

Member	Paul Hamer	Electorate	Box Hill
Period	1 April 2025 to 30 June 2025		

Regulation 6 - Expense allowance and electorate allowance	
Total amount paid to member for electorate allowance	\$12,514.74
Total amount paid to member for expense allowance	\$988.19

Regulation 7 - Motor vehicle allowance	
Total amount paid to member for motor vehicle allowance	\$0.00
Member did not receive the motor vehicle allowance in the previous quarter and member has elected to receive the motor vehicle allowance for this quarter	No

Regulation 9 - Parliamentary accommodation sitting allowance	
Total amount paid to member for parliamentary accommodation sitting allowance	\$0.00
Suburb in which the member's parliamentary accommodation is located	n/a

Regulation 10 - Travel allowance claims					
Date from	Date until	Reason for travel	Total amount paid	Town or city in which accommodation was located	Value of the accommodation

Total number of nights for travel allowance claims 0

Total amount paid to member for travel allowance \$0.00

Regulation 11 - Commercial transport allowance claims					
Date from	Date until	Reason for travel	Total amount paid	Mode of transport	Value of transport

Total number of nights for commercial transport allowance claims 0

Total amount paid to member for commercial transport allowance \$0.00

Regulation 12 - International travel allowance claims			
Date from	Date until	Reason for travel	Total amount paid
21/04/2025	29/04/2025	Joining the 2025 Parliamentary Delegation on the March of the Living Holocaust Education program to Poland, and visiting Dubai in my Parliamentary Secretary Role.	\$7,349.46

Total number of nights for international travel allowance claims 8

Total amount paid to member for international travel allowance \$7,349.46

International Travel Report Poland and Dubai

submitted by:

Paul Hamer MP

Member for Box Hill

Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs

21 April 2025 – 29 April 2025

Introduction

This report covers the travel of a delegation of Victorian Labor, Liberal and National MPs to Poland, as well as a stopover in Dubai.

Members of the Poland 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 Poland leg was undertaken in my capacity as the Member for Box Hill, as Mount Scopus Memorial College (the largest Jewish day school in Australia) is located in the electorate. The school was established in 1949 and was established to meet the educational needs of the influx of Holocaust refugees to the Melbourne community, many of whom had come from Poland. Many school families today are descendants of those original Polish Holocaust survivors.

In addition, the trip allowed for exploration of broader 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 visit to Dubai was undertaken in my capacity as the Parliamentary Secretary for Jobs. The purpose of the visit was to build a relationship with potential investors and learn more about the start-up sector in Dubai.

Summary - Poland

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.

Summary - Dubai

The Victorian Government Trade and Investment (VGTI) office in Dubai was established in 1997 and has had the longest running presence in Dubai of any Australian State.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is Victoria's 18th largest two-way merchandise trading partner and 13th largest merchandise export market. The country is Victoria's most valuable export market in the Middle East and North Africa region. Key sectors include financial services, food and beverage, logistics and business services.

In 2024 the Australian Government concluded negotiations with the UAE on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. The visit was the first official visit by a Victorian Government MP since the Agreement was concluded.

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.
- Identify and investigate relevant programs and policy initiatives that may inform Victorian policy development, particularly in areas such as integration, education and social cohesion.
- Build relationships with key government and non-government stakeholders in Dubai that may offer benefits for Victoria, particularly across Victoria's five priority investment areas: advanced manufacturing and defence, health technologies and medical research, digital technologies, the circular economy, and agribusiness.
- Learn more about the start-up sector in Dubai, and the measures that have been implemented to promote and foster a culture of innovation.

Recommendations

- 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.
- Promote social cohesion and resilience by increasing support for interfaith and intercultural dialogue programs, particularly in response to global conflicts that impact local communities.
- The VGTI office in Melbourne and Dubai continue to work with investors in the region on potential investment opportunities in Victoria and increasing engagement with the region – both with potential Victorian exporters and Victorian companies seeking overseas investment partners.
- Work with Victorian Government agencies, including VGTI and LaunchVic, to provide increased exposure to Victorian based start-ups to local and overseas investors
- Review regulatory settings in Victoria and Australia that could further encourage tech and innovation
- Maximise the use of the diverse talent pool available in Victoria to identify opportunities for growth in the tech sector and help facilitate more entrants into the start-up economy.

Poland Host - March of the Living Australia (MOTL)

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 Poland 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.

Poland accommodation (5 nights) - \$849 – arranged by March of the Living

Poland commercial transport (including shuttles to/from airport and from Krakow-Auschwitz-Warsaw - \$200 – arranged by March of the Living)

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.

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.

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 (Overnight in Warsaw)

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 attending an ANZAC Day service, 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 Pilsudski 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 paediatrician 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.

Shabbat service and dinner

In the evening, members of the delegation who were not travelling on to Tel Aviv attended a Friday night shabbat service at the Nożyk Synagogue in Warsaw. Originally constructed in 1898, the Nożyk Synagogue is the only surviving prewar Jewish house of prayer in Warsaw and is recognised as a symbol of survival for the Polish Jews.

The synagogue was used by Warsaw’s significant Jewish community until the mid-war period, when it was requisitioned and repurposed by the invading Nazis. Following extensive restoration in the post-war years, and after the fall of the Communist regime, the synagogue remains an active Orthodox Jewish house of prayer. The Nożyk Synagogue was the subject of an arson attack in November 2024.

The service included the choir from the Israeli Defence Force, and the synagogue was full of congregants and visitors from all over the globe, joining together for prayer, contemplation and reflection on what had been a momentous week of activities.

Following the shabbat service, members of the delegation returned to have a Shabbat dinner with members of the *March of the Living* Australian delegation, and used the opportunity to reflect on the Poland based activities, and in particular the visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the March of the Living, and how to communicate the impact of these experiences to other colleagues and members of the broader community upon our return to Australia.

DAY 5 - Saturday 26th April 2025 – Łódź district (overnight in Warsaw)

Błaszki

I travelled with Michael Galea 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.

We 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 us 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.

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, we 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.

DAY 6 - Sunday 27th April 2025 – flight to Dubai

Overnight in Dubai – \$204 AUD

DAY 7 - Monday 28th April 2025 -Dubai

Meeting with Mr Mahmood Mian, Head of Business Development, Kanoo Group

The Kanoo Group is one of the largest independent, family-owned groups of companies in the Gulf region. The Group is a diversified business conglomerate based in the UAE, with over ten subsidiaries and a network of global partners.

The Group has previously indicated to the VGTI that they are interested in tech related investment opportunities. During the meeting, it emerged that the Group is also interested in exploring opportunities in relation to renewable energy projects and agriculture (including AgTech). An invitation was extended to the Kanoo Group to visit Victoria to better explore investment opportunities.

The opportunities to grow trade between Victoria and the Middle East (in particular the countries that make up the Gulf Corporation Council) were also discussed more broadly, as was the increasing appetite for government and non-government entities in the region to be investing in new markets.

Meeting with:

- **Mr. Anwer Pirani, Manager - Digital Economy Ecosystem, Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy**
- **Mr. Peter Brady, Assistant Vice President – Tech Cluster, Dubai World Trade Centre**

Dubai Chambers is a non-profit organisation that serves the needs of the business community in Dubai. Its key responsibilities include delivering value-added services to the business community,

driving effective advocacy to enhance Dubai's business environment, strengthening international trade, assisting local companies to expand into new global markets and attracting foreign businesses and investments to Dubai. A delegation from Dubai Chambers is attending the World Chambers Congress in Melbourne in September.

Dubai Chamber of Digital Economy (one of the three tiers of the Dubai Chambers) has a stated aim of positioning the emirate as a world leading digital hub. It focuses on advocating for the interests of the digital economy ecosystem, attracting digital companies to Dubai and supporting startups.

Dubai World Trade Centre hosts GITEX – the world's largest tech event – in October. As part of GITEX, it also runs "Expand North Star", which is specifically focussed on tech start-ups. Currently, start-ups (and tech companies in general) from Australia are underrepresented at this event, and there was a discussion about how this representation could be increased. Earlier this year, Northstar hosted pitch nights in Melbourne and Sydney (their first time in Australia), with the winner being offered a spot at the GITEX exhibition.

The discussion focussed on the key strategies that have made Dubai a tech and start-up hub. Key themes identified include:

- A regulatory environment that encourages tech and innovation;
- A government led strategy mandating the adoption of AI technology;
- Visa advantages for entrepreneurs;
- Diverse talent pool

DAY 8 - Tuesday 29th April 2025 (Flight Dubai – Melbourne)

Conclusion

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 in Poland 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.

The time spent in Dubai provided a valuable insight into the work of the VGTI office in the Middle East and the changing priorities of the region. The meetings with potential investors and stakeholders identified a range of opportunities to invest in Victoria and further grow and support the existing tech and start-up sector in the state.