

Remembrance Etched in Stone

Honoring the destroyed Jewish community from Serock, Poland

By MICHAEL SCHUDRICH
and MONIKA KRAWCZYK

On Aug. 27, Serock, a small town in central Poland, located at the beautiful Narew river, witnessed a quite uncommon event in its rural com-

FIRST PERSON

munity: a gathering of determined men and women, including American and Polish dignitaries, joining in common purpose to unveil a monument at the site of the town's former Jewish cemetery to honor and remember the Jewish community in Serock, most of it eviscerated by the Germans during the Holocaust. Only a handful of the more than 4,000 Jews living in Serock in 1939 survived the catastrophe.

In *Sefer Zikaron Serock*, a commemorative book published in the 1960s, the site was described this way: "The old and new cemeteries were located three kilometers outside of the city, on the road to Pultusk (past the large sawmill) and in the glow of the clear river Narew. The area belonged to the community but the administration was in the hands of the Burial Society. In the cemeteries, the bones of our dearest ancestors from approximately 150 years ago were buried. At the time when the community was destroyed [in December 1939], the German vandals destroyed the graves and used the tombstones to build highways. The cemetery was [ploughed under], and they planted grass there, and shepherds tended to their flocks there. The cemetery is erased, without any trace at all."

After the war the state of disrepair continued, as the Jewish community of Serock had ceased to exist. The cemetery was no more, and the whole area was zoned by Polish communist government as "recreation area" and allocated for a nearby "hotel."

When Poland became a democratic country, positive changes became possible. In 1997 a law was passed which allowed the Jews of Poland to protect Jewish cemeteries. The problem was that Jewish cemetery in Serock was



(Above): Gathering of dignitaries at the site of the former Jewish cemetery in Serock, Poland. Lee Seeman, a North Hempstead town councilwoman and a member of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, is at right. (Above, right): The ceremony unveiling a monument at the site to honor and remember the Jewish community of Serock, which was mostly destroyed during the Holocaust. (Right): The monument up close.

one of at least 1,200 sites, and there are only nine Jewish communities spread throughout Poland. About that time, some tombstones were discovered during nearby road construction and were brought to the cemetery site. The new challenge was to find the funds to restore it.

In 1998 the descendants of the Serock Jews who'd survived the war and the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad carried out a commemoration project in the nearby Wyszkow Jewish cemetery. Since the two towns were historically connected, many former "Vyshkovs" shared family links to Serock, and by then the idea of a Serock cemetery commemoration had been conceived.

This project had to wait until 2014 to be realized. The legal, administrative and technical side of the undertaking was handled by The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ), which was working hand in hand with the Rabbinical Commission on Cemeteries. Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich was consulted to ensure proper treatment and protection of the burial ground. Special team of researchers, surveyors and rabbinic selected the location of the new monument, which was built just outside of the historical burial

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grounds. The work to legally register and then determine the boundaries of the historical property, should some funds become available for this purpose, will eventually lead to the construction of a fence around the whole area. This new monument (and future fences) will bear witness to its glorious Jewish past and our joint commitment to remember.

Remembrance was the central subject of the speeches made on that Aug. 27. In our eyes, the event represented more than just placing a new memorial on hallowed



ground. It was an act of re-dedication of the cemetery. We want the dignity returned to this site. Even without physical presence of the Jews living in the town, the bones alone will declare the Jewish belief in universal values, including respect for past generations.

Among those who attended the ceremony were Stephen Mull, U.S. Ambassador to Poland; Lee Seeman, member of the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, leading a U.S. delegation; Michael Schudrich, chief rabbi of Poland; Piotr Kadlcik, president of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland; Monika Krawczyk, Director of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, as well as local authorities.

The ceremony witnessed also a moving reunion of Holocaust survivor Dina Albert, born Doba Drezner in Serock, with Stanislaw Gasiorowski, son of the Polish family that saved her during the

war. Both were 13 years old when the war began. Gasiorowski, who attended the ceremony with his two daughters and their husbands, offered warm words to Dina's family, which also was present. Dina and Stanislaw easily communicated in Polish, remembering the tragic days of their youth. Stanislaw said that his parents viewed every human as someone with dignity, and noted that though they were afraid of the death penalty imposed by the Germans on Poles caught assisting the Jews, this did not deterred them from providing shelter and food to six Jews. Dina related how she'd met him on a road while was walking barefoot and crying that she had no place to go.

Dina's granddaughter, 16-year-old Hannah Albert-Chapness, whose bat mitzvah project had been to help raise funds for the monument that was unveiled at the cemetery on that day, spoke on behalf of the descendants of the family that saved her during the

continued on page 18

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Stone

continued from page 16

Serock. She said that her presence there, representing the newest generation, is a guarantee that the past shall never be forgotten.

The new monument includes a stone structure in which surviving tombstones were placed, and bears an inscription, which reads in part: "This area comprises the Jewish Cemetery of Serock. Jews were buried here from the 18th century until 1939, when Nazi German forces ordered that all traces of the cemetery be obliterated. For many years, the grave-stones on the wall were piled up on a nearby site. This memorial pays tribute to a once vibrant Jewish community and honours those citizens of Serock who were murdered in the Holocaust solely because they were Jewish."

The event was a powerful example of how people working together great thing may be achieved by

working together, contributing funds, skills and know-how for one common goal.

Many Jews abroad are discouraged when they see visual evidence of neglected burial sites, their earnest passion to do something notwithstanding. The success of the Serock project is evidence that we can save our cemeteries. Goodwill and benevolence from the U.S. together with professionalism and sensitivity from the Polish Jewish community can enable us to finally pay the proper respect to our ancestors and their graves.

"Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor ve'lo ata ben chorin lehibetel mimena" — "You are not required to complete the task, yet you are not free to withdraw from it" (Pirkei Avot, 2:21).

Michael Schudrich is the chief rabbi of Poland and the Jewish Community in Warsaw. Monika Krawczyk is a lawyer and CEO of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (www.fodz.pl).

Alone

continued from previous page

The army and the State of Israel reap benefits because we are taking an "at risk" population that has the motivation necessary to succeed but often lack the support to do so. We provide that support by treating the lone soldiers as members of an extended family.

Lone soldiers often go on to become community leaders who better the lives of Israelis at home and abroad. Over the past five years, we have seen hundreds of such success stories. A prime example is the chairman of our board of trustees, Michael Oren, the historian who just recently completed his tenure as Israeli ambassador to the U.S.

How has the war in Gaza affected the Lone Soldier Center?

Operation Protective Edge has posed a tremendous challenge to us and was very heartbreaking. Three lone soldiers, Max Steinberg, Sean Carmeli and Jordan Bensemhoun,

all members of our family, were killed. We've had dozens of lone soldiers injured, and have been with them and their families in and out of hospitals and rehabilitation centers. We pray for the speedy recovery of all of the soldiers still hospitalized.

The support and appreciation we've gotten from not only the entire Israeli population, but also the entire Jewish world is heartwarming.

To learn more about the center, visit www.LoneSoldierCenter.com.

SOLIDARITY MISSION



The New York Board of Rabbis recently hosted a solidarity mission to Israel. The mission included a visit with lone soldiers. NYBR Executive Vice President Rabbi Joseph Potasnik is at left, and Congressman Peter King (R-N.Y.) is third from left.



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