

In August 2018, I had the pleasure of attending Rev. Steven D. Reece's presentation on "Saving Jewish Cemeteries" at the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies annual meeting in Warsaw, Poland. One of four panelists, Reece presented the philosophy and work of The Matzevah Foundation, which he founded. The other panelists included the Chief Rabbi of Poland two other Jews working in the field of preservation of Jewish cemeteries in Poland. Almost all, if not all, of the audience of 100 or so were Jews. With four panelists packed into short session, he was given the challenge of presenting his work in a dozen minutes. He rose to the challenge of a short talk exquisitely. His presentation was crisply organized: divided between summarizing the mission of his Foundation and the primary values that guide it, then framing the work in terms of the philosophies that guide it and the practical outcomes. Reece held the audience's rapt attention with his earnest voice, supplemented by powerful black and white photography and PowerPoint text.

For many Jews the question of "why should a Christian group take an interest in rehabilitating Jewish cemeteries" is a puzzling one. By carefully outlining his motivations and the practical aspects of the truly holy work that Reece does, he was able to engage the audience in thinking carefully about his propositions. Perhaps the best evidence in my mind of his success in engaging his audience ensued over the following twenty-four hours at the conference when I saw numerous attendees seeking Reece out to gain his counsel on cultural reconciliation projects they were pursuing or to seek his partnership in their own cemetery restoration efforts.