



COURTESY PHOTO BY STEVEN D. REECE

THE BRIDGE BUILDER

An American Baptist runs an organization to bring Christian volunteers to clean Jewish cemeteries in Poland
Jan Jaben-Eilon, Atlanta

WHEN ALBERT Narcys of Adelaide, Australia, wanted to place a memorial to honor his family in their hometown of Wolbrom, Poland, he first contacted the rabbi at his late parents' congregation in Adelaide. Then, despite not speaking Polish, he called the local council of Wolbrom, a small rural town about 50 kilometers (30 miles) north of Krakow and tried going through the Polish government's complicated bureaucratic processes.

After two years, frustrated, Narcys searched the Internet and discovered the Matzevah Foundation in, of all places, Atlanta, Georgia. And, he learned, it was led by a Southern Baptist minister – Steven D. Reece.

"From the first communication with Steven, he seemed very interested and empathetic toward my father's story," Narcys tells *The Jerusalem Report*.

Three years later, in July 2014, a ceremony was held in the Jewish cemetery in Wolbrom to unveil the *matzeva* (gravestone) in honor of Narcys's family members who lost their lives in the Holocaust. Only his father had survived the war and he didn't want the memory of the extended family to be erased.

"Each step of the way, Steven kept me informed as he sought funding for the project and approvals at all levels of the government, including the Jewish hierarchy in Poland. As time went by, I became more and more anxious, hoping everything would work out as I had invested a lot of emotional energy and angst into achieving this family project," Narcys recalls. "I feel relieved and happy that what began five years ago has ended positively," he says, noting how his wife, children and grandchildren were all gathered at the July unveiling.

THE NARCYS family *matzeva* was not Reece's first involvement with Jewish cemeteries in Poland. As might be guessed, Reece's journey to what became his passion was rather convoluted. A professional photojournalist, Reece heard a Southern Baptist man speak at his church in 1988 about his work in Eastern Europe.

"He displayed his photos and I felt compelled visually. I felt an overwhelming desire to go take pictures of Christians living in difficult times," he relates to *The Report*. A gripping dream convinced Reece to live in Poland. After studying at a seminary, he was sent to work there in March 1997 and he began to understand the complex relationship of Poles and Jews.

He was working with a Baptist congregation in Otwock, outside Warsaw, when a waitress at a restaurant suggested he visit the Jewish cemetery. Before the war, the resort town, Reece says, was 70 percent Jewish.

"I began to research why cemeteries were important to Jews. I saw a website about a Polish Jewish cemetery restoration association, and

Restoring Otwock: A group of Baptist volunteers from Georgia move a vandalized gravestone to its original resting place in the Jewish cemetery of Otwock, Poland



COURTESY PHOTO BY DAVID REECE

Steven D. Reece stands as a hybrid between Jews and Christians

I was hooked," he says. The issue, he explains, "doesn't have to be spiritual for people to be involved. For me it is. It's because of the debt I owe to Jews for being a vessel of God.

"On a practical level, for me, the outcome isn't the restoration of a cemetery, but the restoration of a relationship which was endearing. Jews gave birth to Christianity. They are the vessels by which we came to know Jesus. We can't have an abstract view of this. A great evil was perpetrated, and a great question was, where was God?"

Not yet 60, Reece doesn't know if that restoration will happen in his lifetime, but he asked himself, "If Jewish-Christian relations are strained, how do I work beyond the impasse? It should be Christians who take the first step because the Shoah happened during the Christian reign in a Christian country. Ninety percent of the people were Christian.

"The theological aftermath of the Shoah was very difficult. We were viewed as perpetrators. Christians must understand the Jewish perspective of the Shoah. We need to understand the devastation that resulted from Christians standing idly by. That's where reality comes into play."

That's also when his bridge building began.

"When you really listen to people and become aware of something that's important to them, then you ask yourself, what do you do about it? I'm a public servant. That's what the Matzevah Foundation is. I'm a steward entrusted with something because Jews should be doing this, but on a large scale they're not. I'm the Shabbat goy," he says.

For Reece, who lived in Poland for many years and speaks fluent Polish, trying to understand the relationship from a Jewish point of

Jewish World

view is nebulous.

"It's like feeling the wall in the dark for a light switch and never finding it," he describes. "Formal dialogue at the institutional level is good and active, but I'm more concerned with the experiential aspects of what happened by working in the cemeteries because you can touch it. And there are so few Jews left here."

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Reece connected with Aleksander Schwarz, a representative of Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, and with Monika Krawczyk, director of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, commonly referred to as FODZ. "I told Aleks about my idea to bring Baptist volunteers to clean Jewish cemeteries and he asked why? I told him, in one word, 'reconciliation.' That began a 10-year journey with Aleks."

"Steven does much more than taking care of Jewish cemeteries," Schwarz tells The Report in an email. "I believe the true work that Steven does is building an understanding and mutual respect between different traditions. That kind of work is exceptional. It gives great results for now and the future. Jewish cemeteries should be maintained not only by physical work but also they have to be understood as far as the Jewish law and tradition. This goal can be achieved by educational projects that Steven carries out."

"We cooperate with many organizations and individual people," Krawczyk writes in an email to The Report, pointing out the challenge of restoring more than 1,000 neglected Jewish cemeteries in Poland. "One of the organizations we have worked with is Steven Reece and his foundation. We have accomplished the commemoration of the Jewish cemetery in Zambrow together and now we are working on a more ambitious effort to build a fence around the whole cemetery. We are very grateful for Steven's involvement and accomplishments."

When Reece first returned to the US, he didn't know what he'd do with his new mis-

The Narcys family memorial dedication in Wolbrom, Poland, July 2014; Albert Narcys and his wife Margaret are in the center

sion. He incorporated the Matzevah Foundation in December 2010.

All of his board members are Christian. One of them, Dr. Robin Park of St. Louis, explains that, as a physician, she works "in the hope of healing the wounds of people. There are many avenues for helping and healing others. I chose this pursuit as an aspect of my pursuit of God. I wish to know Him. The cleaning of cemeteries, the loving of people is where I feel at peace."

Park first traveled to Poland in 2004 and spent a week in the Warsaw Ghetto. "The depth of the wounds struck me," she tells The Report. "I could see them in the buildings that were half bombed and in the bullet holes in the brick walls. Over time, opportunities arose for the cleaning of cemeteries. To me, these cemeteries represent wounds. The cleaning of them demonstrates God's love."

"Why are American gentiles involved?" she asks. "Perhaps one advantage of this involvement is a reminder to both Pole and Jew that they are not alone. As a physician, I walk with people through the traumas of life. It is healing to know that one is not alone."

In August 2013, Reece brought a group of Christians to Auschwitz to help restore the cemetery there. He ran into Israeli Shlomi Shaked, whose grandfather had been the last rabbi in Auschwitz.

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"He had come there in his gap year and was giving a tour when he heard that we were a group of Christians. He said, 'Jews come for a day or two, but you came for a week. Why?' I answered, 'Giving of loving-kindness, love and honor. This is the root of everything I know of God.'"

Reece has also involved Poles in his reconciliation efforts. One is 19-year-old Anna Zambrzycka. In her broken En-



glish, she writes to The Report about her experience with Reece and the Matzevah Foundation.

"I learned a lot about Jews and their cemeteries, also about some traditions and history, in a little bit different way than in school. I saw the *matzevas*. I touched them. Before Steven's project, I was not aware of, and I am not proud of this, that in my town we have a Jewish cemetery."

Zambrzycka says it was her teacher's idea to get involved in the restoration of Jewish cemeteries.

"I have to admit that at the beginning, I did not want to try. I was afraid of it because I was not sure if I am good enough to work in a project like that. But, after all,



COURTESY PHOTO BY STEVEN D. REECE

I decided to take part in the project. It was one of the best decisions ever.”

HOWEVER, SHE believes the project is only the beginning of what is necessary to reconcile Jews with Poles. “We have a very cruel and bloody history, a lot of unresolved conflicts and problems between us, much sorrow and disagreement. It needs more time and more efforts to improve relations between Jews and Poles. As far as I am concerned, I believe that Steven and the Matzevah Foundation efforts will help.”

Although Reece and the Matzevah Foundation are all Christians, his goal is to encourage Jews to help restore their cemeteries in Poland. He approached sev-

eral rabbis in the Atlanta area and received a response from only one, Rabbi Peter S. Burg of The Temple.

“I met with Steven because he asked,” recalls Burg. “The first time I did not know him or what he did; I just responded to his meeting request. But I have come to admire him and the mission of Matzevah, especially since returning from Poland and seeing the cemeteries firsthand,” he notes, referring to his recent congregational trip. “He is doing good work and it comes from a genuine place.”

Meanwhile, life back in the US hasn’t been easy for Reece.

“When I came back from Poland, I couldn’t reenter the Baptist world. I’m

out of step with both groups,” referring to both Jews and Baptists. “I became a hybrid. I stand as a hybrid between Jews and Christians, but I’m neither one. I’ve become a third culture. For the person in the middle, I have to show grace to both sides. But that’s what bridge builders do. That’s what my dissertation will be about.”

One of his committee members told Reece this is the legacy he will leave behind.

“I’ve known this person for more than 10 years,” Reece says. “He told me that ‘no one is doing what you’re doing the way you’re doing it.’ It defines me, consumes me, sometimes overwhelms me. But it’s not optional; it’s become my life.” ■