
Working towards Reconciliation: A Christian's involvement in Jewish cemetery restoration



Steven D. Reece addresses the conference on Jewish cemeteries held Vilnius, October 2015

Steven D. Reece is a Baptist minister in the United States who works to restore and maintain Jewish cemeteries in Poland. The idea of reconciliation underlies his involvement. In this essay, he writes about the moral questions faced in this work. Reconciliation, he writes, is an action via which there can be transformation – cemeteries and communities being set right and rectified; literally being healed, renewed and honored.

Working towards Reconciliation: A Christian's Involvement in the Restoration of Jewish Cemeteries

By Steven D. Reece

Fools make fun of guilt, but the godly acknowledge it and seek reconciliation (Proverbs 14:9, New Living Translation).

The Shoah is a great moral and ethical failure. European Christians for the most part stood idly by, as Nazi authorities began to marginalize, isolate, and ultimately liquidate their Jewish neighbors. As a Christian, their failure has troubled me. I have often asked myself: How would I have responded? I cannot answer that

question because I was not living at the time. Nevertheless, I am living today in the aftermath of their moral failure. What should be my response today?

In 1997, I was a Baptist minister. My family and I were invited to work with the Baptist Church of Poland. I learned Polish and studied Polish history and culture. One day in 2004, I met a woman of Jewish descent in Otwock, near Warsaw. Our conversation led to an unexpected suggestion for me to visit a Jewish cemetery in Otwock. I began to wonder: Why was this Jewish cemetery important to her?



Jewish cemetery in Karczew, Poland, not far from Otwock (2006)

I began to research Jewish cemeteries and I learned of their importance to the Jewish community. Due to the Shoah, the Jewish community was small and mostly unable to care for the more than 1,200 Jewish cemeteries that lie scattered, abandoned, and neglected across Poland. In the face of the need, I wondered: What should I do? What could I do?

I began to consider how I might involve Christian volunteers in caring for one neglected Jewish cemetery in Otwock. In March 2005, I met with Aleks Schwarz, the representative of the Chief Rabbi of Poland and a member of the Rabbinical Commission for Matters of Cemeteries in Poland. He asked me, "Why would you wish to bring Baptist volunteers to work in a Jewish cemetery?"

I answered him simply with one word, "reconciliation." With that one word, I began a journey with Aleks and the Jewish community. We work towards reconciliation. I am learning that reconciliation is bringing parts together. Reconciliation is a relationship. It is a process of reconnecting, and it is something towards which we have labored for eleven years now, as my work with Aleks and the Jewish community has evolved and transformed.

In December 2010, I established, with a group of Christian friends, [The Matzevah Foundation \(TMF\)](#), a non-profit corporation registered in Atlanta, Georgia. TMF cares for and restores Jewish cemeteries in Poland and educates the public about the Shoah. TMF has been working with the Rabbinical Commission for Matters of Cemeteries, the [Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland \(FODZ\)](#), the [Auschwitz Jewish Center \(AJC\)](#), Fundacja Zapomniane and other individuals and organizations. To date, TMF has worked in Zambrów, Oświęcim, Krzepice, Wolbrom, Nasielsk, Markuszów, and Radecznica.



Jewish cemetery, Oswiecim, Poland.

This year, The Matzevah Foundation and Fundacja Zapomniane began a two-year partnership with Dr. Caroline Sturdy-Colls of Staffordshire University in an interdisciplinary and international research project funded by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). This past July, Aleks Schwarz, Agnieszka Nieradko and myself took part in a regional survey of Jewish cemeteries in the Oświęcim area with Dr. Sturdy-Colls and Czelsie Weston, a PhD student, and in August 2016, the team began a research project of the Oświęcim Jewish cemetery, utilizing several non-invasive archaeological techniques in their examination of the site.

The scope of the project was to pinpoint and record the location of the matzevot within the cemetery confines and to record the data found within the inscriptions upon each matzevah. TMF worked with Staffordshire University staff and students to clear the cemetery of undergrowth, erect matzevah fragments in concrete bases, and recover matzevah fragments.

Additionally, the AJC requested that TMF install a gravel path in order to connect the front sidewalk with a sidewalk leading to an ohel at the rear of the cemetery. Before beginning the work I consulted with Aleks Schwarz with regards to digging, because Aleks was concerned that the foundations of another ohel might be in the area of the path and possibly could be disturbed.



With the permission of the Chief Rabbi of Poland and with Aleks present, we began digging the foundation for the pathway. We were allowed to remove about 10 cm of earth, and while we were digging we encountered two matzevah fragments within the footprint of the pathway.

The presence of the matzevot in the pathway created a moral dilemma. What should we do? Dig them up and move them or let them lie where they were? How do we balance what is best for all versus individual needs? In other words, how do we complete the task of installing the pathway while respecting the dead and honoring Jewish law and tradition? How do we balance the demands of what we, as TMF, were requested to do, that is, install a pathway, while honoring and dealing morally with the religious needs of the Jewish community in regards to the cemetery?



We had to find a way to navigate such a sensitive issue. Ultimately, in consultation with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Aleks, Dr. Sturdy Colls and other parties, we determined to leave the matzevot where they were lying and direct the path around them.

The moral dilemma created an opportunity to collaborate and to seek a resolution that allowed for the installation of the gravel pathway. In the end the gravel pathway seemed to symbolize the work that those of us who work in Jewish cemeteries, do.

In the work of restoration, we frequently encounter unexpected “hiccups” or alternate realities that tend to throw our work off track. It is how we resolve these unexpected occurrences realistically that will determine successful outcomes, and develop leadership competencies and expertise in the work of restoring Jewish cemeteries.

In this instance, we found a resolution. In the end, Aleks called the pathway “The Path of Awareness,” as it revealed something hidden from the past, while making people aware of it in the present, as well as for the future.



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Steven D. Reece is President of [The Matzevah Foundation](#)

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Harry Bolner

on **July 8, 2017 at 18:25** said:

The Germans were not the only Shoah perpetrators. Local allied Axis countries, army and police also participated some with enthusiasm more than others. The end result was the wipeout of whole communities as early as 1941 that lived there for centuries.

GONE..Nobody lives there, nobody remembers. But the cemetery is evidence of that a community once lived and contributed to all the region. Schools, hospitals, stores, businesses, professionals, music, science and arts.

On a ROOTS trip to Romania and Moldova in March 2017, I came upon upon a cemetery the likes I have never seen in EDINET(z) in N. Rep of Moldova.

Sorry, I cannot upload pictures here.

Besides my father being deported to a Labour camp there (surprisingly) surviving I have no personal connection to that place.

There is no one left to take care of that cemetery. Any ideas or help will be appreciated.

Thanks

Harry



Guest

on **December 9, 2016 at 03:03** said:

ps: Millions of Christians were killed by Nazi Germans.



Guest

on [December 9, 2016 at 03:00](#) said:

"Reconciliation" is OK with Germans and individual collaborators, not with "Christians". Holocaust was not "Christian", it was Nazi German with a small % of collaborators (Jewish, Chrstian, Muslim and others).

