

Dedication of Memorial at Rakow Forest / Piotrkow Poland by Shmuel Ben Eliezer

This summer saw a large increase in the number of Jews traveling to Poland. Some came to see the "*alter heim*" where their parents and grandparents had lived, some went to visit the holy grave sites of famous rebbeim, and others traveled to the concentration camps to see firsthand the sites where six million Jews were murdered.

Of these travelers, one group of more than 75 people from all over the world went with a particular mission to the town from which they had escaped the Holocaust. They solemnly gathered at the unveiling of a monument at the Rakow forest outside the town of Piotrkow.

The story of the massacres that took place at the Rakow forest is typical of the Nazi atrocities during the WWII. Fifty-six years ago, the Nazis liquidated the ghetto of Piotrkow, the first ghetto built by the Germans in Poland. While most of the inhabitants of the ghetto were deported to be murdered at Treblinka, one group of 560 Jews was shot to death on December 20, 1942, in the forest outside of town.

"The site of this massacre, the Rakow Forest, is a truly holy site," said Mr. Dessau of the Dessau Family foundation at the dedication ceremony. "Not only did the Nazis kill 560 adult Jews, they also slaughtered 39 Jewish children there.

"I was lucky to escape and rejoin my father and two brothers, Robert and Zvi, in a labor camp. Most of my friends and neighbors didn't survive."

"My brother, Robert, together with Ben Giladi, and myself, have been working for a long time now to ensure that a proper memorial be built at the site," said Saul. "We have been successful in restoring the Jewish cemetery, including the erection of an *ohel* over the grave of our ancestor, Rabbi Dr. Chaim David Bernard, 'the Tzadik of Piotrkow,' and in putting up plaques commemorating the important historical Jewish sites around the town.

"These memorials will ensure that the world understands that we will never forget what was done to the Jewish people at this site during the Holocaust."

The privately funded memorial is an impressive one. A walkway leading to a mound with two granite blocks is engraved in five languages, telling the story of the massacre that effectively ended the Jewish presence in Piotrkow after 750 years. The memorial faces the exact spot where the massacres took place. Above the mound are two flagpoles bearing both the Israeli and Polish flags, ensuring that the site will be recognized as a Jewish memorial, even by passing motorists. Landscaping and a buttress set the area apart from the encroaching forest.

The memorial was set up next to an existing memorial dedicated to 7,000 Polish and Russian prisoners who were killed in the same forest, in spite of objections from various Polish veteran groups. The argument was that a new memorial to the Jewish victims would detract from the Polish memorial. Mr. Saul Dessau worked hard and long to convince the authorities that the Jewish memorial should not be hidden off to the side.

Present at the ceremony was Ambassador Naftali Lau-Lavie from Israel who spoke eloquently about what had transpired at the site and said that the memorial would serve as a reminder to the world that we will never forget.

The moving dedication also included the recitation of *El Moleh Rachamim* and *Kaddish* by two cantors, Simcha Keller, the community leader and cantor in Lodz, and Enoch Goodfriend from Atlanta, Georgia.

The Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw was represented by Jan Jagielski, an archivist in charge of the department for documentation of Jewish monuments. Also, in attendance were members of the Polish community of Piotrkov who came to pay tribute to their Jewish neighbors who were killed during the Holocaust. The Polish authorities were represented at the dedication ceremony by the regional governor, Grzegorz Stepinsky, and the mayor of Piotrkov, Mr. Andrzej Pol, along with his vice mayor Mr. Marzec and Congresswoman Mrs. Radziszewska.