

Educators revive history of Poland's Jews

Donald Snyder | Feb. 17, 2012



Agata Jaworska from the School of Dialogue tells young Poles in Chelm about a Jewish community that was wiped out during the Holocaust. (Courtesue)

WARSAW, POLAND -- Every Polish town and village had its Holocaust. That's what Zuzanna Radzik wants Polish children to learn.

Her task is not easy. Although Polish children are taught about the Holocaust, they don't learn what happened in their own towns.

The killing did not just happen in the death camps that they are taught about, such as Auschwitz and Treblinka. It also took place in little-known towns like Stoczek Wegrowski, where 188 Jews were shot to death on Yom Kippur, Sept. 22, 1942.

Jews made up as much as 70 percent of the population in some towns and villages in prewar Poland.

"We bring history to children in towns and villages who have never met a Jew or seen a synagogue," Radzik said in a phone interview. "When we show them where the ghetto was in their town and that Jews were killed there, it all becomes real."

Radzik represents a vanguard of Poles who believe that the Jewish heritage in Poland is an integral part of Polish history and that Poles must learn about it to understand contemporary Poland. This legacy gives scholars access to aspects of Polish history that have yet to be researched, according to Konstanty Gebert, author and columnist for *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

Another Pole in search of Poland's lost Jewish history is Beata Chomatowska, who is restoring the memory of the Warsaw Ghetto in the city's Muranow neighborhood, which is built on the rubble of the former Jewish quarter.

Yet another Pole to memorialize the country's lost Jews is Zbigniew Nizinski, who bicycles through flat, pine-covered eastern Poland looking for the unmarked graves of those murdered in the Holocaust. His Baptist faith motivates him.

Faith also motivates Radzik, a 28-year-old theologian and devout Catholic. "We have a long history of Christian anti-Judaism," she told me. "We should do our repentance for that and be strong about fighting anti-Semitism."



Radzik supervises the School of Dialogue, a program intended to

recapture the lost history of the Jewish presence in Poland. The program is under the auspices of the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, a Polish nonprofit organization that fights anti-Semitism and works to foster better relations between Poles and Jews. Radzik is a member of the forum's board of directors.

Under her direction, the School of Dialogue deploys educators throughout Poland to make students aware of the places in their towns where Jews once lived and worked, where there were synagogues and *mikvehs*, and to teach the young Poles about Judaism.

In April 2010, two School of Dialogue educators visited Kielce, where 24,000 Jews lived before the war, approximately a third of the city's population. Almost all of Kielce's Jews were murdered during the Holocaust.

Ania, a teenage participant in the dialogue program in Kielce, wrote: "I've been living here since I was a baby and I did not know the meaning of the monuments for Holocaust victims I passed by every day and where the Jewish cemetery is." Now she does.

Like Radzik, Beata Chomatowska seeks to bring to life Poland's Jewish past. The 34-year-old journalist, who lives in Muranow where the Warsaw Ghetto stood, has created the website *Stacja Muranow* ("Muranow Station," www.stacjamuranow.art.pl) to educate residents about the history of the place where they live.

From this place, 300,000 Jews were sent to death camps, and countless others are buried in the ruins. The Germans leveled the Warsaw Ghetto after the uprising in April 1943.

"This area is still dead 68 years after the Germans destroyed it," Chomatowska said. "It is my obligation to remember the people and the place that was here before."

With no physical reminders of the former Jewish neighborhood, it is difficult to visualize its former appearance and recapture its history. Its hilly terrain in some places results from the fact that much of the rubble could not be cleared, so the new housing was often built on mounds of ruins.

Chomatowska is especially proud of recently completed murals by Warsaw artist Adam Walas in the entranceway to an apartment building at Nowolipki Street 13. This artwork features prominent Jews who lived in Muranow before the war, like Ludwik Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto.

Zamenhof intended Esperanto as a common language that would unite people of different cultures. "I transferred Zamenhof's hope to the mural with hope that people would see what is universal," Walas said.

Thirty other Muranow residents have joined Chomatowska's education project, known as the Association of Social and Cultural Initiatives at Muranow. They meet in a still unfurnished ground-floor office at Andersa 13

in Muranow. It is their hope that this will become a meeting place where Muranow residents and Jewish visitors can learn about the district's Jewish past.

Asked what has motivated her in her project, Chomatowska said, "I was always interested in Jewish culture and history, and a world that disappeared."

Like Radzik and Chomatowska, Nizinski brings to light a world that has disappeared. Inspired by the Bible and a fervent belief that the memory of the dead must be preserved, Nizinski has dedicated his life to finding the unmarked graves of Jews murdered by the Germans and identifying those who were killed.

The unassuming 52-year-old Baptist travels to the tiny villages in the pine- and birch-covered lands of eastern Poland. "We discover and rescue the graves from complete oblivion and place memorial stones," Nizinski said during an interview in Warsaw. "They no longer remain anonymous."

Nizinski says it is his purpose to remember those who have been forgotten. "It is so unjust that there are so many Jewish burial sites that are not visited because there are no relatives left."

Nizinski travels to small towns, usually by bicycle, and speaks to elderly people who still remember where murdered Jews are buried. That's how he met 90-year-old Wladyslaw Gerula near Przemysl, a picturesque town in southeastern Poland.

Gerula's parents were taken from the family farm and killed by the Germans because they had been hiding Jews. Their burial site is unknown. But Gerula knows the burial place of the three Jews his parents were hiding, whom the Germans also killed.

Gerula has placed a large stone on this spot and carved a Magen David on the stone. He considers it to also memorialize his parents. Nizinski is helping Gerula search for the identity of these Jews so that their names can be inscribed on the stone. Gerula's parents were honored at Yad Vashem on April 25, 1995.

One of the many unmarked graves that Nizinski has discovered is near the small town of Stoczek Wegrowski. Buried here are Rywka Farbiarz and seven other Jews murdered by the Germans Nov. 26, 1942. Farbiarz's 10-year-old daughter, Chasia, survived the massacre because the bullets missed her and she lay silent beneath the dead. Later hidden in the woods with other Jews, she was helped by a local Polish family.

Chasia Fizinskiarbiarz, who now lives in Israel, visited the grave with her two sons on June 16, 2011 for the unveiling of a memorial stone that Nizinski placed there.

[Donald Snyder is a freelance writer who worked at NBC for 27 years as a news producer. He retired from the network in 2003.]

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