

About Poland 30 Thousand Zlotys* for Headstones

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Headstones taken decades ago from the Jewish cemetery are still used as support under one of the barns in Wielkie Oczy. The barn's owner, a 75-year-old woman, demands 30 thousand zlotys for agreeing to return the profaned headstones. The scandal goes on and the commotion over it rises.

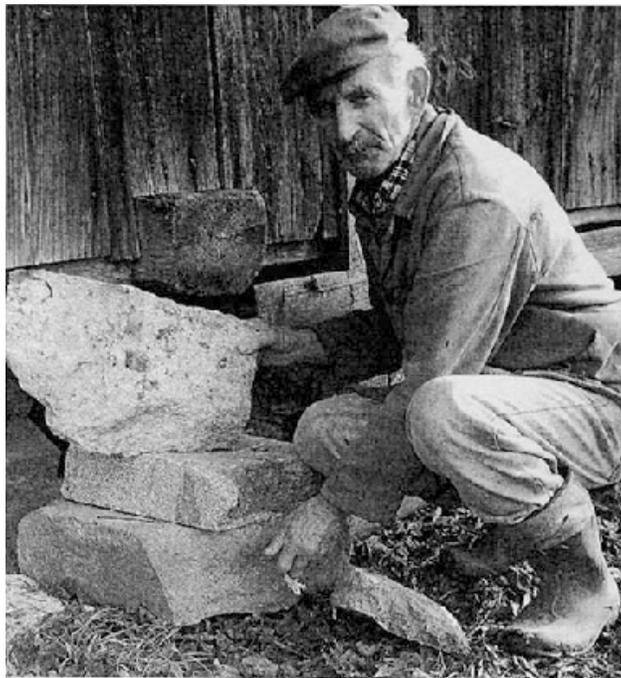
Wielkie Oczy. A village in Lubaczow County, proud of its past as a home to three nationalities. Until the outbreak of World War II Poles, Jews and Ukrainians lived here in harmony.

"Everyone knew each other. I don't remember any anti-Jewish excesses," wrote Ryszard Majus before he died in 1995 in Israel.

The turning point was in the beginning of the 1940s. Germans again entered the village. They started sending Jews to slave labor camps. Those selected for transport, especially the young and strong, were loaded on horse-carts and taken to Jaworow and later by train toward Lwow and Jaktorow. June 10, 1942 was the day of the final solution of the "Jewish question". On this day, as eyewitnesses tell it, the ominous cars of the SS full of Gestapo men arrived at the Wielkie Oczy town market. Jews were expelled from their houses—in total 120 families. They were allowed to take only those things, which they were able to carry. All were driven to Krakowiec and Jaworow. On the way they were unmercifully beaten. Only few of them were successful in escaping to the woods. Soon, displaced Ukrainians from Troscianiec moved into the empty houses of the Wielkie Oczy Jews. Some houses were taken apart and pieces of value were sold. At the same time the local Jewish cemetery, where the first burials date from the XVIII

century, was desecrated. Headstones with their Hebrew inscriptions were torn from the ground with help of horses. Profaned in this way, the headstones were used as supports in barns and for building stairs.

cemetery and replacing them by concrete supports, without any damage to your property, will be fully paid by the persons financing the restoration of the cemetery".



"It's a disgrace and a shame for the whole community," says Józef Slys, shown here with headstones supporting Janina W.'s barn.

Shevach Weiss, Ambassador of Israel to Poland, writes in his letter to Janina W.

"The headstones found their way to your farmyard during the tragic events to my nation. I would be grateful if you would agree to return them to the cemetery. It would be an expression of a great humanism. Of course, all costs of returning of the headstones to the

"I heard that most of the headstones were used for building the so called Krakowiec road," says an older man that I met at the bus stop in Wielkie Oczy.

Most people who took part in these shameful events have died. Those alive today prefer not to open wounds that actually have not truly healed.

"They were hard times," argues 75 years old Julian Slys, "My father didn't take any headstones. He was afraid. Others had no scruples."

The Slys farm is located next to the land of Janina W. She is the one who has caused the commotion about Wielkie Oczy in the country. A one-floor house built of red bricks. A clean farmyard. Deeper in the farmyard, behind the branches

of a walnut-tree, stands a barn. In appearance it looks quite normal. Like others, it is made of boards and covered by rust-eaten sheet iron. But there is something that distinguishes it, and that can be seen in the space below the floor.

"This barn stands on tens of Jewish headstones," declares Bogdan Lisze, the chairman of the Society for

Renewal of Jewish Heritage Monuments in Lubaczow County, "We've tried to recover them. Unfortunately, without success."

More than two years ago the people of Wielkie Oczy, on seeing the progress that had been made in cleaning up the cemetery, started to return the headstones found on their land. Some were broken and on some the inscriptions in Hebrew and ornamental designs could hardly be seen.

"But most important is that the profaned headstones were brought back to their place," adds Lisze, "The local people said: we want to die with a clean conscience."

Up to now, all the efforts made to convince Janina W. to do as others have done failed. However, she agreed to return some of the headstones, but only those that were outside the barn. Those under the barn would have to stay as support for the structure.

"Let them take all the headstones, even the smallest stone, even together with the barn," says Janina W., who starts the talk with us unwillingly, "but first they have pay me. Yes, to pay! Because they'll destroy the structure."

"How much?" I ask. "Not too much. Thirty-thousands zlotys," the woman strongly defends her rights, "Besides, the truth is my father-in-law didn't steal the headstones. During the pogrom he hid a few local Jews. He liked them. They were friends. They told him to go to the cemetery and take some headstones. You can hide them and thanks to you they will be safe."

People doubt the veracity of this story, but prefer not to comment or pass judgment on it openly.

"Let her at last return them instead of demanding money," says an irritated woman by the grocery, "She wants to become rich on the dead."

The sum the owner of the property demands greatly exceeds the value of the deteriorating barn. No one wants to pay. The American Wielkie Oczy

Foundation offered instead to pay all the costs related to lifting up the construction and building concrete supports. Local authorities are also ready to help.

"We guarantee transport," Zbigniew Palczynski, the secretary of Gmina Authority in Wielkie Oczy.



Barely a handful of untouched headstones remain in the cemetery. Others were desecrated or have disappeared.

Bogdan Lisze, the chairman of the Society for Renewal of Jewish Heritage Monuments in Lubaczow County.

"Other members of our society and I don't intend to cultivate hatred and bias against other nationalities. All the traces of the common life here once shared by Poles, Jews and Ukrainians are elements of a rich past and everything possible should be done to preserve them. Just now we have started to catalogue all Jewish monuments in the county."

The entire community waits for the definitive solution of this embarrassing issue. Most declare a positive attitude toward Jews. Every year in the local school there is an essay contest related to the diverse culture of Poles, Jews and Ukrainians that once existed in the region. As far as is possible, pupils together with their teachers help keep up the local cemeteries. They also help to clean the Jewish one, which in the past had been overgrown with brushwood and neglected.

"Even chickens couldn't cross the cemetery," Tadeusz Slysz knows what he's talking about. Together with his son he cut off some of the overgrowth. In the thicket he found moss-covered headstones. Before the war in the Wielkie Oczy Jewish cemetery there were about 2,000 headstones. Now there are only a dozen or so. A fence was erected around the cemetery. In the future, a memorial wall will be assembled out of fragments of the headstones. The question is whether among them will be those that are now under the barn of Janina W.

"I can't exclude the possibility of taking them by force," informs Jan Michalczyzyn, chief of County Prosecutor Office in Lubaczow, "We started legal proceedings based on a suspicion of desecrating headstones. The investigation continues."

Parts of the memories from the book "Wielkie Oczy" written by Krzysztof David Majus were used in the text of this article.

DEEP SYMBOLISM

In Hebrew a cemetery is called as "eternal home" or "home of life". In Poland the most common name for Jewish cemetery is "kirkut". Jewish headstones are characterized by deep symbolism and stylistics, relatively rarely met in other religions. For example a relief of book or bookcase on a tombstone indicates a place of burial of rabbi or a lector reading Torah in a synagogue. A crown on a tombstone may be a symbol of a family head and marital fidelity. Animals on the headstones reflect names and given names. A pigeon symbolizes a given name Yona or Taube, and fox symbolizes the name Fuchs. Violins, scissors or lancet were related to the profession of the late person.

Based on the book "Kirkuty Podkarpacia" written by Marek Gosztyla and Michal Proksa, Przemysl 2001.

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