

The Piotrkow Trybunalski Remembrance and Restoration Project by Ben Giladi

Piotrkow Trybunalski, located near Lodz, was a town with a rich Jewish history stretching back more than five centuries. An illustrious chain of distinguished rabbis and scholars served its community, spreading its renown across Europe. Among them, the great Chassidic leader Rabbi Dr. Hayim David Bernard, the descendants of Rabbi Yissachar of Radoszyce, the legendary Rabbi Meir Shapiro and the last Rabbi of Piotrkow, the noble scholar Moshe Chaim Lau.

The Great Synagogue of Piotrkow, erected in the years 1791 to 1793 after thirty years of planning, was a famed site in Poland. In more recent times, Piotrkow became famous as the center of Holy Books printing establishments.

In 1792, the main Jewish cemetery was established in Piotrkow. One of the most consecrated places of Piotrkow Jewry, it still contains about 3,000 matzevoth. There rest people who were part of our proud Jewish Piotrkow. During the Holocaust, the Nazis desecrated the cemetery by destroying many tombstones, profaning graves, staging tortuous executions, and inflicting indescribable physical and psychological pain and degradation on the victims forced to dig their own graves.

After the war, the small survivor community of Piotrkow tried partially to repair the damage. Still, during the years when most of them left Piotrkow, weeds, bushes and trees overtook the grounds. No one was there to take care. Piotrkowers abroad were concerned; there were calls for some action, but nothing was actually done.

The situation seemed gloomy. Last year, however, a small miracle occurred. There emerged one man totally committed the cause, full of motivation, compassion and energy, with the name of Saul Dessau. He was 16 years old when liberated in Czestochowa on January 16, 1945, after six terrible years in labor camps. There, at liberations day, he witnessed his father's heartbreaking death from the hands of a fleeing Nazi, minutes before liberation, in the presence of his two brothers, Zvi and Robert. Years later, the three brothers searched in vain for their father's grave.

Still, in 1945, Saul and his brothers left Poland for Germany and then emigrated to the United States where they became successful manufacturers and builders. Saul started his own industrialist's career in international trading quite early. Among his many endeavors, he operated the largest hosiery factory in South America. He was always proud to be a descendant of the Great Tzadik of Piotrkow, Dr. Hayim Bernard. In 1945, the brothers restored his ohel. In 1993, Saul and Robert rebuilt the ohel and erected two commemorative plaques on this shrine of so many Chassidic pilgrimages of their past, at the Jewish cemetery in Piotrkow. The cemetery's condition of great neglect was, since then, constantly on Saul's mind. When he visited other cemeteries tended by his survivor friends and saw how far behind his hometown was in restoration, in such a disarray, he resolved to do something about it — once and for all.

So, about a year ago, Saul approached me with a concrete proposal. I still remember the crucial meeting with Saul and Robert, when the notion of the Piotrkow Trybunalski Remembrance and Restoration Project was born, a project entirely financed by Saul and Robert Dessau.

A few weeks later, Saul and I arrived in Piotrkow in order to start the initial arrangements with the many authorities. Creative ideas were exchanged and a promising picture of the restoration plan emerged. This included not only the cleanup and conservation of the cemetery and installation of wide new pavements there, but also the unveiling of five commemorative bronze plaques in five languages, to be erected at respective historic city locations:

- at the main cemetery gate
- commemorating the establishment of the first ghetto in Europe by the Nazis
- at the site of the Treblinka deportation atrocities in 1942
- at the site of an ancient, non-existing 17th-18th century cemetery
- a large plaque to be placed at the front entrance of the Great Synagogue, now a district library

After this first trip, it became apparent that there was a lot to be done. The chemistry, however, was there. Back in New York, our work became intense. It took a lot of effort to ready the five plaques with the proper text, wording and spelling in the five languages. Many faxes with various Polish authorities were exchanged, including lengthy telephone conversations in order to secure permit issuance (also from the Jewish congregation in Poland).

Finally, in July the plaques were ready. Saul and I went to Poland again, carrying the plaques (weighing over 700 pounds) as personal baggage. This nearly impossible feat was accomplished thanks to Saul's sheer driving force and enormous motivation. Again, in Piotrkow we were cordially received by about a dozen personalities — the main cultural and political leaders of Piotrkow. Vital issues were resolved regarding the rededication of the cemetery and plaque unveiling ceremonies. Back in New York, I sent out a few hundred invitations to our survivors all over the world for the rededication and unveiling ceremonies slated for September 25th — just before "Yamim Norayim" — the traditional Keiver Avot and also the 55th Yahrzeit of the 1942 deportations to Treblinka.

The morning of September 25th our people gathered at the main gate of the Jewish cemetery in Piotrkow. They came from the USA, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Israel and even Australia. We arrived earlier to check on the last details and walked the newly installed wide pavements in wonder and awe. From a jungle this cemetery was converted into a shrine. The thick weeds and bushes were gone. New pavements gave easy access to the graves. The trees were pruned, the entire terrain was neat and clean.

At 10:00 A.M. at the cemetery entrance, I addressed the crowd. Then the first commemorative plaque was unveiled by the Wojewoda of Piotrkow, the Hon. Stanislaw Witaszczyk, and Saul Dessau.

We all entered the cemetery, approaching the main symbolic matzevah of the Kedoshim. Here Rabbi Besser spoke of the rich tradition and achievements of the Gedolim of our city. We proceeded and stopped at three modest graves of Lajzer Malc, his fiancée Sala Uszerowicz and Rachel Rolnik. Here I told the heartbreaking story how they were killed in their beds in November 1945, just after liberation, by the Polish bandits of Armia Krajowa. Saul and Robert, the cousins of Lajzer Malc, restored these three monuments just recently. We then proceeded to a

newly erected monument. Here Guta Flatto-Giladi unveiled the Matzevah, speaking movingly about her uncle, Berish Judkiewicz, the first Jew in Piotrkow killed by the hand of a German. A small tin plaque was put on his grave. This plaque, crumbling and eroded, was found by her husband a few months ago. Her brothers Srulek and Zenek and her grandfather Efraim perished in the ghetto and were laid to rest nearby without a marker. So now Guta fulfilled her wish to mark the place of their burial. Next to the restored ohel of the Tzadik and healer, Rabbi Dr. Bernard, another Matzevah was newly erected, a symbolic headstone in memory of Chaim David Dessau, the descendant of the Tzadik. He was killed on January 16, 1945 at the train station in Czestochowa. Now the brothers Saul and Robert, also in the name of their brother Zvi, unveiled the names of their mother Gitl and brother Pinchas who perished in Treblinka.

Saul spoke movingly eulogizing the memory of their parents and brother. Then Rabbi Besser spoke at the ohel, eulogizing the Tzadik.

Rabbi Michael Shudrich, the spiritual leader of the young Jewish generation in Poland, addressed the crowd and especially the present young generation. The young Chazan Symcha Keller from the Lodzer Congregation intoned El Mole Rachamim. His beautiful voice and diction, when uttering this holy prayer, sounded so movingly and clear — far and wide.

One of the London "boys," Reb Israel Rudzinski, a Bobover Chasid, chanted Tehilim. Dr. Henryk Henig of Israel intoned Kaddish Bacibur.

Leaving the cemetery, we stopped at the ruins of three Ohalim. Here, Ambassador Naphtali Lau-Lavie, the son of the last Rabbi of Piotrkow and the brother of the Rav Rashi of Israel, told the story of the three great rabbis laid to rest there: those of Radoshitz, Wolborz and Rozprza. He also revealed that between these three Ohalim are buried the desecrated Sifrei Torah of the Great Synagogue, brought at great risk by himself and other Yeshiva Bachurim to the cemetery in September of 1939. Saul and Robert, right on the spot then, made a commitment to rebuild the three Ohalim and to unveil three commemorative plaques there.

We proceeded then into the heart of the town, the Trybunalski Square. The meaning of the plaque there commemorating the establishment of the Piotrkow ghetto, the first in Nazi-conquered Europe, was explained by the President of Friends of Piotrkow Society, Mgr. Wladyslaw Hartman. I then pointed out to the house No. 4, the former German headquarters and recalled that from there the young Saul Dessau, together with two other boys also present, Krulik Wilder and Harry Spiro of London, were taken to the synagogue with 600 other people. They were miraculously saved at the last moment, before the entire group was taken and shot in the Rakow Forest. Gutka Flatto was also in the synagogue and freed at the last moment. The plaque was unveiled by the city's President, Mgr. Andrzej Pol, and Robert Dessau.

We proceeded to the adjoining square, Plac Czarnieckiego, where a plaque in remembrance of the Martyrdom of Piotrkow Jews was unveiled by the city's Vice-President, Ing. Ian Kruz, and Dr. Moshe Ish-Horowicz Halevi of Israel. We then came to the Great Synagogue, now a district library. Here, Ben Helfgott, the chairman of '45 Aid Society in London, spoke movingly. His mother and little sister perished here. He and Vice-President Mgr. Robert Marzec unveiled the plaque.

Between the shul and the Beth Hamidrash, there lies the site of the first 17th - 18th century Jewish cemetery. The Germans destroyed every monument there. Now a bed of roses was planted and a plaque was erected. The remarks of Ambassador Lau-Lavie were quite powerful. He painted a vivid image of a vibrant Jewish community, recalling the glory and also the atrocities committed there by Amalek. He unveiled the plaque together with the last Jew of Piotrkow, Reuven Hipzer, and Mgr. Andrzej Switalski, the director in charge of all cemetery restorations in Piotrkow. Five wreaths were placed under every plaque at the unveiling time by the city's President.

Then on the way to the museum, we went to see the mural of the Ten Commandments upstairs, in the once Beth Hamidrash, spotted with bullet holes. There Saul told us how he and others tried to escape from the synagogue by putting a wooden board between two windows. The board was shot down by the Ukrainian guards.

The District Museum, just one block away located in an ancient castle more than five centuries old, was our next destination. Here, Professor Marcin Gasior, the museum's curator, opened the impressive exhibit on Judaica and the Holocaust theme, an imposing display of documents, photos, records and relics — an emotional experience for us all indeed. Elaborate greetings by the city's President, a piano concert with Beethoven and Chopin in program and cordial reception concluded this memorable event. After everyone left, Saul and Robert, Guta and I, together with In. Jan Kruz and Piotr Gaida, went to the Rakow Forest (Rakowski Ias) and found the site of the 1943 executions that Saul and Guta miraculously escaped when freed at the last moment from the synagogue. A memorial will be erected there in the near future in memory of the Kedoshim. Back to Warsaw, we met at dinner, hosted by Saul and Robert, with some participants of our pilgrimage.

Next morning on the way to the airport, the taxi driver recognized us. He saw the nationwide television program of the events in Piotrkow, which was given wide coverage by the media.

So, this was one of the rare days of our lives when a tribute straight from the heart moved us all to tears. This day brought us the emphasis of the living spirit — a precious spark of heritage and remembrance which, together with hope and persistence, makes our survival possible.