

## *Guidebook for Jewish Cemetery Restoration:*

### **Descendant's guide to restoring your ancestors' cemetery in Poland**

#### **PREFACE**

With all that has been written about historical and contemporary Jewish life in Poland, all that has been made available about individual cemetery restoration projects, including the lamentation that well over 1000 cemeteries are in need of restoration, and the great generosity of individuals providing advice and mentoring; there is no written guidance on how to proceed.

Having stumbled through the process and learned by trial and error, I feel compelled to share my experiences for others embarking on the journey. My hope is that not only will compiling advice aid individual restoration projects but also promote the goal of restoring the larger assemblage of cemeteries.

I have neither great experience nor expertise with cemetery restoration nor with detailed protocols of Jewish cemeteries. However, after I got over my apprehension of visiting Poland a few years ago, I visited my family's ancestral shtetl in Trzcianne (not far from Białystok), and was appalled by the state of the cemetery. Although my family genealogy and story had been traced back to the mid-18th century, my quest in Poland was to see the status of the cemetery, to document any of my ancestors' graves, and to determine whether I could find the remnants of my great-great grandfather's three-story brick house he had commissioned about 1877.

After seeing the state of the cemetery and becoming very fond of Poland and the Poles, I decided that I would make every effort to restore the cemetery. The Jewish media, as very broadly interpreted, paints a rosy picture of such an endeavor. Having watched the film "A Town Called Brzostek" and read about some other successful restoration projects, I thought the process would be relatively simple and straightforward, albeit with a few stumbling blocks along the way.

Alas, after starting the process along the lines of advice I had been given by a few experts, I discovered that the process was far from simple and straightforward. Many of the descendants had experienced considerable frustration in dealing with what might be called the "required points of contact." Appointments with authorities were cancelled or changed at the last minute, contracted memorials and fences not constructed as expected, and ceremonies not followed according to plan. Not only had the expectations of the descendants frequently not been met, but those of the local communities were not met either. A seemingly gracious gesture on the part of one descendant at a "kick-off" restoration activity, for example, led to an incident nearly derailing the entire process.

With this in mind, I decided that a guidebook, or possibly a pair of guidebooks, would be helpful and go a long way toward getting as far as possible in restoring and documenting the neglected

Jewish cemeteries in Poland. The companion guidebook, which will need to be largely written by someone else, is for local communities in Poland providing suggestions and guidance on how to deal with their respective Jewish cemeteries, descendants groups.

It is critical to keep in mind that each cemetery is unique. Jewish cemeteries in Poland range from having a few to over perhaps 250,000 graves, from completely devastated with no visible headstones to little damaged and having many visible headstones, communities being proactive about restoration and working with diaspora descendants to those being reluctant or even hostile to even acknowledging previous Jewish presence, and from having a group of engaged descendants to descendants without much interest. Thus, while it is important to build on the experience of others, each cemetery will differ and require a different strategy.

Please consider this a “living document.” As our collective experience grows and as the political situation in Poland evolves, new advice will likely be available. I will attempt to update the guidebook from time to time.

I hope that all involved in their respective process will share their experiences and suggestions with the broader community. Please feel free to contact me or post on one or more of the various community Facebook groups.

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## Introduction

This intent of this guidebook is to provide a starting point for descendants thinking about or undertaking a Jewish cemetery restoration project in Poland. I have drawn from my experiences and those of others in the hope that the process will be a better overall experience for all stakeholders.

This document is organized to enumerate tasks, provide advice on the various required authorities, advice on working with others who might help in the process but who aren't necessarily critical, background on working in Poland on which to base expectations, and a starting-list of resources including contact information, websites, videos, and books.

At first thought, a stepwise sequence of tasks leading from start to finish would seem appropriate. However, because of the difference in many aspects of each cemetery, although the general approach may be roughly similar, the strategy should be one akin to the terminology sometimes used in my own professional field of ecological management and restoration – “adaptive management.” That is each step of the process needs to be assessed during the planning phase, while in progress, and after completion to make sure it doesn't need to be redone or the previously planned course of action needs to be adjusted.

## First steps

Ascertain you are indeed dealing with your ancestral cemetery. Ancestors may have been buried in towns other than those consistent with family histories. For example, some from small towns may have been buried in cemeteries of nearby larger towns for “prestige.” Some family histories refer to a larger town near the shtetl where they actually lived, burials may have indeed taken place in either the smaller or larger town. Corroborating this may or may not be an easy task, but some input can be obtained from records available on-line or actually finding the actual or likely headstone of the person in question.

Once this is done, the first step is to collect some basic information about the cemetery itself: Have other descendants or researchers recently visited the cemetery? This can be determined from networking with relatives and web searches, and can yield insights into the status of the cemetery. This basic information will provide details on the basic direction of a proposed restoration project.

What is the status? There are websites with scant to exhaustive details for many cemeteries (see resource list). In my experience, the information does not always appear to be perfectly accurate (though a great starting point) and will need to be corroborated.

Is there already a restoration project underway? This is a slightly more challenging question, but a judicious web search or contacting authorities in Poland should yield results.

Once the initial steps have been completed, the next steps can also be established with a web search and by contacting authorities in Poland.

Ownership and governance: The cemetery may be owned by a range of entities including the municipality, the local, or broader Jewish community. Many cemeteries are under the authority

of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ) who may represent descendants to the municipality during and after the restoration. FODŻ generally has or can provide this information. Based upon personal experience, this is a critical step. For my project in Trzcianne, although we easily obtained permits to place a memorial; our permits for performing a delineation and establishing boundary markers was deferred by the municipal officials until ownership is transferred from the municipality to another entity. I had incorrectly thought that the cemetery was already under the authority of FODŻ. Had this been brought to my attention when I initiated the project in 2017, I would have made every effort to facilitate the title transfer. It is also important to determine whether the cemetery is included in the Register of Historical Monuments (FODŻ or a web search will provide this data). If so, the consent of conservator of historical monuments is required to perform any restoration. Finally, the Rabbinical Commission has authority over some aspects of activities in Jewish cemeteries (e.g., assuring that any restoration activities do not disturb any buried remains, prohibiting work on Saturdays).

Determine location and rough boundaries: This can generally quickly and easily be done by web searches of historical maps and from existing information. There are several sites that can be perused and then corroborated. Even as generic a search as Google Maps yields many Jewish cemeteries. This is needed for planning your own visit in addition to other logistics concerned with various restoration steps. A precise delineation should be performed sometime later during the planning process.

Determine ease of access: Determining access is an important part of the planning process. Some cemeteries are located adjacent to a road and have convenient parking. Others may require access through dense brush over rugged terrain, over private property, or exist behind a locked gate.

### **First reconnaissance visit**

Your quest to restore your ancestral cemetery will likely take at least a few trips. The first should focus on building relationships and estimating what needs to be done to keep the cemetery from further deterioration and to preserve it in some way.

FODŻ: If your ancestral cemetery is under the authority of FODŻ, or will be in the future, you should schedule a meeting well in advance. Their office is centrally located in Warsaw and the helpful and gracious staff will be able to provide information about the cemetery and proposed restoration. This is also an opportunity to develop a relationship that will serve you through the process.

Chief Rabbi of Poland. Rabbi Michael Schudrich collaborates with FODŻ to assure that restoration is performed consistent with Jewish customs, works with the local church in stakeholder engagement during the restoration process, and is a very useful source of advice and ideas. Involving the Chief Rabbi as a credible supporter potentially goes a long way in dealing with other stakeholders. His office is also centrally located in Warsaw not far from the FODŻ office.

JHI (Jewish Historical Institute): Several descendants have gotten a lot out of meeting with staff genealogists. Though you may have your family history well worked out, JHI may have additional details about your ancestors as they serve as a repository for genealogies, family stories, photos, etc. You are encouraged to leave your data with them to facilitate contact with others doing genealogy or possibly attempting to restore cemeteries.

A local guide/“cultural ambassador”: The person you select should be familiar with the region. Several descendants have used Białystok-based experts for Trzcianne, Goniądz, and nearby areas. Others have used Warsaw-based guides. There are companies that can arrange guides for many parts of Poland. The credentials of these are available online and should be investigated. Many of these guides have highly specialized expertise, years of experience, and published books on Jewish issues, particularly cemeteries, in Poland and are more than just tour guides. Suggestions for potential guides can be obtained from others engaged in the restoration process or from the web. Another possibility is to use the Matzevah Foundation, the CEO, Dr. Steven Reece, directs a U.S.-based volunteer-based organization very experienced working with local officials and communities.

Local officials (to the extent available). An introductory meeting with the mayor or representative (also local curator of historical monuments if applicable) should be set up through FODŹ or your cultural ambassador. In addition to determining how receptive they are regarding any proposed project, they may provide tips on how to proceed correctly with the implementation of the proposed project as well as introductions to the local church, school, and possibly the town historian. Ideally, one or more contacts fluent in the language of the restoration proponent should be identified and serve as a primary contact. There may not be such a person in which case FODŹ or the cultural ambassador should serve as an intermediary and longer term point of contact.

Determine the preliminary state of headstones and whether they need to be reset. In many instances, a quick approximation can be gained visually. The range of reasonable possibilities is that there are intact and upright headstones which are readily visible to not seeing any apparent headstones. Sometimes, upon close inspection headstones resembling boulders can be seen partly or completely covered with vegetation. Often, considerable further work will need to be done to find and then reset headstones. In some instances, there may be boulders or concrete or other building material from construction (e.g., fences) that resembles remnant, possibly intentionally destroyed, headstones.

Does vegetation need to be cleared to access and document headstones? Most unrestored cemeteries are overgrown with weeds and shrubs obscuring the soil surface. Note that large trees should not be cleared, as is often consistent with the wishes of the local community, and because of the risk that removal might disturb buried remains. It is important to be aware of the season, as the degree of vegetation cover will of course vary.

It is also helpful to visit nearby cemeteries, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Descendants and guides may have useful information on how to do this.

**Next steps.** To formulate a restoration plan, several preliminary steps must be undertaken:

Formal/legal determination of boundaries: This needs to be carried out in many instances if there is uncertainty about boundaries. Currently, for many cemeteries, only the approximate boundaries are known. The survey needs to be carried out in conjunction with the owner and the municipality. This should be completed before any fencing is installed. Such surveys are also of particular importance when there is the possible threat of encroachment by adjacent land use, for example agriculture, road expansion, or housing construction. The surveyor consults historical maps and records which may be of interest beyond the boundaries and these should be requested during the contracting process.

What permits are needed for clearing vegetation? The municipality and possibly other entities need to grant specific permission to clear vegetation. While this is often a formality, it needs to be investigated. Clearing is sometimes done by volunteers, volunteers working with contractors, or contractors. Some municipalities have specific contractors they prefer.

Are there environmental work windows for clearing vegetation, construction, or other activities (to avoid disturbing nesting birds or other wildlife)? In the case of my ancestral cemetery, we found out from municipal officials fairly late in the process that vegetation clearing is only permitted from mid-October through mid-March to protect nesting birds. I haven't heard of examples of such restrictions elsewhere; most clearing takes place during the mid-Spring through mid-Autumn because of the weather. As someone whose career was focused in part on protecting natural resources through environmental regulations like this, I would recommend graciously complying with any such regulations to elicit the best efforts of stakeholders to help protect cultural resources like cemeteries. Some Jewish cemeteries contain plant species not found elsewhere and which may be subject to environmental regulations. I will provide more information in future guidebooks as it becomes available.

Also the site of a mass grave? Many Jewish cemeteries are also the sites of mass graves from the WWII era. This can sometimes be determined from historical records (which should be corroborated) or possibly by ground-penetrating radar surveys.

Existence of fencing -- need for fencing? The concern is that of adverse effects of possibly encroaching city development, farms, roads, etc. There is a range of opinions regarding whether and how to propose fencing and possibly providing a gate. Fencing is religiously proper in order to delineate a separate and protected area. It also discourages people from wandering through and treating the space disrespectfully

Ground-penetrating radar survey: Ground penetrating radar uses rather new technology to help locate solid objects beneath the soil surface. In some instances, ground-penetrating radar can be done to determine locations of headstones not visible from the surface, locations of human

remains, and remnants of degraded coffins. In some instances, it can be used to determine differences in soil density as might be the case if the ground had been disturbed, in our context, to provide some information on whether a grave had been dug. This is also useful for corroborating the location of mass graves. The value of ground-penetrating radar is that the work can be done without disturbing remains.

### **Developing a Restoration Plan**

It is advisable to prepare a written restoration plan. This will aid in budgeting/fundraising, sharing plans with other descendants, the Jewish authorities, and the local community. Obviously the plan will need to be modified as the project proceeds, but providing a written document facilitates good communication. The plan should include some adaptability to deal with unanticipated things such as changes in funding.

While the plan for each cemetery will differ, the following are potential items for inclusion:

#### What is the desired endpoint?

Perhaps as in ecological work, the term restoration is a misnomer. It is unlikely that an abandoned, possibly desecrated, cemetery could be restored to its original state. Rather, it is up to stakeholders to decide what the endpoint, or ending trajectory, should be. Presumably the intent is to minimize future deterioration, mark and document the site, and assure that it is firmly integrated into the respective Jewish and Polish cultural history. The plan should briefly outline what the “restored” cemetery would be including for example, things like, signs, gates, fences, and long-term maintenance.

#### Collaboration with existing entities

The plan should list city officials (including municipal officials and any school or church officials), the extent to which FODZ and the Rabbinate are participating. The list is likely to change as the project proceeds.

Working with other descendants: An important part of any restoration project is engagement with other descendants who may or may not be your close or distant relatives. Descendants typically are the primary funders for any project, and may have specific ideas about the restoration process and outcome. It is helpful for a reasonable size group to show up during the process and at the dedication ceremony to build relations with local residents. Additionally family histories and genealogies can be enhanced. Some descendants have reported challenges working with others in terms of funding, project design, dedication ceremonies, and indeed the value/wisdom of restoration and reconciliation. JewishGen, JHI, and other websites may be used to identify descendants who are not currently known.

Memorial monument: A formal monument of some sort is an essential part of a restored cemetery. Not only does it serve as a signpost but is also a long-term indicator of the location of the cemetery. Monuments can be very simple, stating that it marks the Jewish cemetery of the town and is a memorial to those buried there (or perhaps who may have perished in the holocaust). The design should be carried out with the review of FODŻ, if FODŻ is the owner,

otherwise, the Chief Rabbinate. The local community should be consulted as well. Ideally, Hebrew, Polish, and English should be included. Examples can be seen from a web search. Costs can range from a few thousand US\$ up depending on how elaborate the design is. Contracting and subcontracting may be challenging as some stonemasons may not be experienced with Hebrew script. It took two “tries” to get the correct text for the memorial at Trzcianne cemetery; I was provided with photographs of the initial version which showed an omission and thus prompted me to request a correction.

Rededication ceremony: A formal ceremony of some sort is a very important means not only of commemorating the cemetery itself with the descendants of those who may be buried, but is a key step in interacting with the resident community and having an assurance that the town considers the cemetery part of a shared cultural heritage. FODŹ has experience developing and carrying out these ceremonies. Usually, such a ceremony takes place after completion of some sort of major restoration activity (e.g., installing a memorial, fencing, vegetation clearing, or headstone resetting), but could take place anywhere during the process to possibly serve as a kick-off rather than conclusion. In addition to the descendants, FODŹ (if appropriate), the chief Rabbi (or his representative), the mayor and other city officials, school officials, and the local inhabitants are invited. A speakers list should be developed with a recommended allocated time for each participant, though in practice, enforcing time constraints may be problematic particularly with politicians and clergy. Often, many more participants will attend than anticipated. Typically, the mayor, the priest, and a substantial portion of the local residents will attend. See examples in the film “A Town Called Brzostek.”

#### Fences & Gates:

A range of possibilities for fences and gates exist depending on the location of the cemetery, the wishes of the local and descendant community and available funds. There is no formal guidance from Jewish tradition. Fences and gates built as part of contemporary restoration projects have been solid, of concrete or stone, and limiting the view; they may be wooden or metal providing a clear view of the cemetery. Design ideas can be gleaned from the web or nearby cemeteries. Cost may be a factor as elaborate fences may be the most expensive item for a small project. Photographs or drawings should be included in the plan to share with the local authorities (who may have opinions) and other stakeholders. As for monuments, construction contracting may be challenging and “as-built” photographs should be reviewed by the funder.

#### Resetting and cleaning headstones:

Often, headstones, even if not intentionally desecrated, have fallen over or could benefit from a light cleaning. Righting fallen headstones may be an arduous task that may benefit from heavy machinery. For example, the Białystok Cemetery Restoration Project’s (reference below) use of heavy equipment over the past few years has greatly sped up the restoration process. However, because of the risk of disturbing remains, use of heavy equipment, rather than lighter machinery, is controversial. Cleaning or repainting text on headstones is also controversial and experts should be consulted to avoid causing irreparable damage. Headstones which are in

such disarray as not to be closely associated with remains, should not be placed in an arbitrary manner, rather they might be used as part of the monument or fencing.

#### Long-term prospects:

Arranging for perpetual care for otherwise infrequently visited cemeteries is potentially problematic. Unlike Warsaw and Łódź, where there is large draw of Jewish and non-Jewish visitors; there is relatively little apparent incentive for remote shtetls that might only get a few visitors a year. This is something that could be discussed with municipal officials during the restoration process. Many city officials are willing to hire contractors to clean and maintain the cemetery if funding is provided; in some instances local officials are willing to pay for regular clean up from municipal funds.

The recommendation for a written Restoration Plan seems a prudent approach and was suggested by the Cultural Ambassador helping on my project. Although I developed such a plan, I have not seen those of others but assume that at least some have been done.

#### **Finances and fundraising**

Properly funding restoration of Jewish cemeteries is typically a challenge both for specific cemeteries and on a general basis. Cost estimating is problematic and needs to be done on an iterative basis as project plans are developed. A preliminary budget can often be estimated in consultation with FODŹ (for FODŹ owned cemeteries), local authorities, or cultural ambassadors, and then adjusted as the amount of funds available becomes known.

Fundraising is sometimes a limiting factor depending on how ambitious a particular project proposal is. Typically, the project organizer and family members contribute the bulk of funds. Other descendants, to the extent that they can be identified and contacted, often contribute as well. Some descendants' have successfully raised funds from friends and strangers. Some project proponents have also used "GoFundMe.com" campaigns or hosted presentations in their home or community to solicit funding. The Białystok cemetery restoration is an example of a successful effort. Sometimes volunteer labor will partially offset the cost; sometimes the local municipality will help as well.

It is critical to keep in mind that though each project needs a certain amount of funding for restoration, that it is also dependent on work performed by other organizations such as FODŹ, Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland, the Matzevah Foundation, Jewish Heritage Institute, and the Białystok Jewish Museum. Even though their work is for broader efforts than your specific cemetery, your success depends on groundwork they have done. Thus, it is suggested that generous financial contributions be made to these groups.

#### **The reconciliation process**

Reconciliation is not something immediately obvious or even apparent when first thinking about cemetery restoration. However, restoring cemeteries, either individually or throughout Poland, is not an isolated act. Meeting with resident Poles during the restoration process is an inescapable part of this. Often, neither the descendants nor the resident Poles have much if

any experience with each other. It is not uncommon for descendants to discover Poles, or actually their descendants, who risked everything to help Jews during the Nazi period, and were accorded "Righteous Among Nations." Further, the restoration process is often a good stimulus for developing or enhancing school curricula about Jews in Poland as the Jewish cemetery is often the only evidence Jews lived in a particular area and as such could be used as an educational resource (Forum for Dialog provides programs and curricula about historical Jewish culture for local communities). Since one of the objectives of restoration is the long-term sustainability of the cemetery, it is essential that all of the stakeholders consider Jewish cemeteries to be part of a shared cultural heritage. Much has been written about reconciliation of the Polish Jewish descendant diaspora with the non-Jewish Poles. Thus, the cemetery restoration both benefits from reconciliation and promotes it.

### **Cultural sensitivities**

In reviewing this section, please keep in mind I am far from an expert in this and am sharing my personal opinions and experience.

1. Jewish traditions require maintaining a cemetery in perpetuity, not disturbing remains, or performing any actions which might disturb remains. In contrast, Polish Catholic traditions in some instances involve only 20 years or so of actively managing a particular burial site. Also, since descendants may come from all branches of Judaism, ranging from Orthodox to secular, and include non-Jews, sensitivity toward a range of observances should be afforded. Note that Jewish cemeteries in Poland are under the jurisdiction of the Chief Rabbinate of Poland, which maintains Orthodox traditions.
2. Money and support need to be handled judiciously.
3. The local community needs to be involved at all stages -- cemeteries that have installed memorials or done other work without close involvement of the community are at increased risk of vandalism, according to anecdotal evidence from some descendants and cultural ambassadors. Alas, there are "haters" in every community, including those where communal support has been exceptional, and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries still occurs in those communities
4. The Polish attitude toward multinationalism and ethnic minorities is very complicated. Although a considerable amount has been written and spoken about this, it is important to keep the following in mind (this is my personal perspective). The Poles have been the unwilling host to many conquering neighbors over the centuries, and, for periods of time did not exist as a separate entity. At the end of WWII, and particularly after 1989, the occupying forces and non-Poles left (in the case of Jews, they were murdered by the Germans and many of those who survived not welcomed back in their home communities). The challenge was the Jews, who arrived by migration, sometimes invited, sometimes not, rather than conquest, may still be considered a foreign entity. Also, prior to Vatican II, the Catholic Church in Poland taught anti-Jewish hatred. This created anti-Jewish feeling by some Poles. Today's Polish Catholic church is largely tolerant. The reader is urged to make every attempt to understand the very convoluted history of Jews and Poles -- from pogroms to the individual non-Jewish Poles who were awarded "Righteous Among Nations" for having risked or lost their lives trying to save Jews.
5. Locating and working with other descendants around the world is a mixed bag and complicated process. Many projects are funded by combining resources from a group of

relatives, sometimes siblings or close cousins. Other projects are funded by presumably non-related individuals all with ancestors from a particular location.

6. As many of the guides/cultural ambassadors have advanced degrees, long publication lists, extensive film credits, or are otherwise exceptionally accomplished, they are sensitive to being called tour guides.

7. In addition to Jewish cemeteries, many communities have abandoned cemeteries of other ethnic groups or nationalities. Some municipalities are particularly concerned with remnant Soviet era military cemeteries.

8. Learning a few phrases of Polish can go a long way toward building cultural bridges with Poles.

### **Role of the important players**

The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ): FODŻ was established in 2002 by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO). The primary mission is to protect, restore, and commemorate the surviving sites and monuments of Jewish cultural heritage in Poland. The cemetery work, is carried out under the supervision of the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich. Another key function is building revitalization; activities involve important and prominent Jewish structures in Poland, such as the synagogues in Kraśnik, Łańcut, Przysucha, Rymanów, and Zamość. FODŻ works in close coordination with local communities and descendants.

Rabbinat: Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland. Rabbi Schudrich is the representative of all Jews and Jewish communities in Poland.

Friends of Jewish Heritage in Poland: The primary mission is to protect and commemorate the surviving sites and monuments of Jewish cultural heritage in Poland. A major beneficiary is FODŻ. FJHP also provides advice on the process of cemetery restoration. They are a U.S.-based non-profit entity and facilitate fund transfers to FODŻ and other non-profit organizations in Poland by credit card rather than bank transfer. FJHP can also set up a website to facilitate contributions (tax-deductible for U.S. citizens) directed towards a specific cemetery. FJHP projects include cemetery and synagogue maintenance and restoration. They have extensive contact with the authorities in Poland and the descendant community and thus provide an invaluable source of advice and help.

The Matzevah Foundation (TMF): TMF is a U.S. based, volunteer, non-profit organization. Their primary mission is to mobilize volunteers to restore Jewish cemeteries and seek to reconcile Jews and Christians. Each year, they are involved with several cemetery restoration projects in Poland. Sites for restoration are selected competitively by a board; thus they are not a “for hire” service, but rather develop and focus on projects that engage descendants, volunteers, and the local Polish community.

Local stakeholders: It is desirable to work with local officials, not only the municipality, but also the school, and the church; such that they are part of the process to restore a joint cultural resource not only of the cemetery but also their history. They are important in the process, both

in the short- and long-term. The cemetery is part of their community and depends on their attention, or lack thereof, for its sustainability. Many community residents are aware of the presence of their Jewish cemetery, and some of the older residents may have pertinent information about its history. Community members of some towns have started restoration efforts independently, sometimes later joined by descendants' groups.

Such work is best done incrementally. In many instances, seeing preliminary work by descendants in cemeteries has invited curiosity and questioning and, in some instances lead to willingness of elderly inhabitants to share their recollections of Jews and the extirpated Jewish community on video. In one instance, following production of the video, the town not only welcomed but initiated cemetery restoration together with descendants.

Embassy officials: There is generally no need to contact the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw or Consulate in Krakow unless something goes wrong. These officials explained that it is common for descendants' expectations not to be completely met, particularly when dealing with contractors. It is possible that embassies of other countries have more or less interest so for citizens of countries other than the U.S. embarking on restoration, it couldn't hurt to make contact. The Israeli Embassy is also involved with Jewish matters in Poland, though I have no knowledge of their role in restoration projects.

Others:

Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries (FDJC): FDJC, working with Jewish Records Indexing – Poland (JRI), has photographed and transcribed gravestones in Poland and provides the information on its website. Importantly, they will (for a small fee), come into a cemetery just after vegetation is cleared and photograph, transcribe, and document all of the headstones.

POLIN Museum, Virtual Shtetl, Memories in Stone: This is a searchable database of Jewish graves from all kinds of cemeteries – Jewish, municipal, military and other. The documentation is produced on the basis of preserved tombstones as well as archival materials. The database also contains information on the matzevot which were removed from cemeteries as a result of site desecration, and are now housed in museums or other places.

International Jewish Cemetery Project. The cemetery project has collected information about Jewish cemetery sites all over the world along with information on the location of the cemetery, and how to obtain more information. Some listings include links to other websites with additional information such as burial lists or a name to contact by email or snail-mail. They encourage contributed new data on cemeteries.

### **Managing expectations**

Cemetery restoration is a slow process for a range of reasons. For the various entities involved in Poland, dealing with cemeteries is not a high priority; more important issues for them involve the existing Jewish community and property, such as abandoned synagogues, which are subject to deterioration. Most of these organizations are also underfunded and understaffed.

Further cultural differences in the expectation of the level of “customer service” between Polish authorities and some in the diaspora community has sometimes lead to mutual frustration. Cultural differences may be apparent in the way e-mail, appointments, and financial arrangements, for example, are dealt with. In spite of the misperceptions that may be inferred from the rate of progress and cultural differences, all of the entities involved are genuinely committed to preservation of Jewish cemeteries and working with diaspora descendants. In fact the extent to which many of them have gone to help me and others has led me to regard them as living treasures.

Thus, it is critical to be patient but persistent.

### **Documenting experiences and findings**

The short and long-term success of restoration projects depends on local stakeholders’ attitudes toward absent descendants and the process. Acceptance and attitudes are driven in part by the magnitude of nearby and regional projects. Thus, the success of your project depends on the success of others. Since we are still in the learning phase of designing and implementing such projects, sharing lessons learned is critical. Sharing success, or “deferred success,” on project websites, cemetery restoration websites, or other easily available locations all contribute toward other projects and the broader goal of restoring other cemeteries and possibly broader reconciliation.

Such documentation, if only to inform the Rabbinate and FODŹ (as appropriate) of visits and conversations with local officials, is important. There are incidents in which descendants visited ancestral cities, tried to “make things happen,” and then didn’t follow through. This has sometimes made subsequent efforts by others more difficult. Descendants who visit, revisit, and bring funding are more likely to find a consistently gracious welcome.

### **CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

As little as a decade ago, Jewish cemetery restoration in Poland was uncharted territory. With the dedicated individuals and teams, particularly FODŹ and The Matzevah Foundation, and their respective funders; tremendous progress has been made toward making the process more routine, thus producing a critical mass of experience.

From my perspective, there is a “window of opportunity” for cemetery restoration, particularly the larger task of protecting the bulk of neglected cemeteries in Poland. Not only are the descendants with ancestral connections (parents, grandparents) to these cemeteries aging, but so are the remnant populations in communities with unrestored cemeteries who can tell the story of extirpated Jews to the younger generation.

It is also possible that those with responsibilities in cemetery restoration within Poland are challenged at times by diaspora descendants. I further hope that by providing this document to those contemplating or in the process of restoration that the process of coaching and advising may be streamlined such that the same information needn’t be provided multiple times.

There is a nascent “Descendants’ Group” forming in the hopes they can, as a group, share lessons learned, provide input to the required authorities, and possibly jointly formulate funding proposals for restoration at the local, regional, and national level. Information will be posted on the Facebook groups dealing with restoration in Poland and Eastern Europe.

This Guidebook is presented from the perspective of restoring individual cemeteries. As important as this perspective is, a comprehensive approach, one considering the aggregate of cemeteries needs to be implemented as well. This presumably would involve enacting legislation and policy at the level of the Polish government. Other stakeholders in the national perspective would be the current Jewish organizations in Poland, the many Jewish philanthropic non-governmental organizations, the diaspora descendants, and possibly the Israeli government. However, in the absence of leadership and responsibility from governments and NGO’s, it will be up to the descendants.

Possibly the last bit of advice I can provide is to be patient and persistent. From the descendants’ perspective, delayed or unanswered e-mails, meetings deferred at the last minute, and low priority may be incorrectly taken as disrespectful and are discouraging. From the perspectives of the authorities (who are grossly overworked and generally have more important priorities than cemetery restoration), the descendants may seem overly entitled, impatient, and similarly disrespectful. And from the perspective of local stakeholders, the descendants may seem like aliens who parachuted in after decades of neglect demanding instant results.

I hope that the suggestions outlined in this document not only will smooth the process for individual descendants but also the larger goal of restoring the large bulk of neglected Jewish cemeteries.

## RESOURCES AND CONTACTS (hyperlinks valid as of 3/1/2020)

### Films:

*A Town Called Brzostek* (available on Vimeo and elsewhere)

Tomek Wisniewski's films on cemetery restoration and broader Jewish issues in Poland

([https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=bagnowka](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=bagnowka))

### Books:

Kaplan, Karen. 2014. *Descendants of Rajgród: Learning to Forgive*. Manora Press. 224 pp.

Kurtz, Glenn. 2015. *Three minutes in Poland: Discovering a Lost World in a 1938 Family Film*.

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. 432 pp.

Oren, Dan A. 2018. *The Wedding Photo*. Rimmon Press. 222 pp.

Steinman, Louise. 2013. *The Crooked Mirror: A Memoir of Polish Jewish Reconciliation*.

Beacon Press books. 223 pp.

Wisniewski, Tomasz. 2009. *The Lost World of Small-Town Jewish Cemeteries*. Instytut

Wydawniczy Kreator. 145 pp+.

### Contact information:

Białystok Jewish Museum:

<https://www.jewishbialystok.pl/EN>

Chief Rabbi of Poland (Michael Schudrich):

[schudrich@gmail.com](mailto:schudrich@gmail.com)

European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative (ESJF) at website

<https://www.esjf-cemeteries.org/country/poland/>

Forum for Dialogue: Their work focuses on raising awareness of the histories of Jews in Poland, the way these histories were conveyed to descendants of Polish Jews and facilitating bonds between Jews and the country of their ancestors.

<http://dialog.org.pl>

Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries (FDJC)/Jewish Records Indexing-Poland (JRI):

<https://jri-poland.org/foundation-for-documentation-jewish-cemeteries.htm>,

<https://cemetery.jewish.org.pl/>

Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODŻ):

<http://fodz.pl/?d=1&l=en>

Friends of Jewish Heritage Poland (also contains information on several specific Jewish cemetery restoration projects):

[jewishheritagepoland.org](http://jewishheritagepoland.org)

Guidelines of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries (available in multiple languages):

<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/tradition-and-jewish-culture/religion/rabbinical-commission-guidelines-for-the-preservation-of-jewish-cemeteries>

National Heritage Board of Poland (also contains information of Jewish cemeteries in Poland, in order to reach this information one needs to enter subpage: "sites" then "immovable monuments" and then "Jewish cemetery"):

<https://zabytek.pl/en>

For information on a specific cemetery use:

<https://zabytek.pl/en/obiekty/name of the city-cmentarz-zydowski> including the specific site instead of "name of city"

International Jewish Cemetery Project:

<https://iaigscemetery.org/eastern-europe/poland/>

Jewish Historical Institute (JHI):

<http://www.jhi.pl/en>

JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry:

<https://www.jewishgen.org/databases/Cemetery/tree/CemList.htm>

JewishGen Family Finder (useful for finding other descendants):

<https://www.jewishgen.org/Communities/jgcd.php>

Jewish Heritage Europe

<https://jewish-heritage-europe.eu/cemeteries/>

The Matzevah Foundation:

<https://www.matzevah.org/>

POLIN Museum, Virtual Shtetl, Memories in Stone:

<https://www.polin.pl/en/resource-center>

<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/memory-in-stone>

Yahad In Unum (information and maps on mass graves):

[https://yahadmap.org/#map/q\\_pays.4/](https://yahadmap.org/#map/q_pays.4/)

#### Examples of Cemetery Restoration Project websites:

Białystok:

<http://Białystokcemeteryrestoration.org/>

Goniądz:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/275069113122921/>

Przasnysz:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/499017763533889/>

Tarnow:

<https://jewishheritagepoland.org/tarnow.html>

Trzcianne:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/FriendsofTrzcianneJewishCemetery/>

Novograd:

<https://jewishheritagepoland.org/novograd.html>

Jewish Cemetery Restoration in Eastern Europe

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/375182256478750/>

Jewish Cemetery Restoration in Poland

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/234842860555240/>

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