

Dear Cousins and Friends:

REDEDICATING KRASNYSTAW JEWISH CEMETERY



Modern-day Krasnystaw Former Jewish home in Krasnystaw

It is very hard to believe that almost 11 years have gone by since I last traveled to Poland to learn more about our heritage and the Holocaust. As you may remember, in addition to the information I learned about our family and that they had lived in Krasnystaw for over 100 years, I witnessed the state of the Jewish cemetery; it is totally overgrown with no evidence there was a cemetery there. But my wonderful guide, Tomasz Cebulski, knew where it had been.

I returned to Poland this July 2024, after making some important connections with people both in the United States and in Poland who are committed to the rededication of Jewish heritage in Poland. In this letter I highlight the key experiences of my trip; I hope it will inspire you to become interested in the Krasnystaw Jewish Cemetery project. I am always happy to answer questions, to talk about my trip in detail and about its meaning to me.



Tracings art exhibit showcases shadows of the mezuzahs once adorning doors of Jewish residences

WARSAW

First, I flew to Warsaw and within a couple of hours met Dan Oren, the President of Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland (Friends), an organization committed to engaging descendants and others in restoring dignity to Jewish cemeteries and other cultural sites there. <https://jewishheritagepoland.org/krasnystaw.html>. Dan and I had been speaking and emailing for a couple of years – he has guided me in this journey and given me both a realistic and inspired grasp of potential goals.



Nowy Synagogue in Warsaw

We walked together to the Nowy Synagogue to meet with Rabbi Schudrich – the Chief Rabbi of Poland (happens to be a fellow SUNY at Stony Brook alum) and Piotr Puchta who heads up The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland ([FODŹ](#)) which was established in 2002 by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO). Its primary mission is to protect and commemorate the surviving sites and monuments of Jewish cultural heritage in Poland.

We spoke about the status of the cemetery which is owned by the National Forest Service. A number of Polish citizens dedicated to these Jewish sites have done a lot of research at the Krasnystaw Cemetery. While some boundaries are known, the northern one needs to be surveyed. Mr. Puchta also committed to contacting the National Heritage Board of Poland to mark the cemetery with a monument - this will be a first step to identifying the cemetery for the local community – and to building consciousness about the Jewish community that once lived and thrived here.

We also spoke about how we ultimately would like to demarcate the cemetery. While I had been committed to the vision of a fence, I now understand that for many reasons, there is movement away from these types of structures. We spoke about using stones and plantings, perhaps along with a plaque and/or a story board

that would provide more information about the Jewish community that lived in Krasnystaw as well as its destruction during WWII. I asked about how we address the mass grave that is likely nearby, and the Rabbi assured me that whatever is done will include this site.

I left the meeting with Dan, and he expressed delight about the commitment of the Rabbi and Piotr Puchta to this project. When I arrived back at my hotel, I discovered Mr. Puchta had already sent me some documents – albeit in Polish – that would prove very important.

POLIN MUSEUM

My next day I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Joanna – my Polish tutor! While the internet has many flaws, it does bring together people who would likely never have met!



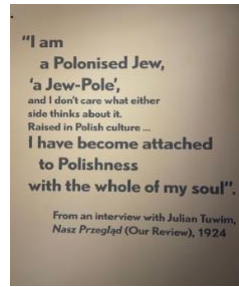
Me with my Polish tutor

The day following, I had the honor of being guided through the Jewish ghetto and the POLIN Museum by Ewa Bratzosiewicz. The Ghetto is now surrounded by development and only small fragments of the old wall remain. There are two beautiful memorials and a large plaza in front of the Museum.



Memorials in Plaza in Ghetto area

The Museum is not about the Holocaust. It does include this history, but its main purpose is documenting the 1000-year history of Jewish civilization in Poland.



There is so much here – I hope to come back some day to spend more time. In the meantime, I'm trying to order the catalog. One of the many facts I did learn during my visit was that Jews lived in Krasnystaw starting in the Middle Ages – much earlier than I had read previously.



Mayer Kirshenblatt paintings depicting Jewish life

I did return to the museum the day before my departure to see a very evocative group of paintings by Mayer Kirshenblatt who left shortly with his family before the Town of Opatow was taken over by the Nazis.

Years later, Kirshenblatt's daughter urged him to put his memories on canvas and this show depicts in so many delightful, colorful, earthy and sad ways the Jewish life of this town before the war.

LUBLIN – BELZEC – ZAMOSC - IZBICA

The next day I traveled by train to meet my next guide in Lublin – Agata Radkowska. Agata, like several other people I met and worked with during my trip, are members/staff of the Grodzka Gate – which is an incredible museum that depicts in great detail the life of the Jewish community that once lived in Lublin. Agata is a bundle of energy and knowledge. I had asked her to guide me to Belzec,

which is a death camp not far from Krasnystaw. Here, Jews were taken on trains, stripped of clothes and possessions upon arrival and gassed – then cremated.



Belzec death camp

Belzec death camp stands in a village – there can be no question but that the residents knew it was a death camp. Yet, any Pole who dared enter this site was shot. I wanted to come here because many Jews from Krasnystaw were taken here – perhaps members of our family. This memorial leaves no doubt about the horror. When you walk in all you see is black rubble to either side of a path where the walls surrounding it grow taller and you are brought to an area from which there would be no escape. Surrounding the site is a border that depicts on metal plaques each year of the site's murderous activities and from which towns Jews were taken to Belzec. Here, I broke down.

After we left here, we drove to Zamosc where I had been previously – it's a gorgeous medieval town with a huge square. There is a beautiful synagogue there.



Zamosc synagogue

We started back to Lublin and passed Izbica – I asked Agata if we could stop there and of course she accommodated me.



Me talking to young Israelis in Izbica

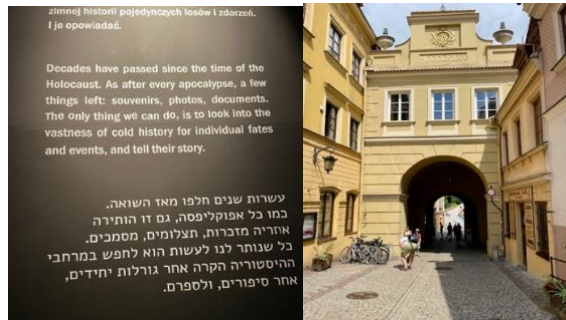
I knew it was a transit site during the Holocaust. It had originally been a Jewish town – the Nazis killed all the Jews there or in Belzec or Sobibor. Jews from Czechoslovakia and other parts of Poland were also brought there. We walked to the cemetery which is just a grassy hill now – there is an Ohel with tombstones placed on the exterior walls and stacked nearby (as you know, the Nazis removed and destroyed Jewish headstones – using them in construction – after the war some people may have brought some back but typically once they are removed, there is no way to put them back to their rightful places – yet, people have come up with some beautiful ways to honor their purposes and the dead.) As in many Jewish cemeteries in Poland, there is a mass grave here. We met a large group of young Israeli women who inquired about what we were doing. They were delighted to learn I had come back to honor my family and to learn that Agata – a non-Jew - was also committed to these purposes. They were very curious and open.



Izbica

(cont'd)

GRODZKA GATE



A simple but powerful example of the message at the Grodzka Gate

Agata dropped me near my hotel in Lublin and we said our goodbyes though we did see each other again at the Grodzka Gate. The following day I met with Monika Tarajko who has been the main hero of this entire project. Monika has done a lot of research on the cemetery and is very knowledgeable in navigating the bureaucracy and the steps in this process of rededication. We met with two others – Marcin and Voldymys - who have done historical research – there are documents from the early 1900s showing the possible boundary of the cemetery. There is some dispute about a strip of land that the Jewish community added but may have never formally procured. But based on aerial photography (from German WWII), they believe the boundary is evident from the road location, placement of stones and the remnants of the mortuary. There are some remaining bricks from that structure that possibly could be used in this process. There are also additional photographs from the 1970s that were taken by the Jewish History Institute in Warsaw. We spoke about the need for heavy clearing of brush as part of the process of reestablishing the boundaries.

Monika then helped me understand the import of the document that Piotr Puchta had emailed to me earlier in the week. In the 1960s Polish “scouts” conducted interviews of locals regarding the cemetery who described the taking of Jews to the cemetery where they were shot and buried. While it feels odd to say, “I was delighted!” by this evidence, I was grateful to these young people who documented the horrors.

Monika then gave me a detailed tour of the Grodzka Gate NN Theatre which is a remarkable archive of Jewish life in Lublin before the war. Forty-three thousand Jews had lived here – the Gate demarks the location of where Jews traveled back and forth from the Jewish Quarter to the rest of the city – conducted business, traded goods, met their neighbors and returned until they didn’t. The Gate shows people not just the sadness and horror of this loss but the great cultural

void left in Lublin and Poland as a result of the Shoah. Monika took me around the boundaries of the Jewish town including the Yeshiva which still stands and functions as a shul, cultural and education center and a hotel! Last we went to the cemetery where the earliest stone is from the 16th century. Several important Tzadiks are interred here, and many religious people make pilgrimages asking for help.



Party in Lublin

That evening, I was honored to be invited to a fun dinner party – so multi-national with Mexican and Israeli Jews as well as native Poles, a person from Portugal and myself! Delicious middle eastern food – of course. And lively conversation on a balcony while swifts called and soared around us. Several of these young people have gotten Polish citizenship which of course I was very interested in!



The commemorative plaque in Markuszow

The following day I met some more Poles who work with an organization – Studnia Pamieci – Well of Memory – that is also dedicated to education about the Holocaust and Jewish heritage. With Teresa Klimowicz, Professor Pawel Sygowski, and Monika along with her very generous dad who drove, we traveled to the Town of Markuszow for a dedication by the National Heritage Board of Poland, at the site of the former Jewish synagogue marking the start of Action Reinhard, which was the Nazi plan to murder all Jews. Dan's family is from here and as a result of learning about the condition of his own ancestors' cemetery and working on its rehabilitation, he became inspired to start Friends to assist in other similar projects. Dan and the Mayor provided moving, heartfelt words about the

need to remember and to honor. There were other officials there including some from a county organization who spoke about their support for these projects to me - including Krasnystaw.



Commemorative plaque in Markuszow marking the start of Action Reinhard

KRASNYSTAW

The next day we left for Krasnystaw where I spent most of the next three days. After a meeting with some stern fellows from the Forestry Service (remember they own the cemetery) to discuss plans and complete necessary paperwork with Monika interpreting and negotiating, we left for the cemetery to meet up with the people who would be working shoulder to shoulder there on a cleanup so that the northern boundary survey can be done. I was completely overwhelmed by the numbers and diversity of our group. In addition to Dan, an additional member of Studnia Pamieci – Prof. Andrzej Trzcinski - and a local descendant, Stawomir Wysocki, joined us, both coming prepared to work. Here I also had the honor of meeting Steven Reece of the Matzevah Foundation – matzevah.org/our-mission.



Me working with the Jewish Gen Fellows, the Matzevah Foundation, Friends and Studnia Pamieci volunteers

Steven was our commander-in-chief as he brought all the tools needed for the work and guided everyone on how to use things properly from both a “tool” perspective and to ensure that our work was in keeping with Jewish law. We also were honored with the presence of Filip Szczepanski who spoke about the protection of cemeteries and the prohibition of disturbing graves. He emphasized that although the condition of the cemetery was not ideal, its remote location near the forest had in a way protected it from worse. In addition to this dedicated and knowledgeable

group, nine American students joined us at the cemetery. These students were Jewish Gen fellows sponsored by Jewish Gen, the Matzevah Foundation, and Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland. Avraham Groll, who heads up Jewish Gen, was there with them. They came to Poland to learn more about Jewish Heritage including the Shoah and to work on the Krasnystaw cemetery. These students were Jewish Gen fellows sponsored by Jewish Gen – Avraham Groll who heads up Jewish Gen was there with them, the Matzevah Foundation and Friends, to come to Poland – learn more about Jewish Heritage including the Shoah and to work on the Krasnystaw Cemetery. I was completely honored by their commitment, joy and curiosity. I hope to keep in touch with many of these wonderful young people – if they are the future – the world has a chance!



Clearing the area

These pictures speak louder than words. A great deal of work went into clearing this area. We also were guided by the wonderful Jeri Ann Karlsberg on how to properly and carefully clean headstones. The Deputy Mayor of Krasnystaw and her staff also came to greet us during a lunch break.



Me with Deputy Mayor of Krasnystaw

We thanked them for their support especially in providing water and a Toi Toi (port a potty).

Stawomir Wysocki gave us a tour the following morning of the Jewish quarter of Krasnystaw as well as the Krasnystaw Museum and the nearby Roman Catholic Church that is hundreds of years old; it survived the war. Stawomir also took us to the nearby river where he told us many of the headstones from the cemetery were taken by the Nazis to serve as a roadway for vehicles. We returned to the cemetery

and shortly before I had to depart to catch my ride back to Warsaw, Steven brought me to the site of what is strongly suspected to be the mass grave. His deep empathy demonstrated in words and actions stays with me.

After a long trip back, shower and a last visit to the POLIN Museum, I had a fitful night's rest before my long trip back. Happily, I was reunited at the airport with most of the students who were at the cemetery as well as Avraham Groll – Director of Jewish Gen and VP of the Museum of Jewish Heritage in NYC. It was delightful to spend more time with these great partners.

THE NEXT STEPS

I have been home for a few weeks now and have spent a lot of time speaking to friends and colleagues about my trip. Certainly, what stands out is the dedication of many non-Jews to the cause of reviving Jewish heritage in Poland. Many here including Paul asked me, “but why are these people who are not Jewish so dedicated?” I believe that reviving our heritage and bringing dignity to many of these desecrated sites is important to understanding the past, important to addressing the loss of Jewish life to Polish society and important to encouraging a desire to learn about history. For Jews and non-Jews alike – particularly Polish citizens – this can be a meaningful effort and goal. I am so hoping that you will join with these people and me in ensuring that the Krasnystaw Cemetery be rededicated so that the community and others become aware of the Jewish society that existed and died.

WE NEED DONATIONS

Some funds for the survey have already been raised but we will need thousands more dollars. In addition, we would like to raise the funds needed to do the landscaping and monument erection that will honor those interred and those murdered here and remind the community of the depth of loss and history. Giving in this manner is a tremendous mitzvah because the dead cannot thank us.

HOW TO DONATE

If interested, please go to <https://jewishheritagepoland.org/krasnystaw.html>. And please do not hesitate to reach out to me for more information!

L'Chaim and Love, Helene