND, 1987-2017

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Key words: The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, Jewish education, rebirth of the Jewish life in Poland, Lauder-Morasha Schools

Abstract: This article presents the history of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland from when it was founded 30 years ago. The Foundation was established by Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder, businessman, diplomat and philanthropist. It was the first organization to initiate Jewish educational activities during the period of political changes in Poland. The Foundation's activities focused mainly on education, both formal and informal. During early '90's people in Poland started to discover their Jewish roots and thanks to the RLSF it was possible to learn and understand Jewish history, religion and culture. The author describes projects organised by the Foundation as well as its development and significance in the rebirth of Jewish life in Poland. Among the Foundation's most important projects are the Lauder-Morasha School Complex in Warsaw, the summer educational camps for families and youths, a genealogical project, and the Lauder e-School. The Foundation has also made a huge contribution and provided support to many organizations, institutions and Jewish Communities throughout Poland.

This article presents an account of 30 years of the activities and achievements of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland and the Foundation's influence on the revival of Jewish life in the country. The author has cooperated extensively with the Foundation over the years, initially as a participant in the Foundation's projects, then as a program coordinator and program manager, and finally as head of the Lauder-Morasha School and director and national representative of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation for 11 years. In Warsaw, Jewish communities from across Europe suffered unbelievable destruction and degrading humiliation, not only during the Holocaust, but also after the end of the Second World War. The vast majority of European Jews perished, and those who survived not only could not rebuild their lives or live as assimilated citizens, but still suffered from anti-Semitic campaigns (e.g., in Gomułka's campaign in Poland,¹ in Czechoslovakia's Slanski Affair² and in the Soviet Union's famous Doctors' Plot³). In the decades after the Holocaust, they also experienced a number of pogroms.

¹ Berent 2009.

² Lukes 1999.

³ Rapoport 1990.

However, the last decade of the 20th century brought new hope to European Jewry, especially in Central and Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, most Jewish communities from European cities were viewed as almost dead and non-existing therefore were considered not worthy of investing any interest in their infrastructure. They were viewed as dying communities that consisted of elderly survivors who were thought to be the last Jews of Poland.⁴

We learn from the Pirkei Avoth that one person is responsible for his friends. Fortunately for the Jewish community in Poland and for the Jewish communities in 15 countries across Europe, there was a great man who felt this responsibility and decided not to leave the Holocaust survivors alone. Their children and grandchildren were assimilated entirely and allowed to become what the world wanted them to be: “the last Jews of Poland.” The person who decided to change the history of the European Jewry was Mr. Ronald S. Lauder, a businessman, diplomat, philanthropist and art collector. At that time no other Jewish organization from, Poland, Israel or the US was conducting any kind of different educational or outreach programs to assimilate Jews.

Mr. Lauder was born in New York and is a son of Joseph and Estée Lauder, who founded Estée Lauder cosmetics. He grew up in a Jewish, non-religious family of Hungarian origin. He attended the Bronx High School and holds a degree in International Business from Wharton University in Pennsylvania; he also studied in Paris and Brussels. In 1986, Mr. Lauder was appointed the US Ambassador to Austria, and being in Europe at that time, shortly before many political changes were about to take place, gave him the unique opportunity to learn about the Jewish community in Austria, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria and so on.

Leaders of the Jewish communities in Eastern Europe had an extremely difficult time running their communities, and it was almost impossible to contact the Western Jewish representatives. There were no educational systems, a lack of educators and rabbis and Jews who were afraid to admit they were Jewish.

Mr. Lauder’s heart was wide open when he was approached with a request to financially support small Jewish kindergartens in Vienna and Budapest, which launched his future Foundation.

During the next 3 years, other countries came, which created a great network of educational institutions. When Mr. Lauder’s diplomatic mission was completed in 1987, the Roland S. Lauder Foundation was officially established. Five years later, the Foundation was already serving more than 15 countries in Europe: Austria, Germany, Slovakia, Romania, Belarus, Hungary, Estonia, Poland, Croatia, Moldova, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, the Czech Republic and Russia.

From the moment the Foundation was launched, over 34,000 children attended foundation projects and over 350,000,000 US dollars was invested in Jewish education in Europe to rebuild Jewish life.⁵

The main goal of the Foundation was education, including formal and informal educational programs and institutions, mostly for the younger generation but also for those a little older. The Foundation opened kindergartens, and primary, middle, high schools, and Educational Summer Camps. Third-level institutions were also opened: in 1999 the

⁴ Niezabitowska 1986: 15.

⁵ *The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation 1987-2007*: 42.

Yeshiva Yeshurun was opened in Berlin with a Rabbinical Studies program, while in 2003 the Lauder Business School opened in Vienna for students from all over Europe.⁶

In each country, the needs, the size and the demographics of the community were different, as were the structures of the schools, which varied by country. In some countries, Jewish kindergartens already existed (e.g., Chabad in Vienna), while in other countries, Jewish students attended state schools with additional Jewish studies classes in after-school programs. Some schools also opened in cooperation with official Jewish communities or Jewish organizations. However, in some countries the schools were completely independent and private, since the local communities had no space or funds or because the Jewish identity of its members was not strong enough to be interested in Jewish education for their children.

In many Lauder schools, we can find a number of non-Jewish students, as there were not always enough Jewish pupils, and the schools would not have been able to survive financially without the extra students. The Foundation was criticized for this policy. However, Dr. Gorge Ban, the CEO of the Foundation, explains that it is better to have a place where you can get a Jewish education than not to have this opportunity at all.⁷

The policy varied by country. In fact, in some countries, parents only agreed to send their children to the Lauder schools on the condition that the school would be open to non-Jewish students as well. They did not want to have their children isolated from local society. In other countries, all private schools, even those for minorities, were obligated to accept all candidates according to their learning results and not according to their national or religious affiliation, like the Middle School in Sofia.⁸

Mr. Lauder's philosophy has always been that communities should decide what kind of school they want to have. However he believes it should be somewhere in the middle, not too secular but not too orthodox either.⁹

The last school that appeared on the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation's map was a school in Athens, Greece. The school was founded in 1960 and was supported by the Jewish community in Athens. Unfortunately, few years after Greece joined the Euro zone in 2002, the country faced a serious economic and political crisis. Starting from 2010 as the crisis was progressing; the future of the school was in question. The school and the Jewish community of Athens were impacted by the situation in the country and experienced serious difficulties supporting the school. In their search for partners in Israel and the US, they approached the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Of course, there was an immediate answer from Ambassador Lauder; as always, Jewish education for children was considered crucial to maintaining Jewish identity and the continuity of European Jewish communities.

This year is very special for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, since it has been exactly 30 years since the Foundation started its activities in Europe. In Poland, the history of the Foundation goes back to 1987, when the first small educational summer programs took place. It was probably the first time in many years that a small group of Polish Jews came together to reconnect with their traditions and to learn about their religion, the

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Spritzer 2006.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation 1987-2007*: 48.

history of the Jewish Nation, and what is important. They did not learn from books but directly from rabbis who came from very traditional Jewish communities in New York, like Rabbi Haskel Besser from the Upper West Side and Rabbi Hershel Lieber¹⁰ from Borough Park. Rabbi Lieber has been actively involved in teaching Polish Jews since then and has served as a hazzan for the High Holidays in Warsaw's only synagogue (also rebuilt by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation). When Rabbi Besser and Mr. Ronald Lauder first met, they had no idea that this combination of two worlds, Orthodox Hasidic Rabbi and secular diplomat and businessman, could change the future of the European Jewry and that they might have so much in common.¹¹

Poland joined the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation network at the very beginning of its existence, which was before the fall of Communism in 1989. At that time, most Polish Jews preferred not to identify as Jews, with exception of some elderly people and a small group that remained active and tried to preserve their Jewish identity. The hope for the growth of the Jewish communities across Poland seemed unrealistic.

Mr. Lauder stressed on many occasions that he was fully aware that the Jewish communities across Europe needed help and support to stay Jewish and to become totally assimilated. However, he also knew that it was possible to prevent such losses by giving young children an education—specifically, a Jewish education.

The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland started its operation thanks to two special people whose impact on forming the Foundation was crucial, Rabbi Haskel Besser and Rabbi Hershel Lieber. They were both involved in helping Polish Jews in the 70s and 80s, years before the Foundation came to existence. In 1991 the first official Director of Outreach and Rabbi was appointed to work in Poland.

A New York Rabbi, with Polish roots, named Michael Schudrich,¹² who had just returned from a 6-year mission to Japan, started his mission to Poland, and shortly after this, he and his family moved to Poland to work and live with the local Jewish community. He continued working for the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation for nearly 10 years, and in 1998, he decided to move back to New York. In 2000, Rabbi Schudrich came back to Poland as Chief Rabbi of Warsaw and Łódź, and in 2004, he was appointed the Chief Rabbi of Poland.¹³ His successor, Yonah Bookstein, who led the Foundation in Poland after Rabbi Schudrich, already had a lot of experience with Jewish communities in Poland, as he had volunteered at the Lauder summer and winter camps since the early 1990's. During his studies at Oxford University, he visited Poland on many occasions, mostly to organize programs for Jewish holidays (Purim, Chanukah, Sukkot and Pesach). From 1996 onward, he was accompanied by his wife, Rachel. He also spent an academic year at the university in Krakow, where he was an active member of the Jewish community. His mission ended in 2001, and the post was given to Rabbi Dr. Joseph Kanofsky. Mr. Bookstein returned to US, where he attended and completed rabbinical school at Ohr Sameach in Monsey. Prior to his rabbinical studies, Rabbi Kanofsky earned a PhD in Literature from Boston University. The Foundation's ceremony for this occasion turned out to be somewhat unfortunate and will stay forever in memories of

¹⁰ Wodnicka 2010.

¹¹ Kozak 2004: 158.

¹² Będkowski, Brzostowska 2014: 377.

¹³ Grabski, Rykała 2010: 419.

the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation family, as it was scheduled for September 11, 2001. Similar to his predecessor, Rabbi Kanofsky led the Foundation for 3 years. From 2004 onward, the official country representative was Helise Lieberman, a founding director of the Lauder-Morasha School in Warsaw. The school had opened in 1994. Warsaw was not the only place where the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation sent its representatives, since the Foundation was running youth clubs in many cities in Poland, not only in Warsaw but also in Gdańsk, Katowice, Krakow, Wrocław and Bytom. In 1998, a rabbi was also appointed to Krakow—Mr. Sacha Pecaric, who was in the final stage of his rabbinical studies. He was born in Croatia and attended rabbinical school at Yeshiva University in New York. While in Krakow, he devoted a large part of his time to translating many important Jewish books, such as Chumash (Five Books of Moses), Siddur (Prayer book) and many books on Jewish law and customs,¹⁴ as well as books about prophets, into Polish. Since 2005, he has been a director of a publishing house independent from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. In 2006, I, as a Polish-born rabbi, was appointed the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Country Representative and Head of School, where I replaced Mrs. Helise Lieberman, who had run the school for 12 years.¹⁵

The collapse of Communism in 1989 meant that there were more Jews in Poland who were hungry for Jewish life than one might have expected.¹⁶ Torn by the trauma of the Holocaust, Polish Jews yearned to reconnect with their Jewish past, to learn about their Jewish heritage and to once again understand what it meant to be a Jew.

The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation recognized their needs and reached out to eager Jewish families by starting educational and social projects through which Polish Jews could explore Jewish holidays, prayers, the Torah and Jewish education. It was these important projects of the Foundation that made it possible for those of the Polish Jewry to rediscover their Jewish identity and develop into the thriving, active and inspiring community it has become. Before the Holocaust, Poland boasted of one of the finest Jewish cultures and communities in the world, and today, through the generous support of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, this community has risen from the ashes to once again become the beautiful and fulfilled community it once was.

One would find it difficult to explain how a lost and heavily assimilated generation of Jews, haunted by the past and anti-Semitism, has miraculously chosen to rediscover its Jewish roots.¹⁷

There is no question that even today, for many of us, this process is not easy, and one can only try to imagine how much harder it was 25 or 30 years ago, in light of the political upheavals that took place throughout Eastern Europe. Only a miracle could re-inspire and reanimate the Jewish community of Poland. It took tremendous courage for one to say openly “I’m Jewish,” in Poland. It took sheer bravery to admit that our hopes, dreams and prayers were that our children and grandchildren would be brought up Jewish and attend Jewish kindergartens and Jewish schools.

The list of accomplishments of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland includes broad-range projects for Holocaust survivors, the elderly, families, students and young

¹⁴ *Klasyczna Biblioteka Judaizmu* 2004.

¹⁵ Grabski, Stankowski 2012: 236.

¹⁶ Datner 2010: 663.

¹⁷ Mayer 2002.

children. For many Polish Jews, participation in these projects was their only possibility to experience Jewish life and to re-instill their culture within themselves, their families and the community.

The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation started with the Lauder Summer Camp in late 1980s, and then the Lauder Kindergarten opened its doors to the youngest Jewish children.¹⁸

Youth clubs and educational centers for adult education were opened to teach the Torah and to allow Polish Jews to experience Jewish life. The long-awaited Lauder-Morasha Primary School and Middle School were established.

Five years ago, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation launched Lauder e-Learning Schools. This cutting edge, innovative, online school provides Jewish education to Jewish children from all over Poland. Participation in this project guaranteed the Polish Jewry that no child would be left behind. Another of the many aspects of supporting Jewish life in Poland by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation was publishing Jewish books written in Polish.

Let's take a closer look the list of accomplishments of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland.

One of the first projects the Foundation in Poland conducted included Jewish educational summer and winter camps. The camps provided a place where families, youth and elderly Jews, who desire to learn about the Jewish tradition and religion, from cities throughout Poland could meet and share a "Jewish living experience." They also took this unique time to meet other Jews, make new friends and learn about and spend Shabbatot together.

As it happened, the first camp, held in Zaborów,¹⁹ was followed with camps in Komorów where only about 15 people participated. The initial role of the Foundation in Poland, guided by Rabbi Haskel Besser, laid the groundwork for the continued growth and success of the unique camp programs. Then in Rychwald, Sródborów and Łądek-Zdrój, the camp developed to a degree that separate sessions for families, Holocaust survivors and teenagers were organized.²⁰

What we emphasize in particular at the camps is the children's program. More than 40 children participate and are divided according to age group. Every day is filled with a full-time program led by experienced teachers. During the camp, children learn about Jewish history and symbols, about prayers and Jewish customs, about the ethical values of Judaism and many others topics. The program is carried out using games and activities, both indoor and outdoor. Children also play an active role in the evening programs.

The youth at the camp are involved in a series of meetings, discussions and lectures designed especially for them. Topics vary from the Torah and the Talmud to the current situation in Israel and prospects for the future of young Polish Jews, as well as from different aspects of Jewish law to modern science and art.

During each session of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation camp, about 150 participants enjoy interesting lectures, discussions, workshops, sports activities, evening programs, trips, Jewish music and tasty, kosher food. For many, this is the only opportunity

¹⁸ *The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Booklet* (1994/1995).

¹⁹ Kocoń 2000: 135.

²⁰ Wodnicka 2010.

to meet and to hear lectures delivered by rabbis or by representatives of various Jewish organizations and special guests. Every year, an incredibly large number of Polish Jews take their first steps into Jewish life. This unique project has brought many families closer to Judaism.²¹

One of the most significant projects for the Jewish community in Warsaw was initiating the complex of the Lauder-Morasha School. The beginning of the Lauder-Morasha School in Warsaw dates back to 1989, when seven families decided that they wanted to give their children a Jewish education. They wanted their children to be Jewish, to study the Torah and celebrate Shabbat and to learn Jewish history.

In 1994, the first grade of the primary school, which had 18 pupils, opened, and five years later, the first grade of the Middle School was opened.²²

Over the years, this project became a great success and the number of children kept growing each year.

Currently there are 85 children at the Lauder-Morasha Kindergarten, spread over four groups; children start in the first group at the age of three. The Primary School has more than 120 pupils, aged six to 13 years old. A total of 40 students are enrolled in the three grades of the middle school.

Lauder-Morasha graduates are accepted to the best high schools in Warsaw and then continue their education at universities and become successful professionals and active members of the Jewish community.

The Lauder-Morasha School organizes lectures, activities and meetings for children, so they can learn what the Jewish community used to be like in Poland, as well as trips to visit different communities in Europe. Our pupils have a very unique chance to not only learn about Judaism but to experience Jewish life at the school and bring home the spirit of Shabbat or holidays.

The new building in which the school has been located since 1999 houses wonderful facilities, such as special labs, a gym, colorful classrooms, a nurse, speech therapy and psychology support, a synagogue, a kosher dining room, a playground, a library and a Jewish studies resource room. Internet access is available throughout the building. At the Lauder-Morasha School, all pupils can receive a Jewish education, including religion, tradition and history, as well as a high-level secular education. They can study the Hebrew language, celebrate Jewish holidays and attend special family events, such as Shabbat dinners, picnics, and concerts. Students even have the ability to participate in a variety of special interest classes and bar/bat mitzvah lessons.

The building was inaugurated in October 1999 by Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder, Rabbi Haskel Besser, Mayor of Warsaw Paweł Piskorski and Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek, who cited the Talmud and talked about the world being sustained by children going to school during his speech to stress importance of education.²³ The same week, the Jewish Lauder-Chabad School was opened in Vienna, Austria, and an educational center for teachers was opened in Berlin, Germany.²⁴ The school was also visited by many international officials, such as First Lady Hillary Clinton and, later, First Lady Laura Bush.

²¹ *L'chaim* 2000.

²² Grabski, Stankowski 2002: 236.

²³ *Dedication of the new campus of the Lauder-Morasha School in Warsaw, Poland* 2000.

²⁴ *Dedications of Schools in Europe seen as part of fragile Jewish Revival* 1999.

Representatives of the school also welcomed President Barak Obama during his visit to the Ghetto Uprising Monument. The kindergarten had the pleasure to host Mrs. and Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu from Israel twice,²⁵ and the school was visited by the Israeli Ministers of Education, Yuli Tamir and Gidon Sear.

During the past academic year alone, the Polish First Lady visited the school, Mrs. Agata Kornhauser-Duda. Mrs. Kornhauser-Duda is a daughter of a Polish writer of Jewish roots, Mr. Julian Kornhauser.²⁶

In Wrocław, the Lauder Etz Chaim School was founded in 1998 by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation.²⁷ During its first years of operation, the school was located in the Jewish community building near 5 Włodkowica Street. The number of pupils grew from year to year, and in 2003, the school moved to the building at 57 Żelazna Street, which served as a Jewish school founded by *Synagogengemeinde* before the Second World War. After the war, the building served as the Shalom Alejchem School, which was closed in 1968. The location of the Lauder Etz Chaim School in this building has historic value, since it was associated with Jewish education and thus has a symbolic meaning for the Jewish community in Wrocław. The school offers high-level classes in Jewish studies and the Hebrew language thanks to the cooperation of the Judaic Studies Department at Wrocław University. Since 2000, the school has been ranked at the very top of the list of primary schools in Lower Silesia, gaining many achievements in international competitions.²⁸ In 2012 the school became independent and changed its name to Szalom Alejchem School²⁹.

The first Jewish youth club opened in Warsaw in the early '90s. The club brought together many young Jews who were just discovering their Jewish roots. They had the opportunity to learn and experience Judaism, but what was most important was that “the new generation of Polish Jews” spent time with each other. To achieve and progress that goal, Rabbi Michael Schudrich opened a small kosher pub called “Bakbuk”.³⁰ In fact, back then, many Polish Jews took their first steps into the Nozyk Synagogue, the Friday night Shabbat dinner or at the Bakbuk.

Mr. Lauder was the first donor who believed in the future of the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews in Warsaw (POLIN) when no one else was interested in supporting the idea of having a Jewish Museum in Warsaw.³¹ As in all his other educational projects, Mr. Lauder was able to see the potential, the future mission and the purpose of the museum. Ambassador Lauder's name is inscribed in the walls of the museum at the main entrance.

Similarly, the youth club in Łódź supports the local Jewish community and helps build a stronger Jewish identity for those who have just discovered their Jewish roots. The Łódź club offers activities for all ages: adults, families and children, along with Holocaust survivors who want to learn about Jewish history, traditions and Judaism. Every

²⁵ Mayer 2002: 138.

²⁶ *Polish First Lady visits Lauder-Morasha School in Warsaw* 2016.

²⁷ Grabski, Rykała 2010: 419.

²⁸ Based on information obtained from Mr. Jerzy Kichler in 2014.

²⁹ Szuchta 2015: 317.

³⁰ Bakbuk—in Hebrew—bottle.

³¹ *Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, raport z realizacji projektu Muzeum Historii Żydów polskich 2014*: 8.

week, Jews of all generations meet to celebrate Shabbat at the Friday night Kiddush and dinner. Many of them bring their family members and friends to celebrate Jewish holidays like Purim, Rosh HaShana and Pesach. To meet the needs of the Jewish community, the club also hosts special lecturers and guests from all over the world.

What distinguishes the Łódź Lauder Youth Club is its unique atmosphere, where lifelong relationships and friendships are created. The club is the most important center for informal Jewish education in Łódź. The programs changed lifestyles the members of the Jewish community, brought families together and helped them feel part of the wider Jewish community.³²

When the Youth Club in Krakow opened in 1997, it gave the local community hope for an active and vibrant Jewish lifestyle. Torah classes for beginners, as well as advanced *Gemara* learning, started with Hebrew and English classes. This attracted many young Jewish students who wanted to be part of the Jewish community. The club became the center of Krakow's Jewish cultural life and Torah learning.³³

Krakow's club was especially well-known for its extensive translation of Pardes Lauder Publications. Thanks to Rabbi Sacha Pecaric, Jews in Poland once again have the opportunity to study Jewish texts in Polish. Among the most important publications are the *Chumash*, books on Jewish Law, fragments of Talmud, and a specially edited *Siddur* (prayer book) with translated and transliterated *Tfilot* (prayers).³⁴ Therefore, the services in the synagogues are more comprehensible and easier to follow.

Smaller youth clubs were opened and supported in less significant Jewish communities, such as Bytom, Wrocław, Gdańsk or Legnica.

Thanks to the extensive support of the Foundation, in 2003, the Moses Schorr Center began activities as a section of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. In 2007, the Moses Schorr Center became a separate entity. The support we received from the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation laid the basis for our activities, thus enabling considerable development.

The cornerstones of the Schorr Center's activity are its Modern Hebrew courses, as well as encouraging "diving in Judaism," the metaphor by which we understand not only inviting people to take part in our programs but stimulating them to embark on self-study. Another important part of our mission is the motto "always closer to Israel."

The programs of the center are addressed to those who wish to bring back the memory of their ancestors, including those who seek their Jewish roots, as well as those who wish to explore a culture that offered so much to civilization. By exploring the Jewish nation's heritage, the Center attempted to nurture attitudes of tolerance and understanding, which accompanied Professor Moses Schorr's activities.³⁵

The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation has supported many projects outside the field of Jewish education. One of the principle undertakings was the Ronald S. Lauder Genealogy Project at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Thanks to the work of the archivists who sifted through hundreds of thousands of fragile documents, members of the Jewish community have the chance to discover their own identity and learn the history of their ancestors. These remarkable efforts led to the reestablishment of family

³² Krawczyk 2015: 155-180.

³³ *L'chaim* 2000.

³⁴ Grabski, Rykała 2010: 419.

³⁵ *Jubilee Book* 2014: 106-107.

connections and human relations, and offered the opportunity to emphasize the importance of their heritage in today's world.³⁶

The first student organization, Polska Unia Studentów Żydowskich (PUSZ)³⁷ was established and then supported extensively by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Mr. Lauder was aware and very sensitive about all the basic elements of the Jewish community like the synagogue, Mikvah and kosher food. Thanks to the Foundation, the only synagogue in Warsaw was restored, and members of Warsaw's Jewish community were able to use it for prayers. The only Mikvah was renovated and opened to Jewish ladies who have the obligation to use it. And, finally, kosher food was provided by the Foundation to the community members. The Foundation made sure there were supplies of kosher meat available. Every month a shochat³⁸ was brought from Budapest to slaughter meat for the needs of the communities. Kosher supervision at the first kosher restaurant (Menora) and a kosher community kitchen were possible thanks to the Foundation. In Krakow the Temple Synagogue was restored by the Foundation³⁹ and, starting in 1990, the Foundation supported and raised funds for preservation of the symbol of destruction of European Jewry.⁴⁰

Mr. Lauder's Foundation was involved and active on many levels of the Jewish life in Poland and created many opportunities to reach out to Jewish families, including organizing Friday night Kiddush and dinners on a weekly basis, creating schools, organizing summer educational camps and hiring rabbis for the communities.⁴¹

The Jewish journal *Midrasz* is the most important publication for Polish Jews initiated by the Foundation. For 10,000 readers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, the magazine, established in 1997, became one of the main sources of information about contemporary Jewish life in Poland as well as Polish Jews' cultural heritage and the problems they grapple with. With its mix of current events, opinions, essays and literature, documents, religious commentaries and current news covering contemporary Jewish life in Poland and abroad, it has filled a vital gap in the Polish press market.

The publication is targeted at three relatively different readership groups: Polish Jews active in the existing communal organizations, non-Jewish Poles interested in Jewish culture and traditions and Poles of Jewish origin who have relatively recently become aware of their Jewishness. The goal of *Midrasz* is to bring them closer to the Jewish world and community.

The Internet Jewish Book Club that began over 10 years ago is a unique service provided to the readers of *Midrasz* and the Jewish community in Poland⁴². It offers to all those interested a wide selection of works on Jewish topics. *Midrasz* is also well-known for organizing an annual Jewish book fair launched exactly 20 years ago. The fair was supported by the Foundation for over 10 years. During the fair, many books on the topic of Jewish history and religion, philosophy as well as Hebrew/Israeli and Yiddish po-

³⁶ Glicenstein 2000.

³⁷ Datner 2010: 670-671.

³⁸ Ritual Jewish slaughterer/butcher.

³⁹ *The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation Booklet* 1994: 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ In cooperation the Foundation cosponsored in Poland Rabbi Baruch Rabinowitz, Rabbi Mordechai Goldberg, Rabbi Zelig Avrasin and Rabbi Pinchas Zarczynski.

⁴² *Midrasz. Pismo Żydowskie* 1999.

etry and novels are presented, also latest publications are introduced. During the event, *Midrasz* also offers many interesting meetings, lectures and discussions with authors, writers, literature critics etc.

In 1998 The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation supported a colorful family magazine named *Szternblech* which in Yiddish means 'Little Stars'. The magazine presented Jewish life and culture with humor games and stories. The magazine was bilingual, published in both Polish and English.⁴³

In 2012, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation opened a new opportunity for Jewish children from all over Poland, called the Lauder e-Learning School. This project creates a sense of belonging to Jewish children from every town in Poland, especially places without Jewish a school for the Jewish community, and ensures the continuation of Jewish education.

Students of the Lauder e-Learning Schools learn Torah, Jewish studies, Jewish history, Hebrew, English, French and German. Students also participate in special school ceremonies, trips and Shabatons.

New technologies will enrich and enable children's education. The Lauder-Morasha e-School will assist Jewish children in understanding their Jewish heritage and shaping their Jewish identity.

The goal of this project is to make sure that children have access to Jewish education regardless of how big and active their community is, or how far away they live.

The Lauder e-Learning School is not only a modern and advanced method of education but also creates a new community for future generations and educates leaders for communities around Poland. The School reaches out to families and their children, not only from small Jewish communities like Lublin or Legnica, but also to places without any Jewish life, including Cieszyn, Zamość or Św. Katarzyna. In September 2017, 45 children started a new school year. The program includes children as young as 7 years old and as old as high school students, who live in almost 20 cities around Poland. Students, parents and teachers of the e-school also have an opportunity to meet a few times a year for the inaugurations of the school year, Shabatons, trips and summer camps.

The Lauder e-School was completely designed, organized and implemented by its founding co-directors Karolina Buchwald-Pawlak and Maciej Pawlak, who were running the project until the end of the last school year. Based on the successful pilot program, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation opened similar online schools in Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Greece.⁴⁴

The surviving Polish Jewry had a dream and hopes to bring back the glory it once had. It took one visionary, noble and compassionate man to make our dream come true, and that man is Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder.

Thanks to Ambassador Lauder, the Polish Jewish community has achieved the improbable feat of rising from the ruins and atrocity of the Holocaust and replenishing the void of the vanished world with rejuvenated Jewish life, education and culture.

Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder had changed, and continues to change, the life and fate of countless Jewish children in Poland and through the children who come home from the Lauder-Morasha School each day also, the fate of their parents and grandparents, for

⁴³ *Szternblech, Family Magazine* 1999.

⁴⁴ Lipman 2014.

whom the yearning to belong again, was ignited through the establishment of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in Poland.

Ambassador Ronald S. Lauder's involvement in the education of the young generation and building Polish-Jewish relations was recognized in Poland by Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, who presented Mr. Lauder with Poland's Medal of Merit. In 2009, Mr. Lauder was presented by the Polish Ministry of Culture with the "Benefactor of Polish Culture" award for his support in the restoration and preservation of the museum in Auschwitz.⁴⁵ In Germany he received the Raoul Wallenberg Prize from the B'nai B'rith. Austrian Thomas Klestil presented him with the Great Golden Medal of Distinction for Outstanding Service to the Republic of Austria.⁴⁶

Ambassador Roland S. Lauder's dreams came true, and his Foundation managed to rekindle hearts of Polish Jews with optimism, motivation and belief that their existence as proud Jews in Poland would never be wiped out. It is thanks to Ambassador Lauder that thousands of families may once again call themselves Jewish. He believed in the continuation and linking the past with the future.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, thanks to the voice in Mr. Lauder's heart, the members of the Jewish communities and other Jewish organizations of today are no longer the "last Jews of Poland" but rather a strong, revitalized Jewish community with a bright future.⁴⁸

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⁴⁵ *Ambassador Ronald Lauder receives the Polish Highest Medal of Honor* (October 13th, 1999), *The Voice*, also *Dedications of Schools in Europe seen as part of fragile Jewish Revival* (October 18th, 1999), Jewish Telegraphic Agency.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation 1992: 7.

⁴⁸ Kozak 2004: 163.

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