

Steven Reece

Steven brings passion, enthusiasm, and sensitivity to his mission with The Matzevah Foundation. His ability to communicate these emotions in an engaging yet humble and unintimidating way engenders trust and an eagerness to support his activities.

In my experience, it is extremely common for someone who grew up Jewish to be suspicious about the motivation of non-Jews who profess a deep interest in and perhaps deeper commitment to Jewish history and culture. This can be a very difficult barrier to overcome, but Steven succeeds through his actions, his academic concentration, and demonstrating his sensitivity to in-the-moment circumstances (for example, his quiet and appropriate handling of the discovery of bone fragments at the Nasielsk cemetery).

His gentle conversation encouraged me to be more introspective than I usually am and to articulate my thoughts without resorting to my well-worn sound bites. I was aware that Steven was mid-doctoral thesis and that the work in which I participated potentially contributed. He periodically asked “how does this make you feel” reminding me to pause and contemplate (a good thing) but sometimes taking me out of the moment, giving me a sense of Steven as momentarily detached: an observer, collecting information. *In no way did this diminish my experience.* I cannot suggest a better way to engage someone in the midst of an emotional experience.

I was extremely impressed by Steven’s skills in effectively communicating with municipal officials and government agencies, local residents who may not have been sympathetic, and with descendants of Polish town former residents, of Holocaust survivors and victims. Each audience had its own agenda and required a different approach. He repeatedly displayed a mastery of this balancing act, fostering good will and a willingness to partner. In this way, he honored Jewish heritage, history, and culture; more than tangibly caring for the land. Without this leadership, our activities would not have been as successful.

Steven conveyed leadership by tireless example. Involving participants non-judgmentally made people feel their participation was meaningful, whether bushwhacking through a forest or handing out water bottles. The emotional intensity of the work quickly makes intimates of strangers. In quiet conversation (such as can be had in a crowded van), Steven was giving of his personal story, including his professed shyness and ongoing effort to overcome his insecurity about public speaking.

I know Steven was nervous about attending and presenting at a gathering of 700 Jews who were to varying degrees obsessive and extremely knowledgeable about their Jewish ancestors in Poland. He seemed eager to develop a mental picture of what he was getting into. In his presentation, Steven read verbatim the bulleted list of a plain text slide. This suppressed his passion and expertise. By highlighting one or two points and sharing a relevant experience or why it’s so meaningful to him, his audience might better connect with him and The Matzevah Foundation’s work. Unsurprisingly, this was not at all the case once off stage, even when talking with a group of new acquaintances.

I continue to be motivated by Steven’s expressive Facebook postings and personal emails, learning more about The Matzevah Foundation’s important mission and gaining insights into what’s important to Steven. He writes in the same voice I met in Poland, genuine, warm, and compelling.