

## Restoration of the Ivansk Cemetery: Progress Report

by Norton Taichman (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)

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### **Construction of the wall and gate of our ancestor's cemetery began today!!!**

Over two years have passed since we committed ourselves to restoring the Jewish Cemetery in Ivansk. When we started we had no idea of what we were getting into. While there have been more "ups" than "downs", cemetery restoration in Poland (and no doubt anywhere else) is an exercise in how to "keep your cool".

By April 2006 sufficient funds had been raised to erect the gate and the perimeter wall of our ancestors' cemetery. To get construction started we transferred funds from our accounts in Canada and the USA to the *Fundacja Ochrony Dziedzictwa Żydowskiego* (FODZ; Foundation for Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland), which represents our financial interests in Poland. For example, the FODZ is responsible for paying the contractor in installments as the work progresses, but actual work in the field could not be set in motion until all funds necessary to finish the job were in the hands of the FODZ.

In early May we authorized the transfer of \$15,000 (US) from our Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project (PJCRP) account in Buffalo; within a couple of days the money reached the FODZ. Likewise, we instructed the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) Federation in Toronto to cable \$32,000 (US) to Poland. But for reasons that need not concern us here, the money transferred from Canada did not reach the FODZ until the end of June.

Because of this unanticipated delay, restoration of the cemetery was not begun until today and is not likely to be completed until the autumn.

Consequently, we must reschedule the date of the rededication ceremony until mid or late October.

October will be a good time to meet in Poland. Winter will still be weeks away; tourists will have disappeared; the weather will be more comfortable; and the cost of airfares and accommodations will hopefully be lower.

***Please let me know if you are considering attending the dedication in Ivansk.***

***I will keep you up-to-date on possible dates for the ceremony, estimated costs, travel and tour options, and other on-going developments.***

***Don't delay.***

***Send an e-mail to < [nstaichman@comcast.net](mailto:nstaichman@comcast.net) > and I'll get back to you!***

## **A Disturbing Image: German Soldiers in the Ivansk Cemetery**

**Photo provided by Andrzej Omasta (Warsaw, Poland)**



It is indeed a nauseating sight: murderers amongst the matzevot of our buried ancestors.

Andrzej Omasta (the PJCRP director in Poland) discovered this photo in a collection of photographs given to him by someone in Kielce, a large town northwest of Iwaniska.

Close examination reveals that the men's uniforms bear hallmarks of the German military. The motifs on the tombstones confirm that these belong to Jewish people. The word, "Iwaniska" was inscribed on the back of the photo; this alone is the only evidence we have to suggest that these men are standing in the Ivansk Cemetery.

For now, let us assume that these men are indeed part of the small contingent of Germans and Ukrainians who occupied the town. In addition, it appears that German soldiers who were fighting on the Russian front were sent to Iwaniska for short rest periods. They can never be forgiven for the deeds they carried out in the name of the "fatherland". If there's a hell, may they enjoy a long stay!

## **Preserving Our Heritage: Recovering Our Ancestor's Matzevot**

**by Norton Taichman (Narberth, Pennsylvania, USA)**

The Ivansk Jewish Cemetery was defiled shortly after the Germans were pushed from Iwaniska. Local inhabitants carted off matzevot for use as grinding stones or building materials, and "useless" stone fragments were discarded and left on the ground.

Since WWII Jewish descendents of Ivansk have trickled back to the shtetl in search of their identity. In almost all instances visitors made the pilgrimage to the Jewish cemetery hoping to find a link(s) to family and friends who were buried there or who had no known grave. But all they found was a barren and deserted burial ground, devoid of tombstones or other meaningful landmarks. All they could do was light a memorial candle, recite the "Kaddish" and leave with an overwhelming sense of loss and futility.

Restoration of the Ivansk Cemetery cannot erase the sadness of history. But preserving and restoring this sacred site is a quintessential mitzvah that we as Jews and as human beings are obliged to fulfill. The cemetery is integral to our personal and our collective identity. By restoring the cemetery we honor our dead and create a beacon for future generations in search of their roots.

Locating and returning the matzevot that were taken from our cemetery is an critical component in recouping our lost legacy. According to halachic precepts recovered stones cannot be reintroduced into the cemetery unless their original locations can be verified. Consequently, these precious artefacts will be mounted and displayed on the wall of the restored cemetery.

As an initial step in rescuing our matzevot we sought help from the people of Iwaniska. Almost everyone we approached was sympathetic and offered to support our effort. **Father Stanislaw Kolasa** urged his congregation to look out for gravestones and to return them to the Town Hall. **Mayor Kazimierz Zoltek** personally approached his people urging them to do the right thing. **Mr. Kazimierz Kotowski**, the District Manager in Opatow has committed his administration to improving the road leading to the cemetery. **Mr. Pawel Skowron**, a teacher of English at the local junior high school, appealed to his students to approach their parents and convince them to return the stones. These as well as numerous other generous acts were the norm. Someone who wished to remain anonymous even deposited 3 large stone fragments in the cemetery when no one was looking. Only a very few individuals tried to extract payment for the return of our matzevot, but we refused to negotiate with them. The goodwill and the decency of the people of Iwaniska were very palpable. As a result I genuinely feel welcome and looked forward to revisiting the town.

In May a small group of Ivanskers together with American and Polish friends made the trip to Iwaniska to rescue matzevot fragments that still remained in the cemetery. The volunteers included:

**David Blumenfeld** (Israel);  
**Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk** (Poland);  
**Joel Rosenbloom** (USA);  
**Pawel Skowron** (Poland);  
**Elya Taichman** (USA);  
**Norton Taichman** (USA)  
**Russell Taichman** (USA)  
**Kazimierz Zoltek** (Poland)

**Grzegorz (Greg) Gregorczyk** (Poland), **Gary Lipton** (Canada), **Lisa Newman** (Canada) and **Andrzej Omasta** (Poland) helped to organize the expedition

Loyal readers of the e-Newsletter should be familiar with Andrzej, David, Gary, Greg, Lisa, Norton and Mayor Zoltek, but a few new faces require an introduction:

**Joel Rosenbloom** is a retired molecular biologist. We were colleagues for over 30 years at the University of Pennsylvania. When I told Joel about my plans to return to Iwaniska, he revealed that his family also came from Poland, but he did not know the exact location. So, why not adopt our shtetl and help out? Joel can now consider himself an Ivansker.

**Pawel Skowron** is an English teacher in the junior high school. We met during my last visit to Iwaniska when he volunteered to act as a translator in gathering testimony from Iwaniska elders. We have kept in touch, and he has been instrumental in our search for matzevot in the community surrounding Iwaniska. He is also actively involved in promoting the essay contest we are sponsoring in the school to foster Polish-Jewish awareness.

**Russell Taichman**, my eldest son, is a periodontist and a molecular biologist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor where he teaches and carries on research relating to mechanisms of prostate cancer metastasis. Russell and his wife Susan have an adorable 2-year-old little girl, Garielle. Russell spends two weeks in the Arctic every summer as a guide for the Sierra Club.

**Elya Taichman**, my eldest and my favorite (and only) grandson is 14 years old. He is entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Akiba Hebrew Academy outside Philadelphia. I think I'm the only one who calls him Elya; everyone else knows him as "Eli". Eli is an avid sports fan (basketball, baseball, football and the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team): somehow he still manages to excel in his academic studies.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> Elya, Joel and I drove south to Iwaniska to meet up with David, Pawel and Russell. Unfortunately, Greg could not come because his job required that he remain in Warsaw. At this time of year the Polish countryside is incredibly beautiful: dark forests, rolling hills, brilliant yellow and green fields, and small, well-maintained farms. On the way, we stopped in Ilza to take part in the rededication of the Ilza (Drildz) Jewish Cemetery. Several of the town's Jewish descendents came from overseas (mostly Torontonians) to attend the event, which also attracted a large number of townsfolk. A moving ceremony paid tribute to those who once lived there.

Upon arriving in Iwaniska, we strolled through the town deeply conscious that this little place was once home to many generations of our people. Since my last visit, Iwaniska has undergone numerous improvements: the village square is being upgraded with new brick pathways, colorful flower beds and a memorial honoring the Polish Resistance during WWII; fresh paint covers most homes and businesses, many of which are undergoing extensive renovation. Iwaniska's personality has been transformed from a forgettable, backwater farming community to one that is attractive and inviting to the senses. The Mayor is doing a splendid job!

We worked in the Ivansk Cemetery from May 23<sup>rd</sup> to May 26<sup>th</sup>; the weather was perfect most of the time. Prior to our arrival the people of Iwaniska cleared the cemetery of overgrown vegetation, otherwise it would have been next to impossible to find anything. We recovered numerous large as well as smaller pieces of tombstones. The work was challenging but very rewarding. The collected stones were taken to the Town Hall for safekeeping until they could be embedded in the cemetery wall.

A partial photographic record of our undertaking is presented below. Those of us who took part in this endeavor will never forget the experience and the feeling of having done something really significant.

<b>Legend to the Photos on the Next Page</b>		
<b>1</b>	<b>In Front of Town Hall</b>	David, Pawel, Joel, Eli, Russell
<b>2</b>	<b>Meeting with the Mayor</b>	Pawel, Joel, Eli, Norton, Russell, Mayor Zoltek
<b>3</b>	<b>Ready for Work in the Cemetery</b>	Eli, Joel, David, Russell
<b>4</b>	<b>Thanking Those Who Returned Matzevot</b>	Pawel, a farmer who acted as a mentsh, Norton
<b>5</b>	<b>Thanking Those Who Returned Matzevot</b>	Father whose son urged him to return Matzevot
<b>6</b>	<b>Thanking Those Who Returned Matzevot</b>	Grandfather sets an example for his grandchildren
<b>7</b>	<b>Orienting and Marking Matzevot</b>	Norton paints arrows on back of fragments (see #16)
<b>8</b>	<b>3 Pieces of the Puzzle Fit Together</b>	Two additional stone fragments also belong to this artifact and were found later
<b>9</b>	<b>Uncovering a Matzevah</b>	Pawel & Norton remove debris covering a tombstone
<b>10</b>	<b>Lunch Break</b>	Cheese, bread, sardines, oranges and water
<b>11</b>	<b>Cleaning a Matzevah</b>	Joel removes 60 years of debris from a Matzevah
<b>12</b>	<b>Three Generations Return to Ivansk</b>	Eli, Norton and Russell
<b>13</b>	<b>Almost Intact</b>	Three stone fragments fit together in this matzevah
<b>14</b>	<b>Loading Matzevot onto a Truck</b>	Schlepping Matzevah for storage in Town Hall
<b>15</b>	<b>What's Going On Over There??</b>	I can't digest my food with all the noise!
<b>16</b>	<b>Individual Tombstone Fragments</b>	Arrows on back indicate "right side up"

