



After lying 60 years in former Gestapo headquarters, recovered gravestones are standing again in Staszow Cemetery.

The stones of Staszow

by Jack Goldfarb

I have made annual pilgrimages to Staszow (population: 16,000) in south central Poland for many years. My ancestors, whose origins in the town can be traced back to 1790, lived there until the fateful day of Nov. 8, 1942. On that "Black Sunday" most of the 5,000 members of the Jewish community — including 35 of my uncles, aunts, and cousins — were reported to their ultimate death in the Belzec and Treblinka camps.

When the Staszow Jews were forcibly assembled in the market square at 8 that morning, about 20 were murdered on the spot and subse-

quently buried in a mass grave in the cemetery. Through an accidental discovery just last November, this mass grave was discovered after 40 years of searching.

In their sadistic efforts to obliterate all traces of Jewish life (and death), the Gestapo on that grim day ordered the approximately 1,000 tombstones in the 120-year-old cemetery to be uprooted. Most were laid down in the town square and in side streets to be used as paving the muddy walkways in the winter of 1942-43.

When World War II ended, the mayor of Staszow ordered the stones dug up and stored in a warehouse. With no Jewish residents remaining in the town and no authorities for the

mayor to consult about these stones, he was said to have sold the gravestones, mostly carved from sturdy sandstone, to construction companies. The tombstones, as such, disappeared forever.

On Nov. 8, 1992, exactly 50 years after Black Sunday, we dedicated a Holocaust Memorial Monument on the site of Staszow's Jewish cemetery, which Polish friends and I had helped restore half a century after its desecration and abandonment. A number of Christian families, hearing of the restoration project, came forward and presented us with 10 gravestones they had preserved in their gardens and

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Jack Goldfarb at his grandfather's gravestone, one of the 140 stones recovered from the Gestapo headquarters.

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backyards. We reerected these stones alongside the memorial as a symbolic minyan, a silent quorum of witnesses to a devastated burial ground.

Saying Kaddish

After that event, we neither saw nor heard of any more traces of those 1,000 gravestones that had stood on the Staszow cemetery. Three years ago, just as I was embarking on my annual journey to Staszow, an Israeli friend informed me that he had visited Staszow and had seen a stone with a Hebrew inscription in the courtyard of a house on Koscielna Street.

Following this tip, I went to the imposing, meticulously maintained residence, which was owned by a high school teacher. Yes, Mr. Zielinski told me, he had a stone in his courtyard. He had to have it lifted up in order to install a gas line on his property. He had left it propped against a wall. It was too heavy to move farther. In the gloomy November dusk, I slowly read the clearly visible Hebrew inscription. It was the gravestone of my grandfather!

The next morning, under a gray, overcast sky, as I said Kaddish, we laid my grandfather's stone back on the earth; suddenly, the clouds parted and a shaft of sunlight illuminated Staszow. Investigating further, I discovered that the Zielinski property had been Gestapo Headquarters during the Nazi occupation and that later it housed the offices of the Communist Security Police (UB) and had once been a military barracks. Mr. Zielinski now revealed

that there were at least 40 more Jewish gravestones forming the courtyard and the floor of his garage.

I was determined to recover every single one of the stones. I offered to have his courtyard repaved in exchange for the stones. At first, he agreed, but then he changed his mind. I negotiated with him for three years, as he escalated his price from year to year because of "inflation" and his insistence on using his own "quality" workmen. I never knew whether my questioning the "morality" of daily treading on these sacred stones had any real effect on this small-town schoolteacher.

At the start of this effort to recover the stones, I went to the German embassy in Warsaw and explained that we all knew how the stones got to the Gestapo headquarters in the first place, and it would be a nice gesture if the German government would help defray some of the \$5,000 cost of their recovery. "Mr. Goldfarb," the young and sympathetic German official assured me, "we will cover the entire cost of this project."

But the difficult negotiations with Zielinski had reached an impasse; his price rose to \$10,000. Meanwhile, the German offer of \$5,000 was nearing its expiration deadline of Jan. 1, 2003.

At this juncture, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the chief rabbi of Poland, who had made many invaluable efforts to resolve the situation, came to the rescue, enlisting the

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Scores of Jewish tombstones form the courtyard of Zielinski House, former Gestapo headquarters. The stones were excavated and returned to Staszow Cemetery.

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aid of Eliza Chodorowska of Warsaw. A conscientious and diplomatic young woman, Chodorowska had top-level governmental experience dealing with difficult matters regarding Jewish issues. She convinced a trio of worthy mediators to travel to Staszow. The three were Father Michal Czajkowski, an ecumenical leader in promoting Christian-Jewish relations; Joanna Branska, president of the Polish-Israel Friendship Society; and Mr. Laszynski, a prominent journalist for *Rzeczpolita*, a widely read national newspaper.

The "haggling" reached an end when Zielinski accepted \$7,500.

It took a crew of workmen from nearby Tarnow just three days to extricate what turned out to be 120 gravestones from the Koscielna Street property. In addition, 400 smaller fragments were recovered, which are being incorporated into two free-standing memorial walls.

Returning from their 60-year exile, the gravestones have risen again in long orderly rows under the tall acacia trees of the Jewish cemetery of Staszow. ■

Jack Goldfarb is a widely traveled writer who frequently visits Eastern European countries.



Restored cemetery. The large white stone to the left is a monument to victims of the Holocaust.