

FOUNDATION FOR  
THE PRESERVATION  
OF JEWISH HERITAGE  
IN POLAND



FUNDACJA  
OCHRONY  
DZIEDZICTWA  
ŻYDOWSKIEGO

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# Lesko

THE CHASSIDIC ROUTE

**Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland** was established in March 2002 by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO).

Our mission is to protect and commemorate the surviving monuments of Jewish cultural heritage in Poland. The priority of our Foundation is the protection of the Jewish cemeteries: in cooperation with other organizations and private donors we saved from destruction, fenced and commemorated several of them (e.g. in Zakopane, Kozienice, Mszczonów, Kłodzko, Iwaniska, Strzegowo, Dubienka, Kolno, Iłża, Wysokie Mazowieckie). The actions of our Foundation cover also the revitalization of particularly important and valuable landmarks of Jewish heritage, e.g. the synagogues in Zamość, Rymanów and Kraśnik.

We do not limit our heritage preservation activities only to the protection of objects. It is equally important for us to broaden the public's knowledge about the history of Jews who for centuries contributed to cultural heritage of Poland.

One of the most important educational activities of our Foundation is the "To Bring Memory Back" program ([www.pamiec.fodz.pl](http://www.pamiec.fodz.pl)) directed to students, with over 130 schools from all around Poland participating in it, and the multimedia Internet portal POLIN – Polish Jews Heritage ([www.polin.org.pl](http://www.polin.org.pl)), meant to present the history of the Jewish communities from 1,200 places in the country.

One of the major undertakings by the Foundation is the Chassidic Route project.

More information about the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland:

[WWW.FODZ.PL](http://www.fodz.pl)

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[WWW.POLIN.ORG.PL](http://www.polin.org.pl)

Dear Sirs,

This publication is dedicated to the history of the Jewish community of **Lesko**, and is a part of a series of pamphlets presenting history of Jews in the localities participating in the Chassidic Route project, run by the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland since 2005.

The Chassidic Route is a tourist route which follows the traces of Jews from southeastern Poland and, soon, from western Ukraine. 20 localities, which have already joined the project and where the priceless traces of the centuries-old Jewish presence have survived, are: Baligród, Biłgoraj, Chełm, Cieszanów, Dębica, Dynów, Jarosław, Kraśnik, Lesko, Leżajsk (Lizhensk), Lublin, Przemyśl, Ropczyce, Rymanów, Sanok, Tarnobrzeg, Ustrzyki Dolne, Wielkie Oczy, Włodawa and Zamość.

The Chassidic Route runs through picturesque areas of southeastern Poland, like the Roztocze Hills and the Bieszczady Mountains, and joins localities, where one can find imposing synagogues and Jewish cemeteries with gravestones dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> or even 16<sup>th</sup> c. Many of those cemeteries have still been visited by the Chassidim from all over the world.

Within the frames of the Chassidic Route project the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland supports local authorities and non-governmental organizations to protect and promote multicultural heritage of their communities. It also stimulates establishing firm partnership between sectors in favor of the development of profiled tourism, based on Jewish cultural heritage.

The Chassidic Route gives many places the opportunity to appear on the map of tourist attractions of Poland; apart from well-known Zamość, placed on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites, there are many places on the Route, which are often omitted by tourists, unaware of their attractions.

We cordially invite you to join us on the Chassidic Route!

**Monika Krawczyk** | CEO



## Why the “Chassidic Route”?

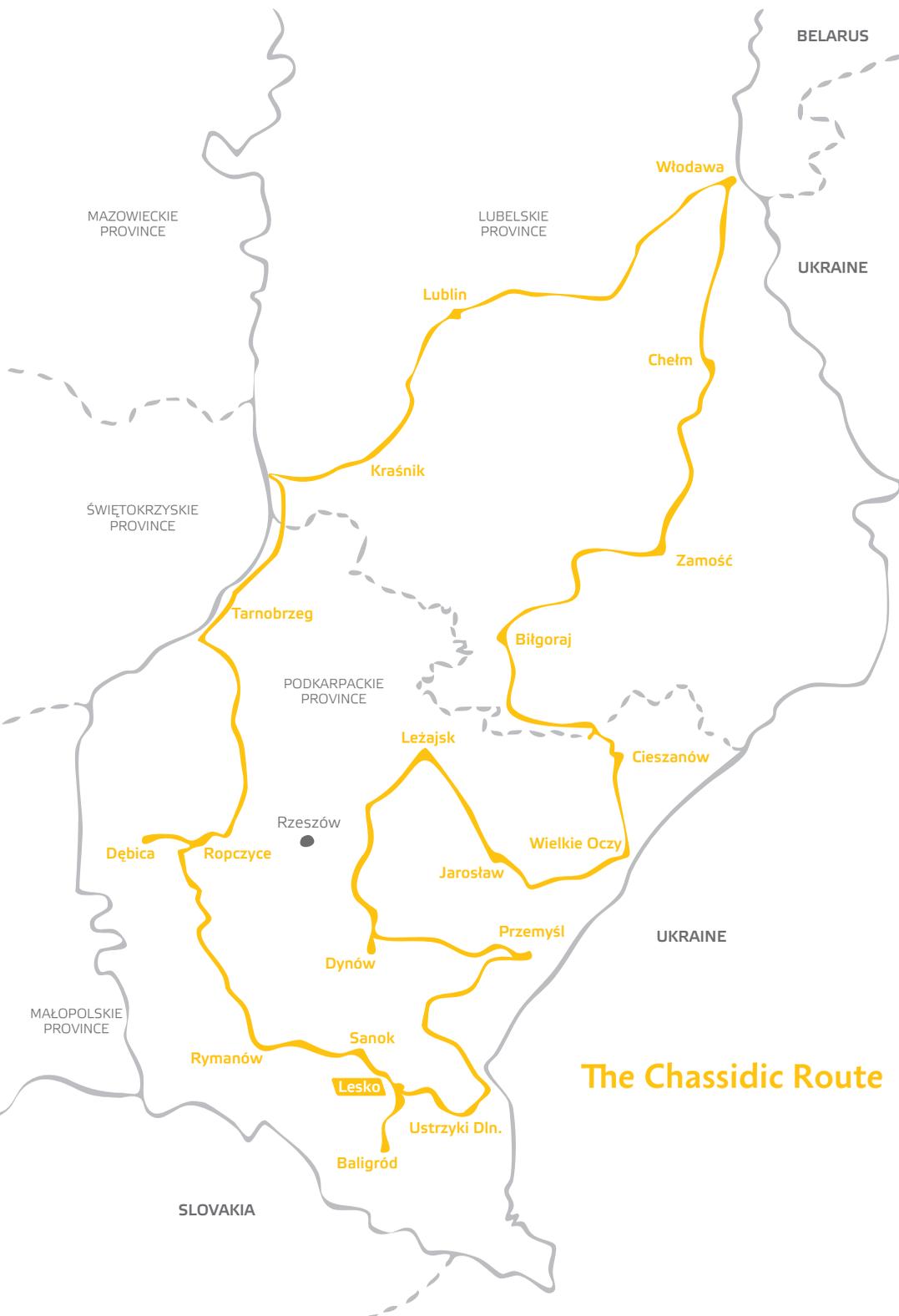
For centuries Poland used to be the homeland to many generations of Jews. An unprecedented development of Jewish culture, as well as religious thought and writing, took place in this country. Here in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. emerged Chassidism, one of the most important currents in Judaism ever. It gained particularly many supporters in eastern Poland, among others on the territories through which the Chassidic Route runs today.

It is traditionally believed that the creator of Chassidism (*chassid* stands in Hebrew for “pious”) was Israel Ben Eliezer of Międzybóž (Medzhybizh) in the Podolia region (today in Ukraine), known as the Baal Shem Tov. The Chassidim believed that religiousness could not be limited only to strict observing of orders and bans of Judaism, and even that obeying of them in a too restrictive way could distance the man from God. Therefore they strongly emphasized the spiritual dimension of religion and the emotional experience of faith.

The Chassidim gathered around the tzadikim (*tzadik* stands in Hebrew for “righteous”), charismatic spiritual leaders, each of whom proposed a special way of coming closer to God, concrete methods of studying of the Torah and other religious writings, as well as celebrating of rituals. In the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the rank of a tzadik became hereditary, which led to establishing entire dynasties of the tzadikim, taking their names from the towns, where their courts were located.

On an anniversary of death of a tzadik (*yortzeit*), the Chassidim gather around his grave with belief that on such a day the soul the tzadik visits the place. They pray and leave at the grave *kvitlech*, small pieces of paper with written requests. This tradition is still vivid and the Chassidim from all around the world still come to the graves of tzadikim in Lizhensk, Lublin, Dynów, Ropczyce or Rymanów.

There were courts of tzadikim in Cieszanów, Dębica, Dynów, Lesko, Leżajsk (Lizhensk), Lublin, Przemyśl, Ropczyce, Rymanów and Tarnobrzeg (or, more precisely, in nearby Dzików). The most important center of Chassidism in Poland was Lizhensk, where the famous Tzadik Elimelech lived. In other localities of the Route only small groups of the Chassidim, affiliated to tzadikim from other towns and villages, used to live. This, however, does not downgrade the appeal of the relics of Jewish heritage located there.



## The Chassidic Route

### The Chassidic Route – Places of Interest:

**BALIGRÓD** – a cemetery established at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**BIŁGORAJ** – a cemetery established in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

**CHEŁM** – a so called “new synagogue” from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.; a cemetery established in the 15<sup>th</sup> c., one of the oldest surviving Jewish cemeteries in Europe.

**CIESZANÓW** – a synagogue from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.; a cemetery established in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

**DĘBICA** – a synagogue erected probably at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.; a cemetery established at the turn of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**DYNÓW** – a cemetery from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. with the grave of Tzadik Zvi Elimelech Shapiro of Dynów (1785–1841).

**JAROSŁAW** – two synagogues from the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and a cemetery established at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**KRAŚNIK** – a complex of two synagogues from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> c.; a so called “new cemetery” established around 1850.

**LESKO** – a synagogue erected in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. and a cemetery from the 16<sup>th</sup> c., one of the oldest surviving Jewish cemeteries in Europe.

**LEŻAJSK (LIZHENSK)** – a cemetery established in the 17<sup>th</sup> c. with the grave of Tzadik Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717–1787), a place of pilgrimages of the Chassidim from all over the world.

**LUBLIN** – the *Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin* (the School of the Wise Men of Lublin) erected in 1930 as the biggest Jewish religious school in the world; a so called “old cemetery” established in the 16<sup>th</sup> c., with the grave of Tzadik Jacob Isaac Horovitz, called “The Seer of Lublin” (1745–1815); a so called “new cemetery” established at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

**PRZEMYŚL** – a so called “new synagogue” erected at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.; a so called “new cemetery” established at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the biggest Jewish cemetery in Podkarpackie province.

**ROP CZYCE** – a cemetery established in the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**RYMANÓW** – a Baroque synagogue and a cemetery with the grave of Tzadik Menachem Mendel of Rymanów (1745–1815).

**SANOK** – a synagogue of the *Yad Charuzim* society, build in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.; a synagogue erected in the 1920’s; a so called “new cemetery” established in the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

**TARNOB RZEG** – a cemetery established at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. with the grave of Tzadik Eliezer Horovitz of Dzików.

**USTRZYKI DOLNE** – a cemetery established in the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**WIELKIE OCZY** – a synagogue from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.; a cemetery established in the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**WŁODAWA** – a Baroque synagogue complex from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

**ZAMOŚĆ** – a famous Renaissance synagogue erected at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> c.; a so called “new cemetery” established in 1907.



*The synagogue*



*The interior of the synagogue*



*The synagogue*

Lesko, a town in Podkarpackie (Subcarpathian) province, is located on the right bank of the San River, in the borderland between the Bieszczady Mountains and the Przemyśl Foothills. It is currently inhabited by about 6,000 people.

### **The Beginning of the Town and the Jewish Community**

The settlement, which later formed the town, was established by Ruthenians probably in the early Middle Ages. However, the first written reference to it dates back to 1436. Lesko was granted with the town rights about 1470 and in the course of time, it became an important craft and trade center. It was privately owned by the Kmitas family, and from 1553 – by the Stadnickis. In 1731, it became a property of the Ossolińskis, later it belonged shortly to the Mniszechs and from 1799 to 1944 it was the property of the Krasickis.

In the Middle Ages, Lesko was mostly inhabited by Poles, Ruthenians and few Germans. Jews settled there in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c., probably in the 1540's. A local census of 1542 says about one worshipper of Judaism. More Jews came to Lesko presumably in the 1560's and 1570's. According to a legend, there were refugees from Spain among the newcomers; however, there is no evidence of that. In 1580, there were 20 Jewish taxpayers in Lesko; as they were heads of families, it can be estimated that the total of Jews was about 120 people, which made 10% of the town residents. In 1615, their number increased to 230 people (13% of the inhabitants). As opposed to many other localities, Jews were subordinated to the town law, which gave them the same rights to run businesses as the other inhabitants. They were defined as town citizens, although they did not hold any official posts.

At first, the Lesko Jewish community functioned probably as an auxiliary kehilla (a religious community), a branch of the Przemyśl kehilla. It gradually became independent, had its own rabbi (first mentioned in 1580), a synagogue, a hospital with an asylum (established after 1579), and a cemetery. The first reference to the cemetery dates back to 1611, when its area was expanded; however, the surviving gravestones suggest that the necropolis must have already existed in the 1540's.

At the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> c., the Lesko Jews earned their living mainly with trading (leather, corn, fabrics, wine and herrings), crafts (butchery, clothing, tailoring, goldsmithery), and money lending. Jews also produced beer, owned fields, ponds, and gardens.

### **The Development of the Jewish Community**

The wars that struck Poland in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. began a period of unsuccessful years for most of the Polish towns. The Lesko inhabitants had to struggle with the economic crisis, too. As of 1676, there were 83 Jewish taxpayers in Lesko (41 men and 42 women), who made 38% of the town residents. The following decades brought a systematic growth of the number of Jews; as a proof of that may serve information about the plague, which followed a fire in the town in 1704 and caused death of 94 Christians and 303 Jews.

At the time, the worshippers of Judaism from the nearby town of Sanok were subordinated to the Lesko kehilla. However, the Sanok Jews tried to become independent from Lesko, which led to a long-standing conflict between these communities. This was the reason for numerous interventions between 1705 and 1724 by the Council of Four Lands, the supreme body of Jewish authority in Poland. Soon after, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., the Sanok community gained its independence.



The balcony barrier made of the prewar bimah balustrade



The cemetery



The cemetery

For a long time the Lesko synagogue (first mentioned in 1608 and 1618) was a wooden building. In the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., a new synagogue, made of stone and bricks, was erected in the Baroque style, referring in its form to the church architecture. It was first mentioned in documents of 1746.

As of 1764, there were 1,656 members of the Lesko kehilla registered as taxpayers, out of whom 587 lived in the very town. Like in the past centuries, the community was the biggest Jewish center in the Sanok region. Whatsoever, Jews who settled in nearby Baligród were subordinated to the Lesko kehilla yet until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.

In 1769, Jews of Lesko owned 86 houses and their total number was 740 people. They made 52% of all the inhabitants, i.e. a slight majority. Jews worked as bakers, butchers, goldsmiths, tailors, furriers, dry goods makers, metalsmiths, bookbinders, merchants and leaseholders of local taxes, breweries and taverns. They were also barbers, musicians and teachers in religious schools.

### The Religious Life under Partitions

As a result of the first partition of Poland in 1772 by Russia, Prussia and Austria, Lesko was incorporated into the Austrian Empire. In 1792, the new authorities established there a German-language lay school for Jewish children (*Jüdischdeutscheschule*). In 1799, there were 1,084 Jews living in the town, which made 51.2% of all the residents. At the time, Lesko became a major center of Chassidism thanks to the famous Tzadik Samuel Shmelke. Lesko was also the place of birth of the renowned Tzadik Zvi Naftali Horowitz (1760–1827), who moved to Ropczyce and founded a dynasty of tzadikim, residing in many towns of Lesser Poland until World War II.

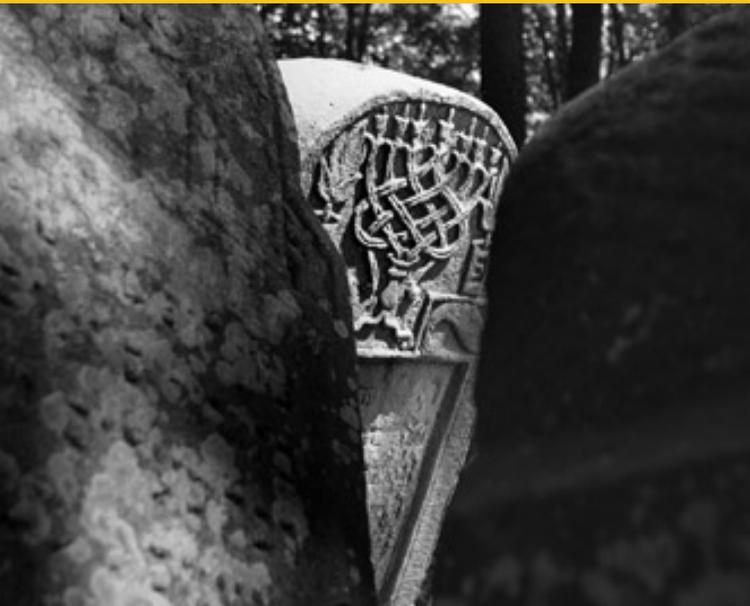
Followers of many different tzadikim used to live in Lesko. There was a Chassidic house of prayers adjacent to the *Beth Midrash* (the study hall), attended by the local followers of the tzadikim of the Halberstam family of Nowy Sącz (in Yiddish: *Sendzer Klotz*). Another house of prayers (called *Sadigerer Klotz*), used by the Sadiger Chassidim, who recognized the spiritual leadership of the Freidmans tzadikim, used to stand close to the main Lesko synagogue. Both Chassidic houses of prayers were destroyed during World War II.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the number of the Lesko Jews started to diminish. Many of them moved to nearby villages. However, in the following decades, the Jewish population of Lesko encountered a new development. The main synagogue was reshaped in 1838 and thoroughly restored between 1872 and 1874. A new *Beth Midrash*, called the New Synagogue, was erected in 1838. As of 1870, the Lesko kehilla, embracing Jews from nearby villages, had 1,858 members, two rabbis, and maintained a religious school attended by 80 students. In 1880, there were 1,976 Jews living in Lesko (57.9% of the inhabitants), and 20 years later, the community comprised 3,794 Jews and kept up four religious schools.

It is hard to determine why in Jewish folk tales the inhabitants of Lesko (like those of Chełm) were presented as dull and were the subject of numerous jokes.

### The Interwar Period

According to the census of 1921, Lesko was inhabited by 2,338 Jews (61.4% of all the residents). During the interwar period (1918–1939), there were about 10 cheders and a religious school for girls in the town. Political parties (*Poalej Syjon*, *Agudat Israel*, *Mizrachi*) were active there as well as other



The cemetery



The cemetery



The cemetery

Jewish religious and cultural organizations. There were also youth societies (*Beitar, Ha-Szomer ha-Cair, Ha-Noar ha-Cijoni, and Cukunfi*). The community ran a bank, which supported members of limited means.

### World War II and the Holocaust

After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Lesko was invaded by the Soviet army. Many wealthy Jews were taken away to the distant parts of the Soviet Union. After Germans had taken the town over, a ghetto was established in Lesko in the spring of 1942, with about 2,750 people imprisoned in it. The ghetto existed until August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1942, when most of its inhabitants were transported to the camp in Zasław. Many Jews were shot on the Lesko cemetery.

### Traces of Presence

The most splendid monument of the Jewish culture of Lesko is the main synagogue (16 Berka Joselewicza St.), built in the 18<sup>th</sup> c., which, devastated by Germans, for many years had been falling into ruin. Restoration works were carried out in the building from 1960 to 1963, continued in 1972. The renovators attempted to give back to the synagogue its looks from before the 19<sup>th</sup> c. alterations. Other restoration works followed in 1981 and 1991. Currently, the building hosts the "Synagoga" Gallery run by the Bieszczady Cultural Center. A small collection of Judaics has been gathered there.

The Lesko synagogue was laid out on a rectangular plan. The building consists of a main hall and a much smaller adjacent annex with a vestibule and a balcony for women. Waved gables crown the eastern and western façades. There is a small tower with stairs leading to an attic in the southwestern

corner of the synagogue. On the top of the western façade, there are Decalogue tablets and a Hebrew inscription, saying: *How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.*

Cornices divide the walls of the main hall in three levels. The middle level is covered with an arcaded frieze, whereas pilasters and half-columns accent the upper level. The eastern wall hides an ornamented *Aron ha-Kodesh* (a niche where the *Torah* scrolls are kept), consisting of half-columns and a triangular finial, and referring in its form to the *Aron ha-Kodesh* from the non-existent Golden Rose synagogue in Lviv (today in Ukraine). The main hall is covered with a wooden ceiling. An iron balustrade, which surrounded the bimah (a platform in the center of the main hall where the *Torah* is read) until World War II, was used for constructing a balustrade of a balcony of a Classicist tenement house in Konstytucji 3 Maja Sq., where it still can be found.

The Jewish cemetery in Lesko (Słowackiego St.) was established probably in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. As centuries followed, it was expanded a few times and currently it covers the area of 3 hectares. Over 2,000 matzevot, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> c., have survived there. The oldest part of the necropolis hides about 120 gravestones from the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> c. and the first decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. Those are rectangular or semicircular plaques covered exclusively with inscriptions. The oldest one is dedicated to Eliezer, son of Meszulam, deceased on the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Tishri, 5309: September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1548. Matzevot from later periods are richly decorated with symbolic reliefs. Numerous research and cleanup works have been carried out on the cemetery since the 1980's. In 1996, an obelisk commemorating the victims of the Holocaust was erected there.



↑ The cemetery

↓ The cemetery



↑ The cemetery

↓ The cemetery



## Activities for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage

Thanks to the successful cooperation between the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland and the Municipality of Lesko as well as local non-governmental organizations, the monuments of Jewish culture, which survived the war, are today in a relatively good condition. Hopefully, the remaining traces of the Lesko Jewish community will remind the future generations about the multicultural past of the town for many years.

The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland has carried out numerous activities to involve the residents of Lesko in taking care of the multicultural heritage of their town. The students of the Marshal Józef Piłsudski Public Middle School are taking part in the "To Bring Memory Back" educational program, created and implemented by the Foundation. Within its frames, young people discover the multicultural past of their town, learn about the fates of the Lesko Jews, the Jewish culture and tradition. They also prepare public events, thanks to which the results of their work become available for the town inhabitants. The students of the Lesko Middle School take care of the local Jewish cemetery and prepare its photographic documentation.

The institutions involved in the preservation of Jewish heritage in Lesko are: the Municipality and the Communal Office of Lesko, the Lesko Center for Education, Sports and Promotion, the Bieszczady Tourist Information Center, the Bieszczady Eco-Tourist Association "Baszta", and the Lesko and the Region Lovers Society. In the nearest future, cleanup of the Jewish cemetery and a publication devoted to it will be carried out as well as marking up of a tourist route, which will follow the traces of the Lesko Jews.

In the summer of 2005 and 2006, within the frames of the "Anti-Schemes" ("Antyschematy") international program, youths from Poland, Israel and Germany cleaned up the Lesko cemetery. The works were conducted in cooperation with the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland.

We hope that soon there will be other activities carried out in Lesko, aiming to remind the inhabitants and tourists about the history of Jews who for centuries co-created the social character of the town and contributed to its cultural and economic development.





← The Decalogue tablets on the western façade of the synagogue

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Information and educational materials on the Jewish culture are available on the website of the "To Bring Memory Back" program [www.PAMIEC.FODZ.PL](http://www.PAMIEC.FODZ.PL) and on the Internet portal POLIN – Polish Jews Heritage [www.POLIN.ORG.PL](http://www.POLIN.ORG.PL)

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