

THE MATZEVAH FOUNDATION

REMEMBERING. RESTORING. RECONCILING.



May 30, 2019

Dear Scholars,

On behalf of JewishGen, The Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland, and the Board of Directors of The Matzevah Foundation, I want to welcome you to the *JewishGen Young Scholars Project*. We value our partnership with you and wish you all the best in the upcoming project.

Enclosed is an introduction to the work of The Matzevah Foundation. We hope this information is helpful as you get to know The Matzevah Foundation.

We look forward to working with you and members of your team this summer as we are starting our ninth year of work in Poland.

Sincerely,
Steven D. Reece

President and CEO, The Matzevah Foundation

Our Mission

The Matzevah Foundation (TMF) exists to educate people regarding the Shoah (the Holocaust), that took place during World War II across Europe, having a particular focus on Poland and the deaths of millions of Jews who had lived in Poland prior to the war. The Matzevah Foundation seeks to show G-d's love by honoring and preserving the Jewish heritage through maintenance and restoration of Jewish cemeteries in Poland.



Photograph 1: Jean-François Abramatic, Kimberly Ford, Hatte Blejer, Kevin Little, and Tandy Ford in the Przerośl Jewish cemetery, July 2018.



Photograph 2: David Franklin in the Markuszów Jewish cemetery, July 2016

TMF Board of Directors

Steven Reece, Founder and CEO

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Steven Reece worked as a photojournalist before entering religious and charitable work. He leads The Matzevah Foundation to care for and restore Jewish cemeteries in Poland, to commemorate mass grave sites, and to educate public about the Holocaust.

Steven is an ordained Baptist minister and is a graduate of Baylor University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He serves as an advisor for the European Jewish Cemeteries Advisory Network (EJCAN). [EJCAN](#) is a network more than 30 international experts representing a range of professional skills and expertise related to Jewish cemeteries who can be contacted for advice on a number of issues."



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Steven is certified to teach about the Holocaust through Yad Vashem and Tel Aviv University. Presently, he is a candidate for the PhD in Leadership at Andrews University and will graduate in 2019.



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The Matzevah Foundation Story

The beginnings of The Matzevah Foundation (TMF) go back to 2004, well before we officially became a nonprofit in 2010. Steven Reece and his young family had been living and working in Warsaw, Poland for several years where Steven was serving as a local Baptist pastor.

In 2004 while Steven was working with a local Baptist church in community ministry, he had a chance encounter one day with a Polish woman who lived in Otwock, a city just outside of Warsaw, Poland. Anna was working in a restaurant where a group of volunteers was staying. She struck up a conversation about his work and what the volunteers were doing in her city. She asked Steven many questions at every meal about what the group was doing and why. Anna was very pleased to hear about the work and the good that they were doing for her city.

Anna suggested that Steven take these young people to visit the Jewish cemetery in the city. Steven asked her very politely, *"Czy ma pani pochodzenie Żydowskie?"* ("Madam, are you of Jewish descent?")

She replied simply, "Yes." And, she added very quickly, "There are many of us in hiding here."

Sometime later, Steven went to visit this cemetery in the forest on the outskirts of Otwock, Poland. There in this quiet, lonely and desolate place, he began to consider a thought that for him was new and even radical:

What was significant about that Jewish cemetery to Anna? What was the meaning of a cemetery to a Jew or someone who had Jewish heritage? He wanted to find out.

He began to research why cemeteries were important to the Jewish community and what obligation, if any, that Christians might have in helping them to care for these holy places. It did not take long in his studies for him to recognize the deep chasm that existed between Jews and Christians, with the chief cause being attributed to the Shoah (the Holocaust). He also learned that there were around 1,200 Jewish cemeteries in Poland and that the majority of them were in dramatic stages of neglect.

As a Christian, Steven always had a deep respect and gratitude towards the Jewish community as it was within the Jewish belief that Christianity was birthed. He began to consider the question of what should be his response as a Christian to the Shoah.

This led him to consider how he might reconcile his respect as a Christian for Jews and the events of the Shoah with a growing call to restore not only forgotten Jewish cemeteries around Warsaw, but also to restore these neglected Jewish burial grounds as a means to build a bridge to the Jewish community and open dialogue between Jews and Christians.

Soon he began to research how he might bring groups of American Baptist volunteers to care for and restore the Jewish cemetery in Otwock. His search led him to meet in early 2005 with the Rabbinical Commission for Matters of Cemeteries in Poland (RCC). When asked why he

wanted to bring Christian volunteers to work in the Otwock Jewish cemetery, he responded simply in Polish by stating, “pojednanie,” which means reconciliation.

The RCC approved Steven’s request and with that one word, he began to care for the Otwock Jewish cemetery by inviting the first group of American Baptists in the summer of 2005. Together they undertook the first stages of cleaning and clearing the cemetery. Over the next two years, more American Christians came and together with local Polish residents of Otwock and friends from the Warsaw area they made significant progress. They completed a full clearing of the overgrowth throughout the cemetery, placed large stones to mark the perimeter, and in cooperation with the Jewish community of Warsaw, inventoried the remaining matzevot located in the cemetery.

After living in Poland for twelve years, the Reece family returned home to Atlanta, Georgia. The desire to continue the work in Jewish cemeteries in Poland remained. In 2009, Steven began meeting with several of those American Christians who had been involved with the Otwock project and who were committed to the work. They began to dream and consider how they could continue caring for and restoring Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

After much planning and discussion, The Matzevah Foundation was established as a tax-exempt, 501(C)(3) nonprofit in 2010. Steven Reece serves as President and CEO of the organization. The Board of Directors and Advisory Board are compiled of like-minded people who have a passion for building relationships within the Jewish community and in remembering and honoring the Jewish history of Poland.

A priority for TMF in the early days was to partner formally with key organizations and people to guide and assist us in the work. Besides the RCC, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) became one of our first formal partners. FODZ manages, protects, and restores important Jewish sites around Poland including synagogues, cemeteries and other historically significant Jewish locations. They provide us with invaluable guidance and practical assistance as we work in various cemeteries around Poland.

The first years of work found us in many cities across Poland including Zambrów, Oświęcim, Krzepice, and Wolbrom, just to name a few. Projects were mostly comprised of cemetery restorations that were completed by wonderful teams of international and local volunteers. Some volunteers are from European countries such as Germany, France, and Ukraine, while others travel from many corners of the world, such as Israel, Australia, Canada, and South Africa.

TMF finds special joy in working alongside local Polish residents of the cities in which we work. Because of our relationship with local Poles, we are able to share about the importance of the Jewish cemetery and the Jewish community it represents in their town and pass along the desire to care for it after our time of work is over.

Another aspect of our work in Poland is that of commemoration. Whether it’s a cemetery or a mass grave in a forest in a remote area of Poland, we work with descendants, local communities, and other organizations. It is through such commemoration projects that we

established partnerships with two other organizations: Friends of Jewish Heritage who we worked with in Markuszów and Fundacja Zapomniane with whom we partner to locate and identify forgotten mass graves. Together we have located and marked 30 sites around Poland where individual, collective, or mass graves were situated.

This year TMF began partnering with JewishGen.org and Friends of Jewish Heritage in the *JewishGen Young Scholars Project*. This program brings together students, who are interested in Jewish Heritage, the Shoah, Polish-Jewish history, and Jewish cemetery restoration, together for a tour of major Jewish heritage sites, and to work with the local high school, and community volunteers in the Krzepice Jewish cemetery.

With each year, The Matzevah Foundation grows in the scope of influence, recognition, and breadth of projects we undertake around Poland. TMF's President, Steven Reece, continues to be sought after by many organizations and individuals to speak on the work he and TMF are doing. He is also a highly regarded expert in the area of properly caring for Jewish cemeteries.

The actual work we do, the clearing of vegetation and debris in an overgrown cemetery or commemorating a forgotten burial spot, serves as the vehicle for what is ultimately our main goal.

TMF's desire is not only to remember and honor the people who were part of the long-established Jewish communities in Poland for many generations but we also seek dialogue and work toward reconciliation with those who will join the work in each Jewish cemetery. Our work is a process and we are learning as we go.

With each day's work a cemetery becomes more visible to us as well as to the current citizens of the town. When people travel by the cemetery they will see matzevot, a cleared piece of quiet land, or maybe a memorial marker. All these pieces serve as a visible and tangible reflection of Jewish lives, culture, heritage, and faith.

All of us at TMF come away from each project with a renewed sense of purpose in the work we do. We count it a privilege to serve the Jewish communities, whether past or present, through the work of our hands, through the friendships and partnerships we have, and through the ever-growing appreciation we have for our Jewish neighbors.

TMF Partners

Rabbinical Commission for Matters of Cemeteries
Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ)
Fundacja Zapomniane
World Society of Czestochowa Jews
Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland
JewishGen.org
Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC)
Foundation for the Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland
Studnia Pamięci (Ogrodnicy Pamięci)
Rohatyn Jewish Heritage

IHRA Cultural Genocide and Holocaust Killing Sites Project

Beginning in 2016 and in partnership with Staffordshire University (UK), Rabbinical Commission for Matters of Cemeteries, Fundacja Zapomniane, The Matzevah Foundation participated in a three-year International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) grant-funded project to document Holocaust killing sites and cultural genocide occurring in Jewish cemeteries in Poland. More than 30 cemeteries in the regions of Oswiecim and Lublin were surveyed and of these four were selected for further examination. Research was conducted in the Oswiecim, Jewish cemetery in 2016, while in 2017 the team examined the Jewish cemeteries in Piaski, Wąwolnica, and Chrzanów. The findings from our research will be made public for the first time on June 5, 2019 in Oswiecim and June 6, 2019 in Lublin.

2019 Projects

June 10-14	Częstochowa
June 17-20	Krzepice
June 24-28	Krośniewice
August 12-16	Oświęcim
August 19-23	Przerośl

Locations of Projects since 2010

Chrzanów	Przerośl
Czestochowa	Radecznica
Karmanowice	Radomsko
Krośniewice	Rogalów
Krzepice	Rohatyn, Ukraine
Markuszów	Wąwolnica
Nasielsk	Wodzisław
Oswiecim	Wolbrom
Piaski	Zambrów

All of the above projects were restoration and/or commemoration projects.

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