

Steven D. Reece

From: Steven D. Reece <sdreece@matzevah.org>
Sent: Sunday, January 27, 2019 11:15
To: Yehoshua Ellis
Subject: An Idea
Attachments: Scannable Document on Sep 17, 2018 at 11_18_29.jpg

Shalom Yehoshua,

As we remember the Shoah today, I wanted to share with you an idea. It is something that I have been thinking about for some time. When you get a chance, I would like to discuss it with you. I have attached a graphical summary, a mind-map of an idea, which structurally captures what I have in mind. It is an outline, which I will briefly explain below.

Background

In 2016, JoAnn Siegienski (secretary of TMF) and I along with a group of volunteers from TMF and Staffordshire University met Haim Horowitz from Tel Aviv in Oswiecim. Haim is in his early 70's and is the child of survivors. He shared with us his family's story, and he also told us that the City of Oswiecim gave his grandfather's (Chaim Gerstner) home back to the family.

Haim said that he and the family did not wish to sell the home. Instead, they wanted to give it to an organization that would use it to bring justice and honor the memory of his grandfather's family, who were murdered by the Nazis in WWII. The Nazis hung Haim's grandfather, along with six other Jews in the Chrzanów Ghetto for baking bread. I have developed a close relationship with Haim over the past three years. I have spent time with him and assisted him in his desire to keep the matzevah at the site of the hanging in Chrzanów. The monument sits on private property and is under threat of being moved.

As an organization, we considered Haim's dream as something we should pursue with him. We named the idea Chaim's House in honor of Haim's grandfather. We have done an initial exploration of the possibility for such a project in Oswiecim. This past August, I outlined to Haim the idea of Chaim's House, and he fully embraced it. He shared our idea with the family, and they are behind it as well. We have also discussed the idea with Tomek Kuncewicz, the director of the AJC. He welcomes our initiative and says it is needed. He is willing to assist us to navigate the restoration of the home since he has experience in restoring the home used for Café Bergson.

I have introduced the possibility of Chaim's House to Aleks, and we briefly discussed and considered what we could do with it as a training and educational center. I have also talked with Rabbi Schudrich about TMF cooperating and partnering formally with Fundacja Zapomniane. I did not introduce the idea of Chaim's House to him because at the time it was premature. Therefore, we collectively have not taken any action on any of these matters.

At our October board meeting, our board discussed the idea of Chaim's House. We realize that we cannot take on such a project alone; nonetheless, it is an idea that we wish to pursue.

The Need

From my as yet unpublished research and dissertation, I can demonstrate that Jewish cemeteries are spaces in which Jew and Christian may work together in the pursuit of dialogue and reconciliation. Additionally, such Jewish-Christian cooperation will allow communities to address the greater issues of the ebbing away of Jewish spaces, memory, and life in Poland.

1. How might we employ the space of the Jewish cemetery to link and engage the Jewish community of Poland and the Polish-Jewish diaspora with local Polish communities and others in the long-term stewardship of Jewish material and cultural heritage of Poland?
2. How might such efforts be pursued in agreement with the Halacha and honor Jewish traditions?
3. How might Christians learn about the Shoah and thereby become partners with the Jewish community in the long-term cultural stewardship of the Jewish heritage of Poland?
4. What is needed for such work and how can we fund such work?

Idea

What would it look like if we created a new, joint organization that would speak to Haim's desire to honor his family and speak to the injustice of the Shoah? Could restoring the home and making it an educational center change the landscape of the neglect, abandonment, and misappropriation of Jewish material, spiritual, and cultural heritage of Poland? What if TMF, the Rabbinical Commission, and Fundacja Zapomniane joined forces and approached the German Government to fund and support the creation of this educational and training center that we term for now Chaim's House?

Overview: Chaim's House/House of Life

1. Chaim's House will be a new organization, a joint Jewish-Christian project involving the Rabbinical Commission, Fundacja Zapomniane, and The Matzevah Foundation.
2. Chaim's House will be an educational conference center and a place of learning for those involved in Jewish heritage preservation, Jewish cemetery restoration, mass grave, Shoah research, and commemoration. Additionally, it will be a place to teach Christians and churches about the Shoah.
3. Chaim's House will be a multi-disciplinary and collaborative partnership linking existing organizations involved in the field, such as the Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC), MDSM (International Youth Meeting House), The State Museum at Auschwitz, and Jewish Community of Bielsko-Biala.
4. Chaim's House will be a small museum honoring the memory of Haim Horowitz's grandfather, Chaim Gerstner, and the six other Jews, who were hung in the Chrzanów Ghetto for baking bread.
5. Chaim's House will celebrate Jewish life and would reflect normal Jewish life in Oswiecim before WWII. It was a baker's home, so it would house artifacts that reflect the family history and Jewish life, including an exhibition artistic elements – photos, reflections, narratives, etc.
6. Chaim's House will incorporate both classroom and field training and continue academic/scientific research of the Shoah, as demonstrated by the work that TMF and Fundacja Zapomniane did with Staffordshire University and Dr. Caroline Sturdy-Colls in the IHRA grant-funded project regarding the plight of Jewish cemeteries as places of cultural genocide and mass killing sites during the Shoah.
7. TMF, Rabbinical Commission, Fundacja Zapomniane would initiate leadership training and develop local leadership so that the Chaim's House will be a self-sufficient organization, which is overseen by a board of directors, mostly residing in Poland and the community of Oswiecim.
8. The primary goal of Chaim's House is to remember and preserve Jewish heritage through education and training as a means to initiate dialogue and reconciliation among Jews and Christians.

Rationale

In the attached graphical model, I have roughly outlined the idea of the House of Life (Chaim's House). It is comprised of two aspects: CH (Chaim's House) and JC (Jewish Cemetery). Essentially, Chaim's House is the classroom, and the Jewish cemetery is the laboratory in which theory and praxis meet.

Practical Considerations

Haim's family home is a historical monument. Restoring it within the laws of Poland will cost roughly 70,000 Euro. Staffing it, paying for electricity, taxes, etc. is unknown, but these would be annual expenses that would need to be considered. Haim Horowitz is behind the idea that I have outlined above. He and his family are willing to donate the

home to such use. We need a legal organization to receive the property and operate it and the educational program. I do not know if we need a physical building to pursue such an educational and redemptive program. The building itself is neglected and in ruins and serves well as a symbol of the neglect, abandonment, and misappropriation of Jewish material, spiritual, and cultural heritage of Poland.

Conclusion

Polish Jews were murdered for baking bread. The Polish Government returned the home to Haim and his family. This restorative act is rare; it is redemptive and requires a proactive response. The German Government is looking for a way to make amends – to seek restoration and reconciliation with the Jewish community of Poland. If we act on their desire to make things right, we have an opportunity to develop an educational platform and seek funding for it through them (and others). If we take on such a project, we will redeem the tragic loss of Haim's family and honor the memory of his grandfather and other Jews, who were murdered. It will be a living testimony and possibly be a means to change perspectives of Jews and Christians toward each other. It will potentially pass on to the next generation the importance of speaking to the injustice of the Shoah today.

What I have shared with you is an idea. I have taken our ideas of Chaim's House and combined it with some of the matters that we have considered in the past and which we are presently considering.

I want to know what you think and if you think that this idea has merit or not. We can certainly reshape the idea and refine it. Nonetheless, the main thing that I would like to propose is that we come up with a specific plan to present to the German government that would speak to all of the issues on the table.

What do you think? Could we talk about this idea sometime this week?

L'shalom,

Steven



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