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In & Around Montreal

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First Jewish headstone erected in Polish town since World War II

By DAVID LAZARUS
Staff Reporter

He was a husband and father who died in 1938 of natural causes, at the too young age of 51, not long before the Nazis invaded Poland.

Yet when Markus Rubinfeld's tombstone was unveiled in late April in an eroding Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of Jaroslaw, Poland, local media took notice, as did a film crew, area politicians and officials, and others.

The reason was that Rubinfeld's *matzeivah* was the first Jewish tombstone to be unveiled at the neglected and forlorn Kruhel Pekinski Jewish cemetery since the end of World War II.

The Montreal young adult group on the recent March of the Living trip witnessed the event because the group's chair, Mark Spatzner, is Rubinfeld's maternal grandson.

Spatzner made it his mission to have the family erect a monument in Rubinfeld's name. Rubinfeld had never had one before, and his original grave had disappeared in the events that consumed Polish Jewry.

"If the Nazis had not invaded in 1939, he would have had his unveiling," said Spatzner, a Montreal periodontist who was on his third March. "But this has been a happy thing for me. It is the man I am named after, and this is where my ancestors came from. He was living the way Jews should have been allowed to live."

Spatzner first got the idea of erecting the monument after speaking with local Jewish genealogist Stanley Diamond, from whom he learned that the location of his grandfather's grave had been lost.

Spatzner found out that his March group would be travelling through Jaroslaw, in the southeastern Galicia region of Poland near the Ukrainian border.

The town was once home for about 7,000 Jews. Most were

brought to a soccer field not long after the Germans entered Jaroslaw in September 1939, and, luckily, as things turned out, were expelled into Soviet territory, where they survived. Those who remained in the early 1940s ended up in death camps like Belzec.

Fortunately, Spatzner said, Rubinfeld's widow and their four children — Paula (Mark's mother), Meyer, Leon and Esther — were in the first group. All but Esther are still alive.

His father Hersh's family was not so fortunate. Also from Poland, Hersh survived the war, but many of his family died in the death camps.

The logistics of arranging for a Jewish tombstone in Poland were not without their challenges. Spatzner and Rabbi Reuben Poupko of Beth Israel Beth Aaron Congregation, where Spatzner is a member, co-wrote the inscription. Rabbi Poupko also accompanied the group on the March.

Many of the other details were handled by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, which was established by Union of Jewish Communities of Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization. Its mission is "to protect and commemorate" surviving Jewish cultural and religious sites, such as synagogues and cemeteries, including Kruhel Pekinski, which it owns.

Foundation officials at the ceremony included CEO Monika Krawczyk, Albert Stankowski and Lukasz Biedka. The foundation arranged for the actual tombstone and had it transported to Jaroslaw, and Spatzner hired a local video



Mark Spatzner stands next to the tombstone of his maternal grandfather, Markus Rubinfeld.

crew to record the event, which was missed by three great-granddaughters of Rubinfeld who also were in Poland for the March but could not be in Jaroslaw the day of the unveiling because of their own itineraries. They included Mark's daughter, Dalia.

Upon seeing the finished video back in Canada, Spatzner said, family members, including his mother, "bawled like babies."

In the video, Rabbi Poupko referred to the unveiling as a "restoring of history" and the "correcting [of] a wrong."

"Because of the Nazi assault," he told *The CJN*, "many Jewish people were condemned to anonymous graves. This restores dignity to the place and to those who died."

For Spatzner, the unveiling ceremony also served to reaffirm to the young adults

on the March what the trip was all about. "It was about closure, about doing the right thing," he said.

"I think it brought back a real sense of identity and purpose to their Judaism.

"In Judaism, you make a monument for someone who passes away. It's part of being a Jew and remembering your ancestors.

"There used to be 20 monuments in the cemetery. Now there are 21."