

TITLE OF PROJECT: Nasielsk Jewish Cemetery Project

DATE OF PROJECT: 3 - 6 July

LOCATION: Nasielsk Poland

TEAM LEADERS: Steven Reece and Przemek Panasuik

PARTICIPANTS: Susan Carson, Glenn Kurtz, Charlie Shan, Jay and Marla Osborn, Jerzy and Katarzyna Sosnowska

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT:

The city of Nasielsk is about 20 miles to the northwest of Warsaw, Poland. The project is a multi-year project to clear and clean, commemorate and document the matzevot (inscriptions). Long-term goal is to use the cemetery as a space for dialogue with the local community by re-integrating it back into the community. The role of TMF is primarily consultative – giving direction and focus to the project.

Funding of the project was exclusively realized through financial contributions made by the Nasielsk descendant's group. Two descendants participated directly in the project along with other volunteers from the surrounding community and from Warsaw.

Please see the following for a highly detailed [description](#) and explanation of the project that was written by Jay Osborn.

GOALS OF PROJECT:

1. Engage local community leadership (mayor, Catholic church, school, local residents, etc.)
2. Begin clearing and cleaning cemetery
3. Discover hidden matzevot
4. Document inscriptions

LODGING:

<http://www.starymlyn.info/hotel/>

Price of double room: \$31.37 per night

TRANSPORTATION:

A 9 passenger Renault Traffic van was rented for project.

PRELIMINARY BUDGET:

\$1,600.00

PREPARATION OF VOLUNTEERS:

Volunteers received the TMF volunteer orientation guide.

EXPECTED OUTCOME OF PROJECT:

To engage the local community and Jewish descendants to begin the process of clearing the cemetery.

ACTUAL OUTCOME OF THE PROJECT:

City government was highly involved and provided portable toilet, trash bags, laborers and members of the city council participated in the physical work. A young couple from a nearby community joined in the work for the entire project. Local residents assisted in clearing and removing large, dead or fallen trees. Other local residents stopped by frequently and shared their memories and stories regarding the Jewish community. During the final day of the project a young Jewish man, who lives in Nasielsk appeared and shared with us his story as well as the importance of the work that we were doing.

Roughly 1/5 of the cemetery was cleaned by an average of 10 people over 3 working days.

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY:

See above.

EDUCATION R.E. HOLOCAUST?

See above.

CONTACT WITH LOCAL JEWISH POPULATION:

See above.

VOLUNTEER FEEDBACK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hmq6RdAyRME&feature=youtu.be>

<http://rohatynjewishheritage.org/2016/07/nasielsk-cemetery-clearing/>

<http://www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2016/07/08/jewish-cemetery-clean-up-first-hand-report-cross-post>

Glenn Kurtz:

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It was a privilege to work beside you and with the Matzevah Foundation. I am profoundly grateful for your expertise, your diplomacy, your good humor, and of course your very hard work. Perhaps for me especially, who has spent so much time delving into the history of this town and seeking the identities of the individuals who lived there, to begin caring for this ground again after a lapse of 77 years is overwhelmingly meaningful. It may not make a difference to those who rest there. But it makes a difference in the lives of their descendants around the world and, I hope, in the lives of the town's current residents.

The Jewish community of Nasielsk lived in the town for at least 350 years until it was violently destroyed in 1939. The memory of this violence has left an inheritance of bitterness for all those who trace their ancestry to the town. The few survivors and numerous descendants who re-visited the town in the postwar years almost all reported an indifferent when not outright hostile reception from the local population. Together, this war-time violence and post-war bitterness froze the town in the minds of those who remembered it, and severed all connection for those whose ancestors had lived there.

The work I have done for the past five years was not originally intended to establish a bridge between Nasielsk's current population and the descendants of its destroyed Jewish community. I intended only to learn enough of the history to decipher my grandfather's 1938 home movie. But to my astonishment, the process of deciphering the film opened a series of opportunities to engage the local community, first with a visit by descendants. Now, through the Cemetery Restoration Project.

My goal has always been to preserve the memory of Nasielsk's Jewish community. I quickly learned that this was not something I could do alone. But the great discovery of this process, and the great joy, if I can call it that, has been how the community of those dedicated to preserving this memory continues to expand. Beginning with the survivors and their families, the "community of memory" has grown to include members of Nasielsk's administration, concerned local residents, the wonderful people of FODŻ and The Matzevah Foundation, and many others who have volunteer time, information, and resources. Restoring the cemetery is, for me, a symbol of the effort to remember the Jewish community. But the teamwork, camaraderie, shared effort, and satisfaction of the Cemetery Restoration Project show the living spirit essential to holding that memory. Perhaps through this work, the descendants and the local population can begin a dialogue that will unfreeze relations and create a productive, collaborative partnership. Truly preserving the memory of this Jewish community can only be accomplished together.

Thanks again for all your work.

Jay Osborn:

The visibility of the working volunteers, and the growing visibility into the cemetery as the cutting and clearing proceeded, appeared to change how townspeople passing by looked at the place. What had been a wild place, undeserving of attention, was revealed as a cemetery, a place deserving of care, and an element of the city's heritage. That the volunteers included townspeople and city staff, descendants from the region and abroad, Jews and Christians, and others with no affiliation but a desire to help, was a powerful message to me as a volunteer and to many of the passersby who slowed or stopped to look and talk. I am taking that message with me into my own work elsewhere, but I think it is even more important that the message and the results of the work will also stay in Nasielsk; the changing perception of the cemetery may be a turning point in long-term recovery of the Jewish presence in the city.

Marla Raucher Osborn:

I volunteered to clean and clear weeds at the Jewish cemetery in Nasielsk because I do not want this cemetery to be forgotten; I do not want it to die an unnatural death.

Nasielsk today has no surviving Jewish community to regularly visit and care for its historic Jewish cemetery; but it does have individuals who remember and who care, and who this last week also worked, should to shoulder with Nasielsk Jewish descendants and friends. Through this communal gesture we together re-enforced the visible clues that this is - AND REMAINS - a Jewish cemetery. I would like to think we also contributed to re-establishing an historic community bond broken 75 years ago.

Sure, nothing lasts forever. But by our apathy, distance, or indifference we should not and cannot let Nasielsk's Jewish cemetery - a piece of Jewish as well as Polish Heritage - die and disappear from memory.

Charlie Shan:

On one hand I'm very grateful for your work. It's so rare that somebody without a connection to the lost Jewish community would care enough to help commemorate it. On the other hand I wonder how important it is to create a memorial on the old Jewish graveyard. Surely it's the right thing to do. But with what seems like an apathetic Polish population and an immobilized Jewish diaspora I'm not sure what should be done.

BUDGET & EXPENSES:

Nasielsk budget: \$1,625 (donations received from Nasielsk descendant's group)

Expenses:

1. Cemetery survey: \$602.00 (conducted in late July 2016)
2. Van rental: \$567.96
3. TMF housing and meals: \$258.79 (Przemek Panasuik covered these for me and himself)
4. Fuel: \$120.00 (approximate)
5. Tool repair: \$60.00

GRAND TOTAL PER PERSON:

Each person (volunteer) was responsible for their own housing and meals. Nasielsk budget funds covered transportation, tool maintenance, water, and fuel for van and tools.

GRAND TOTAL FOR MATZEVAH:

\$0.00

PROBLEMS, ISSUES, THE UNEXPECTED:

None.

FOLLOW UP:

I will speak with Glenn regarding next steps prior to the board meeting.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

God is blessing my leadership and bringing forth from it fruit. The following quote captures the lesson that I am learning well:

Thank you for the opportunities you gave me and us to work with you, to observe your management and work methods, and to hear your thoughts on strategy and tactics and the guiding principles in your work. This year we got to see first-hand that you gather great people to do great work; we admire you for that, and for your gentle hand.

PLANS TO RETURN?

The Nasielsk Project will be considered for 2017 and will more than likely continue until primary goals listed above are realized.