



Gravestones at the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw, Poland, Friday Dec. 22, 2017. AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

Who's Responsible for Neglected Jewish Cemeteries in Poland? It's Complicated

The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland says most of the cemeteries are in an advanced state of neglect

Human remains were removed from a Jewish cemetery in the town of Siemiatycze in eastern Poland last month as part of a project by the Polish Automobile and Motorcycle Association, the land's owners, to build a parking lot on the site.

A few months ago, trees fell on gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, burying a large number of graves, while a year and a half earlier, human remains were unearthed during infrastructure work at the site of Plaszow concentration camp, which was built on the ruins of the Jewish cemetery outside of Krakow.

In Plonsk, the Polish city where Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion was born, a private company has been trying to build a shopping mall on the local Jewish cemetery.

These four cases received widespread media coverage. In the end they were dealt with by the Jewish community and Polish authorities, but dozens of examples of neglect and improper care of Jewish cemeteries in Poland exist – and most have never made the headlines.

“The situation is terrible,” says Lili Haber, the chairwoman of the Association of Polish Jews in Israel. “If there was a level below shame and disgust, then I would use that.” On the Israelis of Polish Origin Facebook page that Haber runs, she posts pictures and video clips showing

the condition of Jewish cemeteries in the country. “It makes you want to cry when you see some of the places. Dogs and cats are urinating on our ancestors,” she says.



Volunteers work to clean a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland, on Sunday April 14, 2013. AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

Between 1,200 and 1,500 Jewish cemeteries are spread out all over Poland. The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, commonly known by its Polish acronym FODZ, says most of the cemeteries are in an advanced state of neglect, “without any marking, without fences and even without gravestones.” The group, which was established 15 years ago by the Jewish communities in Poland, says the sites are “unprotected, not maintained and inaccessible to visitors.”



A Jewish cemetery in Poland. Ofer Aderet

Trying to understand who is responsible for this situation turns out to be a very complicated mission. The answer is hidden in the gap between the historical, legal, political and economic aspects of the problem. The two major occupations that Poland suffered in the last century – Nazi and Soviet – led to serious damage to the Jewish cemeteries. Alongside the physical damage, the Nazis also destroyed archival documentation such as lists of burials and records of the Hevra Kadisha, the Jewish burial society.

In a few places, such as the ancient graveyards in the cities of Kalisz and Slubice, the Soviets destroyed what the Nazis didn't have time to dismantle. They also nationalized Jewish property, including the cemeteries, and used them for a wide range of purposes. Gravestones from the Jewish cemetery in the city of Ostrowiec were used as building materials for private and public buildings, as well as the wall that encircles the Christian graveyard in the city.

The question of the legal ownership of the cemeteries contributes to the complexity of the matter and the answer varies from place to place. Sometimes they belong to one of the nine Jewish communities in Poland. In other places, the owner is an organization or a private individual, and sometimes it is a local government or even the state, which took over the property after it was nationalized..

This explains how in the 1970s, the Jewish cemetery in Torun, the city where Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer – one of the earliest and most important Zionist thinkers of the 19th century – is buried, was made into a city park.



A Jewish cemetery in Poland, December 2017. Ofer Aderet

Some say it is difficult if not impossible to place the responsibility for preserving the Jewish cemeteries on the small local Jewish community living in Poland today. Estimates put the community's population anywhere from a few thousand to the low tens of thousands.

"The tragedy of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland is that these shrunken Jewish communities that live there today need to maintain cemeteries that served a community tens of times larger," says Matan Shefi of the genealogy department of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

"It will be a very difficult task to place on the 4,000 Jews living in Poland today to take care of the cemeteries that belonged to a community of 3.5 million people before the Holocaust," states a report published by FODZ.

So far, the nonprofit organization has attended to some 200 Jewish cemeteries. The pace is slow: Over the past two years, they have fixed up only 10 of them. "A drop in the ocean," as the report states. FODZ estimates that it needs about 20,000 euros to restore the average Jewish cemetery in Poland.

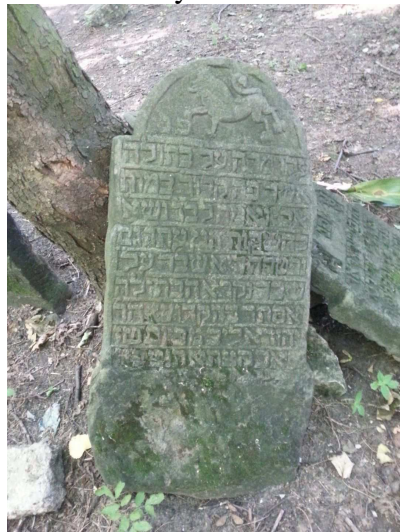
FODZ director Monika Krawczyk places the responsibility for preserving the Jewish cemeteries on a number of groups. The current situation is the result of a number of factors, so many groups are responsible for helping us protect the Jewish cemeteries and maintain them, she says. The list includes the German and Polish governments and local governments, along with the Jewish community.



Gravestones at the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw, Poland, Friday Dec. 22, 2017. AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

Haber adds another group to the list: The descendants of Polish Jewry who now live in Israel and all over the world. “I want to organize a special project, in which we will bring together [the descendants of] Polish Jews, explain the situation to them and collect 50 shekels (\$15) from each of them,” she says.

The Polish government is the one putting the largest amount of money into rehabilitating the cemeteries. Last month, the Polish parliament approved allocating 100 million Polish zlotys (about 100 million shekels) to restore the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery. This cemetery, first used in the 19th century, is spread out over an area of over 300 dunams (75 acres) and about 250,000 Jews – many of them unknown today – are buried there.



A Jewish cemetery in Poland. Ofer Aderet

“This is the largest contribution of Polish government funds to preserving the physical Jewish heritage,” says Anna Chipczynska, the president of the Warsaw Jewish community. “Even the nonprofit organization of the memorial site at Auschwitz – Birkenau did not receive as much money from the government,” she notes proudly. This money has enabled real change “and we won’t see trees falling on gravestones anymore, broken gravestones or those that are unreadable,” she says.

But the Jewish community, which owns the cemetery, did not receive the money from the government. Instead, it went to a relatively new and anonymous non-Jewish Polish nonprofit called the Cultural Heritage Foundation. Among the projects the organization, which was founded in 2012, is preserving and restoring historical sites of the Polish people, including the graves of Poles and Polish churches outside the country. Over the last three years, the organization has also undertaken the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery project, cleaning up a large part of the cemetery and restoring 55 gravestones.

The head of the Cultural Heritage Foundation, Michal Laszczkowski, calls the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery “a large territory in the middle of the city which looks like a jungle.” A visit to the site immediately explains what he means: thousands of gravestones covered by plants, tree branches and leaves.

The project has no end date. “There is enough work for eternity,” says Laszczkowski. This includes trimming tens of thousands of trees, removing an infinite amount of leaves and cleaning and preserving the gravestones, he says. In the future, he plans to get help from Israelis of Polish origin who have documentation, written or photographic, of the gravestones in the cemetery and who can help with restoring them.

“We consider the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw to be part of the Polish – and not just Jewish – heritage,” says Laszczkowski. It is possible that this statement serves to justify why the government decided to give the funding to his organization. During a press conference held last month, Piotr Glinski, Poland’s first deputy prime minister and minister of culture and national heritage, said that areas where Jewish Poles are buried are part of Poland’s cultural and national heritage.

Slawomir Chwascinski from the city of Radoszyce has a similar view. He is part of a network of local activists who are involved in preserving local Jewish sites – including cemeteries – and heritage in their communities.

“It is not just the history of the Jewish community, but my history too,” he says of his life work, preserving and restoring the Jewish cemetery in his hometown. He even found gravestones stolen from the Jewish cemetery in Radoszyce spread all over in nearby villages. He is active in the Forum for Dialogue, an initiative promoting Polish-Jewish dialogue, combating anti-Semitism, teaching about Jewish history and culture and preserving local Jewish heritage.



A volunteer helps to clean a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland, on Sunday April 14, 2013. AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski

“I ask myself, why do I do it? Must I clean up other people’s conscience? After all, I didn’t steal these gravestones, so why must I preserve them? But the question needs to be: Why not do it?” says Chwascinski.

Poland’s chief rabbi, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, is involved in a somewhat similar project called Tikun. Through the program, which is run in cooperation with FODZ and the Polish prison service, prisoners volunteer to clean up Jewish cemeteries.

In many cases, wealthy Jews from outside of Poland fund the preservation work for the cemeteries in the communities that their families came from. For example, Holocaust survivor and American businessman Sigmund Rolat has given money to the local Polish community in Czestochowa, where he was born, to preserve the Jewish heritage of the town, including the cemetery.

One of the main websites that deals with Jewish cemeteries in Poland is the Virtual Shtetl, which is run under the auspices of POLIN – The Museum of the History of Polish Jews. It offers maps, photographs and historical information on a great of number of cemeteries. The site says that aside from “known” cemeteries, many others cannot be precisely located on the map – and a few sites are still being examined to see whether they were used as cemeteries.

The mass graves scattered around the country are a separate story. Gil Paran, who guides student trips to Poland, tries them to these forgotten sites to hold memorial ceremonies there. He gets his information on the sites’ locations from a Polish colleague who travels all over the country to find information on where Jews had been buried without any gravestones or other markings.

FODZ warns of taking individual actions not coordinated with the organization. Krawczyk, the director, tells of Israeli students who tried to repair faded inscriptions on gravestones in one of the Jewish cemeteries as part of their school trip to Poland.

“They thought it would be a good idea to do it with oil paints, but the result was the opposite: The paint removed the names from the gravestones and the cemetery was ruined forever,” she said. “If we can take advantage of this opportunity to ask the groups from Israel: Please, don’t leave garbage in the cemeteries.”

For those who are interested in assisting in a more professional manner, Krawczyk recommends a project called Adopt a Jewish Cemetery in Poland, which is sponsored by FODZ. The idea is simple: The organization provides advice and help with the bureaucracy. Finding the money and doing the work is up to you.

Ofer Adreret

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