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Review of two of our summer 2016 projects

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Summer 2016 Project Updates

Happy Fall!

As we move into a new season, we want to share with you some of the great work that happened in the latter part of the summer with two of our projects. August saw a return to Oswiecim for The Matzevah Foundation (TMF) as well as our first visit to Radecznica, Poland. Today we'd like to share with you about these two projects.

Oswiecim, Poland

Account by JoAnn Siegienski, TMF Secretary

Most people have heard of Auschwitz. Far fewer have heard of Oświęcim. Oświęcim is the Polish city that the Nazis renamed Auschwitz and is



where the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration & Extermination Camp is located.

Prior to WWII, Jews made up over half the population of Oświęcim. During the war, the Nazis deported the Jews and destroyed the Jewish cemetery. About 1,000 Matzevot (tombstones) have been returned to the cemetery and preserved. The stones are engraved in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and German. The oldest dates

back to 1757.

This is the fourth year we've worked in Oświęcim's Jewish cemetery. Through this work we seek to preserve and bring honor to the Jewish heritage of Oświęcim. While we're here, we stay at the International Youth Meeting Center. Our work this year included clearing the cemetery of overgrowth, placing Matzevot without bases in concrete stands (completion of a project we started last year), and building a path from the front to the back of the cemetery.

The path ended up being symbolic of the work we do in Jewish cemeteries. We start out with a straight line in mind. Along the way it is not uncommon to run into things that weren't part of the original plan. With the cooperation of our partners, a solution is found as these things are brought to the light. One of our partners, Aleks, called it the Path of Awareness. A very fitting name!





Oswiecim Thoughts from Steven D. Reese, President of The Matzevah Foundation



The Matzevah Foundation in cooperation with Fundacja Zapomniane became partners in an interdisciplinary and international research project led by Dr. Caroline Sturdy-Colls of Staffordshire University (United Kingdom). The team was tasked to conduct a regional survey of Jewish cemeteries and select one Jewish cemetery to conduct further research. The team utilized several non-invasive archaeological techniques in their examination of the Oświęcim Jewish cemetery in August.

The scope of the project was to pinpoint and record the location of the matzevot within the cemetery confines and to record the data found within the inscriptions on each matzevah. TMF worked with Staffordshire University staff and students to clear the cemetery of undergrowth, erect matzevah fragments in concrete bases, build a path, and recover matzevah fragments.

TMF was asked to install a gravel path. With the Chief Rabbi of Poland's permission and under supervision of his representative, we could dig the foundation for the pathway. While we were working, we encountered a moral dilemma in the form of two matzevah fragments. What should we do? Dig them up and move them or let them lay where they were?

The dilemma: How do we balance what is best for all versus individual needs? In other words, complete the task of installing the pathway or respect the dead and honor the Jewish law and tradition? How do I balance the demands of what we, as TMF, were requested to do – install a pathway, while honoring and dealing morally with the religious needs of the Jewish community in regards to the cemetery?

I had to find a way as a leader and a moral agent to balance the tension that existed ethically in the work and honor the request with which we were tasked. In consultation with other parties, we determined to leave the matzevot where they were lying and direct the path around them.

As a leader I have the personal responsibility of being a “moral influence agent.” I must have integrity in my dealings with other people and do what is right while balancing the need of the individual with the demands for what is best for all.

Consequently, I have become a credible voice in the conversation regarding the moral questions that we face in our work with Jewish cemeteries and mass graves of Poland. Our organization is also becoming moral change agents as we seek to honor the lives and culture that were desecrated at the hands of the Nazis and others. We are seeing transformation – cemeteries and communities are being set right and rectified – literally being healed, renewed and honored.



Workers install the matzevah to commemorate the mass grave in Radecznica, Poland

Racznica, Poland

Account by Steven D. Reese, President of TMF

You have probably all heard a joke at some point in your life that begins with this line: “A

rabbi, a priest and a minister walked into . . . ” You can fill in the blank and complete the joke however you wish. But for me, as a Baptist minister, what I walked into was no joke.

My work in leading The Matzevah Foundation is changing. In Radecznica, Poland this past September, three spiritual leaders (a rabbi, a priest, and a minister) were asked to pray at a ceremony that commemorated and honored twelve Jewish victims murdered at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. I was the minister invited to pray. For my prayer, I simply read, in Polish, Psalm 25:6, “Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old.”

Why was I invited to pray? The Matzevah Foundation is partnering with Fundacja Zapomniane (Foundation of the Forgotten) to commemorate the forgotten ones, those Jewish victims who lie in more than a thousand unmarked mass graves sprinkled across the countryside of Poland. Radecznica was the first time that we (TMF and Fundacja Zapomniane) were able to cooperate in an actual commemoration project. Bruce Mussey(TMF Advisory Board Member) and I were involved in preparing the site of the mass grave with Aleks Schwarz of Fundacja Zapomniane. We cleaned and cleared the area of debris and assisted the contractor to protect the grave and erect the memorial (matzevah).

We also joined in the commemoration ceremony.

On the day of the commemoration, nearly a hundred members of the local community, government officials, school children, teachers, and parents walked to the site and participated in the commemoration ceremony. They heard the story of those murdered and of the eyewitness who kept their memory alive. After the ceremony those who wished placed wreaths and candles at the base of the matzevah in honor of the victims.



Michael Schudrich, the chief Rabbi of Poland, places a candle at the matzevah during the ceremony



Pupils read the maztevah during the ceremony



Agnieszka Nieradko, president of Fundacja Zapomniane, explains the importance of the matzevah to local students

**Georgia Gives Day
November 16, 2016**



The Matzevah Foundation is registered in the State of Georgia as a nonprofit organization. Because of this, we will participate in the Georgia Gives Day this year on November 17, 2016.

And you don't have to live in Georgia to participate in this initiative!

Georgia Gives Day is a collaboration of Georgia Center for Nonprofits (GCN) in partnership with participating nonprofits, state agencies, corporations and businesses, associations, and foundations. *GCN's vision is to build the country's highest performing state-focused resource center, and to position Georgia as a national model for nonprofit excellence and achievement. GCN is on a journey inspired by our belief that nonprofits are essential components of a healthy democracy and thriving communities, and by our conviction that strong nonprofits working together can achieve anything they desire.* (Excerpt from Georgia Gives Web site)

If you would like to make a donation on Georgia Gives Day, please visit this link to Georgia Gives Day and type in The Matzevah Foundation in the search box at the top and a short description of TMF will pop up with a donation button.

We appreciate your support!



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