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GLOBAL

A clash between Jews in Krakow highlights growing acceptance of Chabad in Europe

BY CNAAN LIPSHIZ JULY 3, 2019 2:46 PM



Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich delivers a speech in Warsaw, January 2019. Schudrich backed Chabad in a dispute with the Jewish Community of Krakow. (Mateusz Włodarczyk/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

(JTA) – When burly guards working for the Jewish Community of Krakow blocked the entrance to a Chabad-run synagogue, it was the culmination of a series of clashes between the local establishment and the Hasidic outreach movement.

That scene on Monday also echoed numerous previous clashes – some physical – across Europe.

In 2016, guards working for the Jewish Community of Lithuania ejected the Chabad emissary to that country, Rabbi Sholom Ber Krinsky, and his followers from one synagogue. Krinsky was





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officially banned from entering another synagogue in 2017. In 2004, a similar showdown in Vilnius ended in a brawl.

They are extreme examples of tensions that pit relatively small Jewish community associations concerned with preserving traditions (and sometimes control of restitution money) against what they perceive as ideologically driven outsiders. The local “communities” – that is, officially sanctioned governing bodies that represent Jewish interests – often accuse the haredi Orthodox Chabad of displaying little sensitivity, patience and diplomatic skills in dealing with native co-religionists.

Chabad denies the claim, saying the young, charismatic rabbi-and-wife teams they send to establish synagogues and Jewish centers across Europe are providing essential services for historic Jewish populations depleted by time and tragedy. The movement says it opens doors to Judaism for Jews of all backgrounds, despite its adherence to strict Orthodox practice.

The Krakow version of this week’s clash was sparked by a property dispute between the Chabad-run Izaak Synagogue and the Jewish Community of Krakow, from which it rents the space. Men hired by the community – their faces masked under balaclavas – blocked the synagogue doors while worshippers gathered to pray on the sidewalk. Pictures of the standoff shocked people abroad.

In a sign of growing acceptance of Chabad in Europe, the Krakow incident sparked vocal protests even from top religious representatives of groups seen as Chabad’s rivals.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis, which has clashed frequently with Chabad, called the synagogue’s closure “immoral and opposed to Jewish tradition.”

Poland’s chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich, who is not Chabad, on Tuesday criticized his own colleagues – in fact, his own employers – for what he described as a greedy power grab that harms the city’s most active Jewish Orthodox congregation.





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It was especially disturbing to Schudrich because “the Izaak Shul is the one place in Kraków with a steady daily minyan,” or prayer service, he wrote in an usual open letter to Tadeusz Jakubowicz, the longtime leader of the Jewish Community of Krakow. Jakubowicz is a member of the Executive Board of the Union of Jewish Communities of Poland, where Schudrich also works.

Schudrich praised Rabbi Eliezer Gurary, the Chabad movement’s emissary to Poland, and Rabbi Avi Baumol, a regular at Izaak Synagogue, for their “Torah learning and Jewish values.”

“Thanks to them and to many others, the Izaak Shul is fulfilling the responsibility of our Jewish community in Kraków,” the chief rabbi wrote. “This should be supported and applauded. Instead, the electricity was cut off and then the water was cut off. And this morning armed masked guards were posted to prevent Jews from attending the morning minyan.”

Schudrich’s statement was extraordinary as well in that it framed the dispute in terms of money – especially the Jewish property administered by the community since the Holocaust.

He wrote that the Jewish Community of Krakow is “the heir of Jewish communal property and therefore is responsible and obligated to use these properties to enrich Jewish life and observance in Krakow and not to treat them as private properties, only concerned with maximizing profit.

According to the community, the dispute was not over rent but damage caused to the synagogue by the Chabad-led congregation. Gurary denies the assertion.

Critics of the community association object to what they call the opaque management style of Jakubowicz and his daughter, Helena, who runs the real estate portfolio.

The Jewish Community of Krakow has only a few dozen members in a city with hundreds of Jews. Critics also say that its many assets, restituted after the Holocaust, should not be under the control of such a small group.





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Ironically, perhaps, the Jewish Community of Krakow is fending off accusations over another of its properties: a former synagogue that renters are being allowed to run as a bar and cafe. Reform Jews and others have said that the bar's operators are damaging the historical building, but the community denies it.

Schudrich leads an umbrella group that unites regional Jewish communities that follow the European Kultusgemeinde ("gmina" in Polish) model - essentially associations reserved to card-carrying members who pay fees and vote on key issues. Chabad operates on the American model of private congregations that depend on individual donations or funding from an external private source.

The latest clash in Krakow comes amid growing cooperation between Chabad figures and established Jewish communities across Europe. This rapprochement in Holland, France, Germany, Russia and beyond follows intense friction in the 1990s and 2000s over control and status in several of those communities.

"The big fight was in 2000, we're now in 2019," said Goldschmidt, the chief rabbi of Moscow. "I think people today are interested to get on with it and to be as beneficial to the community as possible. We have to try to put struggles behind us and come to a modus vivendi between all parts of the community,"

In France, Chabad rabbis effectively run the Jewish education system where many non-Chabad communal leaders send their children, raising its institutions to unprecedented excellence.

In Holland, one of the established community's most prominent rabbis, Binyomin Jacobs, has the official title of the chief rabbi of the Inter-Provincial Chief Rabbinate of the Netherlands. He works from the established community's headquarters at an office adjacent to that of the chairman of the Organization of Jewish Communities in the Netherlands.

Yehuda Teichtal, the head emissary of Chabad to Germany, is officially a rabbi of the Jewish Community of Berlin and considered by many to be its chief rabbi.





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In Russia, where Chabad and non-Chabad leaders clashed openly 15 years ago, they signed a cooperation agreement two years ago in which they formally buried the hatchet.

In some places, peace was achieved because Chabad won the fight. This appears to be the case in Russia, where the movement enjoys the backing of President Vladimir Putin. (In 2005, Goldschmidt, the non-Chabad chief rabbi of Moscow, was temporarily forced to leave the country because his visa had been revoked under unclear circumstances and then returned.) In others, as in Holland, shrinking Kultusgemeindes co-opted well-connected and industrious Chabad rabbis into the establishment in recognition of their contribution.

Friction and even open conflicts between Chabadniks and their peers continue to plague some communities, though.

In Hungary, the Mazsihisz Jewish community has accused the local Chabad group, EMIH, of abetting a government-led campaign to distort the Holocaust. EMIH has rejected the allegation and accused Mazsihisz of using allegations of anti-Semitism for partisan goals. The two umbrella groups, which had coexisted quietly for many years, recently descended into open conflict, even on how to honor the remains of Holocaust victims.

Even there, however, there are signs that Chabad is gaining recognition.

In October, Robert Frolich, the rabbi of the Dohany Synagogue, said at a roundtable discussion last year: "We need to accept that Chabad is part of Jewish community life in Hungary, let's not work against it."

The head of EMIH, Slomo Koves, said this recognition owes in no small part to how "Chabad has grown in Hungary and throughout Europe as [Kultusgemeinde] communities diminished."

His group, which was a small stakeholder in Hungarian Jewry 30 years ago, has 17 rabbis now working in Hungary – more than any other denomination.

In Poland, too, some community members were upset when Chabad rabbis met an influential





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politician, Jarosław Kaczyński, saying they papered over the right-wing government's record on anti-Semitism.

In countries like Hungary and Poland, where the government gives Holocaust restitution and funding to Jewish groups, the fight between the established community and Chabad has been complicated by competition for resources and status.

But even in Western Europe, where governments offer less funding to religious groups and minorities, the expansion of Chabad was perceived as bad news by communal leaders when a rabbi from the movement opened a synagogue in Switzerland in 2012.

"We're not so happy about the synagogue," Joel Weill, the Basel Jewish community's head of administration, said at the time. "We fear it will further divide the community. We have 1,000 people who go to synagogues. This isn't New York."

In Greece, Victor Eliezer, a vice president of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, said in 2016 that Chabad brings "extremism and fanaticism that is totally alien to the Jewish community" of his country.

<https://www.jta.org/2019/07/03/global/a-clash-between-jews-in-krakow-highlights-growing-acceptance-of-chabad-in-europe>

