

# International Travel Report

## Poland & Ukraine

Visit for March of the Living 2025

Visit to Ukraine

21<sup>st</sup> April 2025 – 1<sup>st</sup> May 2025

Electorate Business

Michael Galea MP

# Part 1 – Poland

21<sup>st</sup> April 2025 – 26<sup>th</sup> April 2025

## Introduction and Summary

This combined report covers the travel of a delegation of Victorian Labor, Liberal and National MPs to Poland.

Members of the delegation were:

- David Southwick MP, Member for Caulfield
- James Newbury MP, Member for Brighton
- Rachel Westaway MP, Member for Prahran
- Tim Bull MP, Member for Gippsland East
- Emma Kealy MP, Member for Lowan
- Paul Hamer MP, Member for Box Hill
- Nina Taylor MP, Member for Albert Park
- Michael Galea MP, Member for the South Eastern Metropolitan Region
- Ryan Batchelor MP, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region

The purpose of the travel was both electorate and parliamentary in nature. The trip allowed for exploration of state-wide issues relating to social cohesion and the challenges posed by recent rises in antisemitism, both internationally and within the Victorian/Australian context.

The travel was part of a program organised by *March of the Living* Australia – a non-for-profit organisation that has been established to educate Jewish and non-Jewish Australians about Jewish life in Poland in the centuries before the Holocaust, the circumstances that led up to the Holocaust and the impact that it had – particularly on Polish Jewry. It does this through an immersive, in-country, experience for participants. Our tour was led by Sue Hampel OAM, Co-President of the Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

While attending the anniversary commemoration was significant in its own right – given that it was the 80th anniversary, and therefore one of the last milestone anniversaries in which Holocaust survivors would be able to participate in the program – the program had particular significance this year given the rise in Anti-Semitism that has been witnessed in Victoria (and elsewhere in the world) over the last 18 months. Given that Victoria is home to the largest Holocaust survivor community outside of Israel, this is an issue that touches communities throughout the State and serves as a reminder of how important it is for community leaders of all political persuasions to stand up and speak out against racism and bigotry, as well as how quickly words of hate can turn into something far more devastating. The program has given members of the delegation the insights to speak to their own communities, and the Victorian community at large, about the dangers of letting antisemitism, and other forms of racism, go unchecked.

Although Australian politicians have previously visited Auschwitz, including on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in January, this was the first delegation of MPs from an Australian Parliament to participate in the *March of the Living* program.

## Statement of Objectives

- Participate in the *March of the Living* program in Poland to deepen understanding of Jewish history, pre-war European Jewish life, and the Holocaust.
- Commemorate Yom HaShoah (Jewish Holocaust Remembrance Day) at historical Holocaust sites and reflect on the legacy of genocide, antisemitism, and the importance of remembrance.
- Build relationships with key government and community stakeholders in Poland that may offer mutual benefits for Victoria, including in education, innovation, multicultural policy, and social resilience.
- Identify and investigate relevant programs and policy initiatives that may inform Victorian policy development, particularly in areas such as integration, security, and social cohesion.

## Recommendations

Following this trip, this delegation calls on the Victorian Government to:

- Support Holocaust and antisemitism education by strengthening curriculum content in schools and funding community-based education initiatives, including partnerships with organisations like March of the Living.
- Continue to promote social cohesion and resilience by increasing support for interfaith and intercultural dialogue programs, particularly in response to global conflicts that impact local communities.

## Hosts

*March of the Living Australia Inc.* is a values-based, community-orientated, for-purpose NFP organisation and prides itself on best-practice governance in line with its core values of respect, inclusiveness, tolerance and social justice.

The March of the Living itself, a 3-kilometre walk from Auschwitz 1 to Birkenau, is a tribute to all victims of the Holocaust, their memories and their legacies. The March contrasts with the death marches, which began towards the end of World War II and continued virtually until the Third Reich's last days. Each year since 1988, Jews and non-Jews from across the world have come together on Yom HaShoah to participate in the March of the Living.

The uniqueness of the program is highlighted by the distinctive experience of visiting Poland over Yom HaShoah. *March of the Living Australia* assisted by facilitating the visit to historical and significant sites and providing transportation, accommodation and meals. The cost of the program was \$1849 which included accommodation from Tuesday 22 April through to Sunday 27 April, most internal transport connections, entry to museums and a fee to participate in the March of the Living.

## **DAY 1 - Tuesday 22nd April 2025 - Krakow**

Krakow was the historic capital of Poland and the residence of Polish royalty. Following the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, Krakow was established as the capital of the General Government, a Nazi-occupied administrative region. The Nazi Governor-General, Hans Frank, took up residence in the city's historic Wawel castle. As a result of this history, many of Krakow's historic buildings remain, including a large old city.

## **Introduction to Krakow - Walking Tour**

The delegation took a walk along King's Way, which stretches through the city of Krakow, to Wawel Castle. Today, the walk remains a central avenue for the city, that includes a number of key buildings, squares, and shopping districts. Notably, parts of the walk still include original medieval fortification. After crossing over the originally placed drawbridge, the walk commences with Floriańska Gate, which was erected shortly after 1300. The gate originally was the starting point for royal processions. Beyond the gate, a bustling strip is now in place, before the street opens into main market square, known as Rynek. The square is one of the largest market squares in Europe.

During World War Two, the Nazi's used the square for a rally that was attended by Adolf Hitler. The square includes a number of prominent features, including the Town Hall Tower, a seventy-metre tower, Cloth Hall, which is a bustling market, St. Mary's Basilica, and the thousand-year-old Church of St. Adalbert. After leaving the square, the royal route continues, until it reaches Wawel Castle. The Castle was built under order of King Casimir III the Great and comprises a number of buildings including the Wawel Cathedral. Many visit the castle because of the myth surrounding Smok the dragon who lived under the castle. Today a large fire breathing statue is a heavily visited tourist attraction.

## **DAY 2 - Wednesday 23rd April 2025 - Krakow**

### **Jewish Krakow**

The first recorded presence of Jews residing in Krakow dates from the early 13th century. In the late 1400s, the Jews of Krakow were forced to move outside the old city, with many settling in the neighbouring village of Kazimierz. For the next 450 years, Kazimierz would be the city's Jewish quarter and a major centre for Jewish life. On the eve of the war approximately 60,000 Jews resided in Krakow, almost one-quarter of a total population of about 250,000.

While today the Jewish community of Krakow is small, the history of Kazimierz is kept alive through an annual festival of Jewish culture, which has become one of the world's largest Jewish festivals. In the heart of Kazimierz is the childhood home of Helena Rubinstein (now the Rubinstein Hotel). As a young adult, Rubinstein moved to Coleraine (in the Lowan electorate) where she would establish an international cosmetics business. 5

On its visit to Kazimierz, the delegation visited three of the five synagogues remaining in the city:

**Remuh Synagogue (Orthodox)** – The oldest synagogue in Poland and one of the oldest in Europe. The present buildings were built to honour plague victims following a severe outbreak of plague in 1551. Many of the tombstones in the adjacent cemetery were pillaged by the Germans and used as road bases and building foundations. Surviving fragments were used by the synagogue after the war to construct a moving exterior wall, where you can still see many of the inscriptions on the tombstones today.

**Tempel Synagogue (Reform)** - Built in the 1860s. It is the newest synagogue in the city, and was noted for pre-war preacher Rabbi Ozjasz Thon, who typically (and unusually) gave his sermons in Polish, not in Hebrew. This approach attracted congregants who favoured Jewish assimilation with Poles, however rising antisemitism in the pre-war period started to drive its members away

towards Zionism, which was building strong support amongst Galician Jews. The synagogue would be used by the occupiers as horse stabling during the war.

**Izaak Synagogue (Orthodox)** – Currently being restored, this synagogue was used by the occupying Germans as paper storage. During the war, the Gestapo ordered the Jewish official on duty to burn the Torahs. He refused and was shot. The building was a high school campus until a few years ago.

### **Jewish Community Centre Kraków**

In 2008, the Jewish Community Centre (JCC) of Krakow was formed, with the centre formally opened by Prince Charles (now King Charles III). It aims to rebuild and support Jewish life in Krakow. The JCC is 95% funded by foreign donations and holds a close connection to Australia as previous Australian *March of the Living* delegations were the first to visit the centre.

With 1,100 active members, the centre's reach remains strong as too is their social contribution. Last year, 100,000 people visited the centre. For example, as the group visited, we met with displaced Ukrainians who fled from the Russian invasion and are fed each day by the centre. The centre provides between 800-1000 meals a week and has provided support to 400,000 Ukrainian refugees, 98% of whom aren't Jewish (A total of 7 million Ukrainians have passed through Poland since the full-scale invasion commenced in 2022). In that time, the JCC has invested approximately \$14 million USD in aid, roughly \$2,000 USD per day. The delegation also crossed paths with Bernard, a Holocaust survivor who comes in every day to make use of the centre's food pantry.

At the centre, the delegation met with its director, Johnathan Ornstein. Johnathan noted that Poland has not seen a rise in antisemitism, as many other nations have. He reported that Jews feel very safe in the country today. As with many in Poland, he reports that the main concern is the threat of Russia, noting that US posturing regarding NATO has also undermined confidence.

### **Galicia Jewish Museum**

In the afternoon, the delegation visited the Galicia Jewish Museum. The museum opened in 2004 with investment from the UK. Galicia is a historic region of south-eastern Poland and western Ukraine that was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire prior to World War One.

The delegation was shown the exhibits by curator Dr Katarzyna (Kasia) Suszkiewicz. The main exhibition shows images of Jewish life in Kraków and wider Galicia before the war, the horrors of the Holocaust, and how Jewish life has since revived in the region. The photos in the final section are the only to show people in them, a poignant symbol of Jewish culture coming back to life in the region.

The Galicia Jewish Museum has also played a major role supporting Ukrainian refugees. At the start of the war the museum was used as a daycare centre, with Ukrainian speaking teachers supporting the children whilst their mothers were arranging their affairs. It was also used as a job finding service for adults, with one senior gallery official from Ukraine now working at the museum itself. More recently the museum has been used as a support service for senior Ukrainian refugees.

There is discussion about a forthcoming exhibition the museum will put on about Australia and the Holocaust, focusing on survivors' stories in Australia. There will be an opportunity for this exhibition to tour Sydney and Melbourne at some point.

## **Kraków Ghetto (Podgórze)**

Following the museum, the delegation crossed the Vistula River to the suburb of Podgórze – historically a poor suburb, home to light industry. It was in Podgórze that the Nazis established the Krakow ghetto, forcing 15,000 Jews to live in extremely cramped conditions. A *Judenrat* (or Jewish Council) was established under the strict control of the occupying Nazi forces.

A year after the ghetto was set up, more than half of the population were seized off the streets and taken by train to the Bełżec death camp. The entire ghetto would be liquidated in March 1943.

The delegation visited three significant sites within the ghetto precinct:

### **Eagle Pharmacy (Apteka Pod Orłem)**

The central square has a monument of 68 chairs. Most are facing the famous Eagle Pharmacy, which during the war was run by Tadeusz Pankiewicz. The pharmacist would provide support the population in various ways which helped them to survive. Open 24/7, the pharmacy was the secret meeting place of the underground, and a contact point where food and medications were delivered to the people living in the ghetto. He would supply hair dye to Jewish girls so they could pass as blonde Poles and offer medicine to calm those who couldn't cope with their situation. In 1983, Tadeusz Pankiewicz was recognised as "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem on for rescuing countless Jews from the Holocaust. The pharmacy is now preserved as a museum.

### **Schindler's factory**

On the outskirts of the ghetto, the delegation visited the factory Oskar Schindler moved his business to during the war. Whilst he profited off slave labour and has a flawed and complicated story, his efforts in rescuing 1,200 Jews from their fate in the ghettos by relocating them to safety have set his legacy. His story was relatively obscure until Australian author Thomas Keneally immortalised him in *Schindler's Ark*, which was adapted into the film *Schindler's List*.

On the side with the factory there is a plaque (in Polish) commemorating amongst two others, John P Liversidge, an Australian RAAF pilot who has a connection with East Gippsland. They were part of an aerial bombing unit who supported the Warsaw Uprising in 1944.

The inside of the factory has a wall with a small portrait of each of the people who Schindler saved – including a number who later migrated to Melbourne.

### **Ghetto wall**

There are two remaining sections of the ghetto wall in Kraków, of which the delegation visited one. The wall was deliberately topped in the shape of tombstones as macabre symbolism by the Nazis. The buildings abutting the walls had their windows bricked up, so inhabitants could not see or interact with the outside world.

### **Dinner with Professor Mark Spiegelman and Rachel Spiegelman**

Professor Spiegelman is an accomplished Australian who is a retired surgeon and archaeologist. Born in Poland in 1940, he is a survivor of the Holocaust. He told us of his many remarkable survival stories from his childhood, including how his parents dressed him as a girl to avoid German officers checking to see if he was circumcised, and how he and his mother narrowly escaped detection and capture whilst on a trip to the market to buy essential food.

He also shared with us the harrowing conditions he lived in concealed in the ground in the ghetto. He was forced to live underground for an extended period, as a result of which he and only a small number of others avoided capture during the ghetto's liquidation.

Professor Spiegelman was in Poland as part of the *March of the Living Australia* delegation.

### **DAY 3 Thursday 24 April 2025 – Auschwitz/Birkenau**

In 2025, the Jewish Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom HaShoah) fell on 24 April. It coincides with the date in the Hebrew calendar that marks the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, when Jewish resistance fighters defied the Nazis and fought for freedom and dignity.

#### **Auschwitz**

In the morning, the delegation was given a tour of the Auschwitz camp complex:

**Crematorium** – Near the entrance to the camp, a rudimentary gas chamber and crematorium was built. Victims were transported in cattle trucks, and then those selected for death had to experience the indignity of having to undress publicly ahead of being led to extermination by poisonous gas and their bodies cremated. The gas chamber and crematorium used in Auschwitz served as a prototype for the mass extermination that occurred at Birkenau.

**Site of hanging of Rudolf Höss**– Rudolf Höss, a German SS officer and the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, lived adjacent to the camp very comfortably with his family, simultaneous to his leadership of the camp (the home is visible from inside the camp). After the defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of World War II, he was convicted in Poland and executed for war crimes on the Auschwitz camp site.

**Exploration of Buildings** – Former camp barracks have been converted into a museum, with each providing physical evidence of how prisoners lived, ahead of extermination, save for the few who managed to escape and/or survived following liberation. Exhibits include:

- Individual, itemised photos of early prisoners (this was only undertaken in the early phases of the camp), as well as other photographic evidence, some taken without authority, to provide important evidence of the inhumane treatment. For instance, photos of sites of murders committed and mass graves ahead of Auschwitz being implemented e.g. in countries such as Lithuania, Belarus, Romania & more.
- Huge quantities of human hair extracted from victims – extremely disturbing.
- Large quantities of items formally owned by victims of the camp: clothing, suitcases, disability-aids, toiletry items (shaving brushes, hair combs), shoes etc
- Details regarding the completely unethical experimentation conducted on children, especially twins.
- Examples of the completely inadequate rations provided to prisoners, noting that starvation (and torture) was a pivotal and frequent cause of death in the camp.

#### **March of the Living**

Approximately 12,000 people from 40 countries participated in the march **President Isaac Herzog of Israel** and **Polish President Andrzej Duda** opened the march, greeting the participating Holocaust survivors and released hostage Eli Sharabi, who was representing an

Israeli delegation of released hostages and hostages' family members. The delegation marched together with other Australians (including Professor Spiegelman and his family).

As we reached Birkenau, out of respect for the millions of people killed, many from our group (and others) placed wooden paddles between the rails of the train tracks that led to this place of extermination.

### **Yom HaShoah ceremony**

The walk culminated with a ceremony on the grounds of Birkenau to commemorate the 80th Anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe. Owing to a huge storm with torrential rain and hail, the ceremony concluded earlier than originally planned.

### **DAY 4 Friday 25 April 2025 - Warsaw**

Warsaw is the capital and largest city in Poland. It was almost completely destroyed during World War II. The delegation spent the day in Warsaw learning about Jewish life in the city, and the experiences of the Warsaw Ghetto.

### **ANZAC Ceremony Warsaw**

The delegation observed ANZAC Day in Poland and was pleased to be the guests of the **Australian Ambassador Benjamin Hayes** at the combined Australia – New Zealand service at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Piłsudski Square. This event was also attended by both the New Zealand and Israeli Ambassadors to Poland and a representative of the Turkish Embassy in Warsaw.

One of the more pleasing elements of this service was the level of participation from the Polish Defence Forces, a country that has no direct history of entering combat alongside troops from other countries and had no representation at Gallipoli, which the date commemorates. Representatives of the Polish Land Forces, Air Force and Special Forces formed the official guard at the service and impressed all in attendance.

Our delegation was well received and laid a wreath on behalf of Victoria, later attending an official reception at the Australian Embassy.

### **Warsaw Ghetto**

The delegation undertook a walking tour of Warsaw to learn more about the Warsaw Ghetto, and the fate of the city's Jewish population following the Nazi invasion in 1939.

The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest of the Nazi ghettos, established in November 1940 and imprisoning around 460,000 Jews in an area of 3.4 square kilometres. This represented about 30% of the population of the city confined to around 2.4% of the metropolitan area. Conditions were extremely poor, with few rations and severe overcrowding. Disease was rampant. Communal prayer was banned. Around 100,000 inhabitants died in the ghetto from disease and starvation before the deportation to the death camps began in 1942.

The tour included a visit to the Monument to Henryk Goldszmit, a Polish Jewish pediatrician and children's author. He was also an early children's rights advocate, in 1919 drafting a children's constitution, and hosting a radio program during the 1930s promoting the rights of children.



Goldszmit operated an orphanage in Warsaw, which was forcibly moved to the ghetto under Nazi occupation. Despite offers of sanctuary by underground organisations in the ghetto, Goldszmit would not leave the nearly 200 children in his care. All of the inhabitants of the orphanage were sent to the Treblinka extermination camp and murdered in 1942.

Resistance in the ghetto to German incarceration grew, and underground organisations and movements formed including ŻOB, the Jewish Combat Organisation. The delegation visited the Anielewicz Bunker, at Miła 18, a ŻOB command bunker that includes a memorial to the Warsaw Uprising and the resistance fighters who died. The Warsaw Uprising in May 1943 was an act of resistance in the ghetto to oppose the Nazi's final efforts to transport the remaining ghetto population to the death camps in 1943. Armed resistance began in early May, and continued for 29 days. At Miła 18, when their command bunker was discovered, the ŻOB leadership committed mass suicide via poison rather than be captured by the Nazis. Around 13,000 Jews were killed in the ghetto uprising. Once the uprising was defeated, the remaining residents of the ghetto were deported to the death camps.

Several hundred bunkers were built throughout the Warsaw Ghetto during occupation, for protection and to aid the armed resistance. The delegation visited an archaeological site curated by the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. A park near the Anielewicz Bunker was chosen in 2022 for archaeological research, and excavation work later that year discovered basements from two nineteenth century tenement houses that formed part of the Warsaw Ghetto. The sites uncovered an extensive collection of fragments of equipment and infrastructure used as part of the resistance in the ghetto. The delegation heard from museum staff about the historical significance of the find and the plans to preserve both the site and the remnant artefacts.

## **POLIN museum**

On Friday afternoon the delegation visited the POLIN Museum in Warsaw. The POLIN museum in Warsaw is a Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Its core exhibition covers the 1000-year history of Jews in Poland, from the Middle Ages to the present. Prior to the Second World War, Poland was home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, estimated to be around 3.3 million before the Holocaust.

In addition to a museum of history, the POLIN Museum's mission is to *"be a place of meetings and discussions for all those who want to better understand the past and contemporary Jewish culture, draw lessons for the future, confront stereotypes, and face today's threats such as xenophobia and prejudice. Our values are openness, tolerance, and truth. In our activities, we strive for a mutual understanding and respect between Poles and Jews. We aim to serve as a guide on the path to building a multicultural community."*

Polin is the Hebrew word for Poland, and sounds like 'rest here' which legend tells was told to Jews fleeing persecution in the East. This began a millennia of settlement in the lands of modern Poland. The museum explores the role of Jewish traders and merchants, and the charters that gave Jews the right to settle, practice their religion, engage in certain occupations, and be protected from harm.

The museum traces the long history of the Jewish community in Poland – from its periods of relative stability and prosperity through to times of anti-Semitic violence and State sanctioned restrictions. The museum also documents how the prevailing conditions, particularly in the late 19th century and early 20th century gave rise to the establishment to a range of Jewish political organisations.

In addition to documenting the experience of Polish Jews during the Holocaust (90% of whom were murdered), the museum also has a focus on the fate of the some 300,000 Polish Jews who survived the war, most of them in the Soviet Union. The vast majority left within a few years. For those who remained, so did antisemitism.

This became heightened in 1968 as part of the socio-political crisis and student protest and uprisings against the communist regime. In an effort to discredit student protests, the communist government launched a propaganda war that blamed Jews. While not expressly using the word 'Jew', instead these anti-semitic campaigns included the organisation of "anti-Zionist" rallies in towns and cities. In the wake of this campaign, around 13,000 Jews left Poland.

The fall of communism in 1989 has begun a revival of Jewish life, albeit on a small scale. While the number of Jews in Poland today is small, there has been a renewal of Jewish life and a celebration of Polish Jewish traditions, history and culture.

## **DAY 5 - Saturday 26th April 2025 – Łódź city and region**

### **Błaszki**

I travelled with Paul Hamer MP to the small town of Błaszki in the Łódź district (about two-hours drive from Warsaw). Błaszki was the hometown of Philip Blashki (original name Favel Wagczewski) who migrated to Melbourne in the 1850s and became a successful businessman; he changed his surname to match his hometown. The Blashki family continues to have large family connections throughout Melbourne.

While Błaszki was, and remains, a relatively small town, it had a vibrant Jewish community until World War Two. With the arrival of the Nazis in September of 1939, ten hostages were taken from among the community's elders, and were executed in the Christian cemetery. Then began the theft of Jewish property, and an edict regarding forced labour was imposed. In December of 1939 the Jews of Błaszki were expelled and sent to several different cities in occupied Poland.

### **Łódź**

Łódź is Poland's fourth largest city, located approximately one hour southeast of Warsaw. On the eve of World War II, it had a population of approximately 650,000 about one-third of whom were Jewish. Łódź was Poland's textile centre in the 19th century, and many neo-classical buildings from that era remain intact.

The delegation met up with Mr John Crust, a Canadian academic who lectures in English at the University of Łódź. Mr Crust is active in the local Jewish Community Centre and assists with English language translations on several Holocaust related activities. Mr Crust provided the delegation with a guided tour of the Lodz city centre and various landmarks related to the Lodz ghetto.

The Lodz Ghetto – which was also known as the "Litzmannstadt Ghetto" – was the longest operating Jewish ghetto throughout World War II. Established on 1 May 1940 in the poorest area of Lodz, the ghetto became a highly profitable production hub for the German military until its liquidation between in August 1944. With over 160,000 people incarcerated within four square kilometres, the living conditions for inhabitants of the Lodz Ghetto were deplorable. 13

People lived in overcrowded, dilapidated buildings with no access to essential resources such as sewage, gas heating, or running water. Unlike most other ghettos, Lodz was completely sealed off, making smuggling goods almost impossible.

As a result of poor sanitation and lack of food, diseases riddled the ghetto, with 44,000 inhabitants dying throughout its existence. Transportation from Lodz to Chelmno extermination camp began in January 1942. In 1942, the Nazis murdered approximately 70,000 Jews from the Lodz Ghetto at this camp.

As a final stop, the delegation visited the Radegast Station Museum. Situated on the edge of the ghetto, this was the station through which Jews from other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe were transported to Lodz ghetto, and from Lodz ghetto to their deaths at Chelmno and Auschwitz. A cattle car, similar to that used to transport Jews, sits at the station, just metres from the current train line. In contrast with the crowds at Auschwitz, the complete absence of crowds and noise at the museum made this a powerful, and at times overwhelming, emotional experience.

### **Reflection from Nina Taylor MP, Member for Albert Park**

*It has been very disturbing to see the marked rise in antisemitism. The cross-parliamentary 'March of the Living' tour to Poland, presented an excellent opportunity to get a much deeper understanding of the catastrophic impact of hatred, and the impetus to ensure such destruction never repeats.*

*The tour greatly enhanced my understanding of the integral nexus of Polish Jews to Poland over centuries, and hence delivered a profound appreciation of the devastation that must have followed as the ghettos were mobilised, and the systematic destruction of Jewish people (predominantly Polish) was manifested.*

*It was an incredibly emotional and moving experience and I am very grateful for the opportunity. I feel it has ameliorated my capacity to tackle hatred and bigotry – knowledge is power.*

*We have a beautiful, multicultural society in Australia, and there is direct imperative therefore to foster kindness, harmony and respect always.*

### **Summary of the results achieved and any recommendations arising**

The delegation's visit to Poland provided a deeply meaningful opportunity to engage with the historical, cultural, and contemporary dimensions of Jewish life. The program offered a profound exploration of the rich heritage of European Jewry and the devastating impact of the Holocaust. Commemorating Yom HaShoah at historically significant sites reinforced the enduring importance of remembrance, education, and the fight against antisemitism.

This visit enhanced understanding of how global events affect local communities and underscored the importance of promoting interfaith dialogue and inclusive education. It also fostered international relationships that can support Victoria's ongoing efforts to strengthen multicultural harmony and community resilience.

## Part 2 – Ukraine

27<sup>th</sup> April 2025 – 1<sup>st</sup> May 2025

### Introduction and Summary

At the conclusion of my visit to Poland I took up an opportunity to visit Ukraine. As Secretary of the Parliamentary Friends of Ukraine group in the Victorian Parliament and with a significant Ukrainian community in my electorate, it was important to me that I see life in Ukraine firsthand, given the current situation due to Russia's abhorrent war.

I have made several parliamentary contributions regarding the war both before and after my visit. This trip provided for many profound experiences which have informed my further understanding of the war, but also of Ukraine, its society and culture more broadly.

The following list of meetings is not exhaustive.

### Note on travel claim

My claim on the international travel allowance is for the March of the Living program in Poland, as well as return flights to Krakow.

The entirety of costs for the Ukraine component of the trip have been paid for by myself. This includes transport costs between Poland and Ukraine, accommodation in Ukraine (as well as in Poland on the nights of the 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> April, either side of the Ukraine visit), program facilitation costs and all incidental expenses.

### Statement of objectives

- See firsthand the lived experiences of Ukrainians in the war, and learn from site visits, meetings and other discussions about the current situation
- Pay respects at sites of Russian war crimes
- Develop relationships with key government and non-for-profit stakeholders in Ukraine
- Convey my support as a member of the Victorian Parliament for Ukraine in its time of need
- Convey the support of the Premier of Victoria to President Zelenskyy
- Identify opportunities for closer engagement, aid and investment between Victoria and Ukraine
- Learn of technological advancements made by Ukraine in fields such as body rehabilitation, combat industry, de-mining and reconstruction

### Results and opportunities

- A letter of support from the Premier of Victoria was delivered to President Zelenskyy (via a third party)
- Opportunities for closer engagement between Ukrainian cities and local government in Victoria were identified, and are currently being pursued
- Opportunities for the attendance of the Kyiv Chamber of Commerce to visit Melbourne in September 2025 to attend the 14<sup>th</sup> World Chambers Congress

- Ways in which the deployment of government and private sector aid can be most effectively maximised were learnt

## **Contacts**

In Kyiv, my visit was facilitated by Julian Knysh, an Australian journalist who has been living in and reporting from Kyiv since shortly after the outbreak of the full scale invasion. It was further assisted by Kostantin Yaramenko, a fixer, and Veronika Stegnii, who translated and scribed.

## **DAY 6 – Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> April – Lviv**

A significant portion of this day is occupied by car travel. As the airspace over Ukraine is closed, there are no flight options. Travel time between Warsaw and Kyiv is approximately 10 hours, and overnight curfews in the major cities require that I arrive in Kyiv before midnight. I take the opportunity to visit Lviv en route.

### **Superhumans Lviv**

Visit to a hospital which specialises in prosthetics and body reconstruction and rehabilitation for both soldiers and civilians. The hospital is funded solely from private donations, with the majority coming from outside Ukraine. The facility includes full rehabilitation resources including a hydrotherapy pool, operating theatres as well as a section where the prosthetics are constructed on site.

I am shown around by Ksenia Ilenkiv, who manages foreign donations. Superhumans have treated over 1,000 patients in the past year, with 355 staying there at the time of my visit. The waitlist is around 1.5 million people. Further Superhumans centres are being built or planned in Dnipro, Odesa and Kyiv

### **Prostir**

Meeting with Dr Lesia Dobosh, a military doctor who in her own time has established a not for profit which helps veterans to rehabilitate and reintegrate into civilian life, through a range of group and individual programs including culture, art and cooking.

### **Lviv**

A brief tour of the city centre, which includes a visit to a church which has become the default church for military funerals in Lviv, and a Sunday market run by war veterans. On one street a group of elderly citizens gathered to sing a version of Ukraine's national anthem.

### **Field of Mars**

Visit to a field next to the Lychavik cemetery which has become a makeshift military cemetery and war memorial. The sheer scale of graves is overwhelming, as are the photos of the fallen soldiers, the vast majority of whom were civilians before the war. Many of the fallen are young.

## **DAY 7 – Monday 28<sup>th</sup> April – Kyiv city and region**

### **Site of 24<sup>th</sup> April Russian attack**

Visit to an apartment block in a residential neighbourhood of Kyiv which was attacked by a North Korean-made Russian drone a few days earlier. 13 people were killed, and 90 injured. Buildings and vehicles were decimated, and the impact of the destruction was still horrifically visible at the time of visit.

### **Irpın**

Irpın is a city 26km west of Kyiv which was invaded by Russian troops in the full scale invasion in 2022. The actions of the citizenry and military in Irpin repelled the Russians, and prevented the fall of Kyiv, leading to the city being dubbed the 'City of Heroes'.

I met with the Mayor of Irpin, who showed me some of the key sites, including the Romaniv Bridge, a river crossing which was famously blown up by Ukraine to halt the Russian advance. The ruins are now being converted into a memorial, with a new bridge built to the side. We also visited the 'car cemetery' of rusted abandoned vehicles, saw the ruins of Taxes University, and visited a residential reconstruction site. Despite 70% of the buildings in the city being either destroyed or significantly damaged in the full scale invasion, in many parts of Irpin the reconstruction is so advanced that the effects are no longer visible.

### **Hostomel**

Visit to an ordinary supermarket carpark, from where a Russian soldier hid behind an outbuilding and shot at passing cars, killing a dozen people.

### **Bucha**

A city which was the site of many Russian atrocities in early 2022. We paid respects at a memorial built above a mass grave of 800 people. The victims included children as young as 7 and people in their 80s. A local school was used as a base for the invading troops, the bodies of raped and murdered local women were discovered there once the occupiers were driven out.

### **Borodianka**

Another city which was largely destroyed in early 2022, but has made significant progress in reconstruction. I meet with a city official who shows me impressive new children's playgrounds in the centre of the city. The playgrounds are well used, and the city has prioritised such facilities to help children find a place of joy away from the stresses of the war.

In the central square a number of painted art pieces are on display, using large sheets of concrete from destroyed buildings as a canvas. One of the artists is Banksy.

Upon returning to their houses (if their homes were still standing) after occupation, residents in cities such as Borodianka were confronted with more horrors. The invading troops had left behind mines in everyday objects such as kitchen cupboards, washing machines and even children's soft toys, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to return. Some were even sewn into the bodies of living cats and dogs.

### **Andriivka**

A small village which is still showing many signs of the destruction wrought upon it by Russia in 2022. This village and the cities above are still recovering from a devastating Russian occupation which was just over a month. Cities in the east of Ukraine have been occupied for more than 3 years. Crimea has been occupied for 11 years.

## **De-mining**

Meeting with Ihor Bezkaravainy, Deputy Minister of Economy, responsible for de-mining activities across Ukraine. Land mines are the single largest humanitarian issue facing Ukrainian civilians after the temporary occupation. Approximately 25% of the nation's land mass has had or will require demining work. The work that has already been undertaken has reduced this area from 174,000 square kilometres to 157,000 square kilometres.

Given the scale of the issue, best practices used elsewhere have proved ineffective in Ukraine. This had led to the development of new ways of working and more efficient means of mine removal, including the adapting of new technologies such as the use of drones to detect mines, and even scare off livestock from known mine locations. Ukraine is now leading the world on de-mining practices.

An industry has formed around these projects, involving stringent tender and audit processes. The minister emphasises that Ukraine sees international support as an investment, not merely aid.

## **DAY 8 – Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> April - Kyiv**

### **Yuliia 'Taira' Paievskia**

Breakfast meeting with Taira, a Ukrainian war hero. Taira was working as a medic in Mariupol in 2022 during the full scale invasion, treating civilians and both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. With a body cam, she captured the last footage released from the occupied city, depicting Russian atrocities and war crimes. She gave the footage on a SD card to a contact who smuggled it hidden in a tampon through a dozen checkpoints in order for it to be shown to the world.

The following day Taira was captured by Russia and spent three months tortured as a Prisoner of War. Her injuries were so extensive that she required spinal reconstruction upon her release. Taira has shared her story widely to a domestic and international audience and has successfully raised awareness of Russian war crimes. She has now returned to active service on the frontline.

She argues how Russia uses torture as a form of psychological warfare against the prisoners of war and against Ukrainians more broadly, and how this form is more dangerous and insidious than the physical threat.

### **Childrens Rights Network**

Meeting with Anastasiia Stepula of the Childrens Rights Network, an agency which represents the major NGOs working to protect children.

We discuss the crisis of Russian abduction of Ukrainian children, how the culture of the domestic child protection system correlates with this, and what is being done by individuals to return their children home.

Russia has abducted approximately 30,000 children (official figures are around 20,000) from temporarily occupied regions of Ukraine. Younger children have their names and dates of birth changed before being adopted to Russian families, making it nearly impossible to locate them. Older children are brainwashed in orphanages, trained up to fight against Ukraine when they

turn 18. Children are often stolen through deception, with notable examples being Russian authorities telling parents they are taking their children for an excursion to the seaside, never to be seen again.

For the small minority of children who are able to be rescued, a significant amount of work needs to be undertaken to help the child recover from the physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Astonishingly, international law does not sufficiently capture the abduction of children across borders from occupied territories. This is a major barrier to any attempts to bring Russia to justice for this.

### **Voices for Children**

Meeting with Olena Rozvadoska, who manages a network of centres across Ukraine which supports children to deal with the psychological stresses of the war, through group based and individual counselling and activities. Their Kyiv site is one of many across all major cities.

Many of the children have parents who are in the military, and many have lost their parents or other close relatives due to the war.

The following is an account given to the “Voices podcast”. Valeriia is a 17 year old who was abducted but found her way back to Ukraine, and was supported by Voices for Children:

*Valeria, 17, lives in Kyiv and is currently studying at a medical college remotely. Although she appears to be an ordinary teenager, she has endured a year and a half of Russian military occupation and deportation.*

*In every interview, I speak for the children who can no longer speak. They went to Russia - and they simply have no opportunity to speak. Or they died in the first days, Valeriia said on the “Voices Podcast”.*

*“The Russians stole a year and a half of my childhood”*

*Valeriia is originally from Nova Kakhovka in the Kherson region, which was occupied by Russian troops early in the large-scale invasion. At that time, she was living with her grandmother, who had become her guardian following her mother’s death.*

*“When I realized we were living under enemy military occupation, I started experiencing tinnitus due to severe stress. It lasted for a month. Then the shelling and explosions began, and it was terrifying” recalls Valeriia.*

*Almost a year later, in the fall of 2022, as Ukrainian forces approached Nova Kakhovka, the Russians announced a forced “evacuation”. Valeriia, along with other children, was taken to occupied Crimea ostensibly for a vacation.*

*During the deportation, the children were forced to sing the Russian anthem, learn pseudo-history, and the “native” Russian language. Moreover, they were constantly urged to move to Russia and enrol in its universities.*

*“We were completely labelled as children of the Russian Federation. They simply erased our identity as Ukrainians — citizens who have lived in Ukraine all our lives, although now in its militarily occupied part” Valeriia noted.*

*Two months later, her grandmother took her back, and eventually, Valeriia made her way to the territory controlled by Ukraine on her own. From the last Russian checkpoint, she had to walk through a minefield. When she finally saw Ukrainian soldiers and heard the Ukrainian language, she could not hold back her emotions and burst into tears.*



*“The Russians stole a year and a half of my childhood. I had to grow up very quickly. Instead of “liberation”, Russia caused me to develop chronic stress disorder” Valeriia stated. “I want every child to get their home back.”*

*After moving to Kyiv, Valeriia started undergoing therapy sessions with a psychologist from “Voices of Children”. Intrigued by her story, the Foundation’s chief communications officer, Olha Tymchenko, decided to take her under her care following their meeting. They have already moved in together and are settling into their new shared space.*

*“I want every child to get their home back, and I want those homes to be safe. Every crime witnessed by children should be investigated, and Russia must finally be punished for each such crime.”*

## **Ukraine Media Centre**

Attended a media event discussing the role international independent journalists can play in ensuring the war remains front of mind for international audiences. The discussion also touched on the risks posed by Russian media interference in Ukraine and worldwide.

Russia has committed a number of crimes against journalists in Ukraine, which has included the targeted murder, kidnapping and harassment of journalists and the disabling of local broadcasts to be replaced with Russian propaganda. Russia spends \$4bn USD each year on propaganda.

## **Arm Women Now**

Meeting with Iryna Nikorak, a member of the Verkhova Rada (Ukrainian parliament) who founded Arm Women Now, a non-profit which advocates for women in the military. She facilitates a hub which helps women in the armed forces to connect with each other, and was instrumental in procuring specially fitted flak jackets which are better suited to women’s bodies. She has published a book which highlights the personal stories of many women who are serving in the military, most of whom were civilians before the war. One of the women profiled is Taira.

## **Chamber of Commerce**

A productive meeting with Gennadiy Chyzhykov, President of the Kyiv Chamber of Commerce, and members of his team. We discussed opportunities for closer economic engagement between Ukraine and Victoria, and their intention to visit Melbourne this year in September for the 14<sup>th</sup> World Chambers Conference.

## **Bookstore**

With Russia attempting to eradicate Ukrainian culture in its entirety, it has become all the more important to Ukrainians that they embrace their language, customs and culture. I visit a bookstore to take part in a program where civilians buy books, write a note of encouragement in the front cover, and hand it back over in order for it to be sent to the frontline for soldiers to read. More than 50,000 books in the Ukrainian language have now been sent to the frontlines.

## **Maidan Nezalezhnosti**

Visit to the famous square where well over a million people protested to overthrow a corrupt pro-Kremlin president in 2013. The protests, now known as the EuroMaidan, were the pivotal moment at which Ukraine embraced the West and the democratic free world.

A corner of the square is now a memorial to fallen soldiers. Among the many commemorated there is an Australian who volunteered to fight for Ukraine.

**DAY 9 – Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> April – Krakow**

Having travelled overnight by car from Kyiv, I fly back to Melbourne from Krakow Airport.