

'When I look at an old picture of myself as a skinhead, I feel ashamed. Every day I try and do teshuvah,' he said... 'Every minute of every day. There is a lot to make up for.'

These are the words of Pawel, or Pinhas as he is known today. Pinhas who lives in Warsaw, Poland has an incredible story.

Before the outbreak of World War II there were 3.5 million Jews living in Poland. They had a thriving social, cultural and intellectual life. There were more than 30 daily newspapers and over 130 Jewish periodicals. More than 50 percent of all doctors and lawyers in Poland were Jewish.

After the war, of course, everything was changed. At the end of 1947 only 100,000 Jews still lived in Poland. The other 200,000 survivors of the Shoah had already emigrated. Almost all who remained hid their Jewishness because in a country ruled by the Communists, it wasn't safe to be a Jew.

Since 1989, the end of the Communist era, Poles have begun to see Jews differently. Michael Schudrich, a New York City native who became the Chief Rabbi of Poland in 2004, claims that Pope John Paul II, a Polish native made a huge difference in the way Jews are now treated. He spoke against anti-Semitism and his statements had an impact on other Poles. He saw Jews as the 'older brother' of Christians and believed that to understand Christianity, one had to understand Judaism.

There is a revival in things Jewish in Poland. Now there are film festivals, theatre groups and Kosher style restaurants. Jews hidden since the Shoah are just beginning to acknowledge their Jewish roots.

In addition there are 100s of Poles, most of them raised Catholic, who either converted to Judaism or discovered Jewish roots that were hidden. In 2004 Warsaw's Jewish community grew from 250 families to 600. Cafes and bars in the old Jewish quarter in Krakow are filled with young converted Jews who listen and dance to Israeli hip hop music. It's a world our grandparents and great grandparents could never imagine.

And that brings us back to Pinhas. Sometimes when he looks into a mirror, he can still see the neo-Nazi skinhead he was, looking back at him. But now he wears a skullcap and he, his wife and two children are Orthodox Jews.

This unlikely transformation is a fascinating story.

Pawel was raised in Warsaw in one of the high rise, concrete apartments in the 1980s. He and his friends hated the restrictions of Soviet style communism and found an easy target for their frustrations—the Jews. They shaved their heads, carried knives and raised their right arms in a Nazi salute when they saw each other.

They, of course, perpetrated many atrocities in the name of Jew hating.

Pawel had doubts about what he was doing. He even wondered about his family's history. Even though his father regularly attended church, he often quoted what he called the 'Old Testament.' In addition to that, his grandfather hinted that there were family secrets. And when Pawel told his grandfather that Jews were bad, he screamed that if he ever said anything like that again, he would be permanently banned from his house.

Pawel joined the army and married a fellow skinhead at age 18. But 4 years later his wife discovered that she had Jewish roots. This pushed Pawel to ask his own parents about his relatives. They finally told him the truth: both his maternal grandmother and paternal grandfather were Jews.

In his shock he went into seclusion for weeks and eventually decided to take on the religion that many of his ancestors died for. He converted when he was 26.

'I still struggle every day to discard my past ideas,' said Pinhas now 33. He adds, aware of the irony, that he had to stop hating Jews in order to become one.

One of the most poignant pieces of his story is that, as a Jew, he forced himself to reread *Mein Kampf* but he could not get to the end because it made him physically ill.

When he asked a rabbi why he felt this way, the rabbi replied, 'The sleeping souls of your ancestors are calling out to you.'

This is an amazing story, as is the fact that Jewish Poland is coming back to life. We could think that besides being an interested piece of Jewish news that this story doesn't relate to us. But I think that all of us struggle with our prejudices; struggle to accept those who aren't like us, who are easily singled out and judged or even hated. But all of that judgment and hatred leaves us cold and empty inside.

As Pawel had to do on his way to becoming Pinhas, we have to look at the ways we form opinions that are not based on reality but on fear and misinformation. We can take a lesson from Pinhas and challenge ourselves to be open to those ideas we can't imagine agreeing with. When we continue to change, we become the kind of people our religion was created for, to teach us the importance of being generous and loving to those around us.