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Non-Jewish Germans preserve memories by saving cemeteries

Photo by Toby Axelrod

Nirit Ben-Joseph, an Israeli, and Eckehart Ruthenberg, a German non-Jew, inspect an abandoned Jewish tombstone in a Polish cemetery.

By TOBY AXELROD • Thu, May 08, 2008

BERLIN – Eckehart Ruthenberg stands beside tombstones overgrown with moss and layered with leaves to have a smoke, then dons a yarmulke and enters the gateless cemetery. This nearly forgotten Jewish burial site in the Polish forest is one of 600 that Ruthenberg, a non-Jewish German, has documented painstakingly. His self-imposed mandate is to rescue the names of Jewish families.

The cemeteries "are like orphans who were abandoned," Ruthenberg said. "I adopt them."

Many non-Jewish Germans have tried to restore dignity to Jewish cemeteries, but Ruthenberg's efforts range farther than most. Since 1987, he has been "adopting" cemeteries across the German state of Brandenburg and into western Poland. Ruthenberg, who was born in 1943 and grew up in the former East Germany, said his journey began as a form of rebellion.

His father, a committed Nazi and student of "eugenics," threw Ruthenberg out of the house when he was 21. Ruthenberg stopped looking into his father's past after learning that as a soldier he'd been stationed near where the first gas vans were used in mass asphyxiations. "I was afraid," Ruthenberg said. "It went too far for me."

In 1983, after East German authorities confiscated his passport when he applied to go to the West, Ruthenberg opted to cross another forbidden boundary – into Jewish cemeteries. Local officials told him it was "foreign territory" when he asked for details about a site in Eberswalde. "Jewish history was a taboo theme," he said, as Jews were identified in East Germany as capitalists, bad guys.

Four years later, in a dusty shop in East Berlin, Ruthenberg found what he calls his "golden book:" a 1914 listing of German towns including population identified by religion. On maps of towns with Jewish communities, he sought the tiny "L" indicating a Jewish cemetery.

"I would guess the 'L' stands for 'Lebenshaus,' house of life," says Nirit Ben-Joseph, Ruthenberg's Israeli friend, a professional tour guide and an amateur historian who has lived 20 years in Berlin. "In Hebrew, a cemetery is 'Beit HaChayim.' [meaning "House of Life"].

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Ruthenberg started visiting the sites with his youngest son, Jonas, who was born in 1985. He says they would "walk around with sticks," poking to find "stones under the leaves and earth." In 1994, Ruthenberg published a lexicon with Jewish studies professor Michael Brocke and photographer-filmmaker Kai Uwe Schulenburg that named 300 cemeteries.

Ruthenberg estimated that only a small percentage of the cemeteries he has seen can be restored. German occupiers laid waste to some cemeteries during the war, according to Rabbi Andreas Nachama, director of the Lander Institute for the Communication of the Holocaust and Tolerance at Touro College in Berlin. "But the other pattern was that, after the war, there was no longer anyone to take care of these cemeteries," said Nachama, a historian. "They were very often forgotten and then destroyed."

Abandoned sites have become a resource for stonemasons, Ruthenberg said, recalling a cemetery that had 10 stones two years ago. "When I went back a few months ago, they all were gone," he said. So far, Ruthenberg has made impressions, or rubbings, of 60 memorial stones. Ben-Joseph translated the inscriptions.

"If I find a stone under the earth, that is when I am happiest," Ruthenberg said during a recent trip to Poland. "It is like I saved a family. Everyone was forgotten."

In many places, a cemetery is the last trace of a destroyed European Jewish community. It is also the closest thing to a Jewish holy place, said Phil Carmel, director of a new online database of Jewish cemeteries in Europe called Lo Tishkach, Hebrew for "Do not forget." The project is coordinated by the Conference of European Rabbis and sponsored by the Claims Conference. The database's website contains information about the condition of 4,000 cemeteries; eventually, it will have at least 10,000.

Other efforts include the Jewish cemetery project of the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies and the Jewish Cemetery Database Project, which has information about 34 Jewish cemeteries in Germany and nearly 20,000 individual gravestones. Such umbrella projects demonstrate the vastness of the Jewish life that was destroyed. In Germany, people like Ruthenberg have done much of the legwork already.

There are others, too. Ernst Schaell is a retired mechanic who spent 20 years restoring the Jewish cemetery of Laupheim in the former West Germany. Klaus-Dieter Ehmke persuaded his neighbors to return the tombstones they had removed from the Gute Ort Jewish cemetery near Niederhof, in the former East Germany.

Such people "have tried to preserve the memory of something that was important to the Jewish community," said Arthur Obermayer, whose German-Jewish History Award has honored Ehmke and Schaell. "In Germany, cemeteries have been much more effectively maintained than in Eastern Europe because of Germans who care."

"Sometimes local, non-Jewish groups have the best possibility of ensuring some kind of protection or care for these places," said Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international Jewish affairs for the American Jewish Committee and a member of the Claims Conference board. He said he has encountered cases "where a town historian or school group studying about the history of the Jewish community decides to take a kind of responsibility for the cemetery."

Lo Tishkach hopes to inspire those with ancestral connections to Europe to support local efforts.

Ruthenberg, who describes himself with the German term for "memory worker," supports himself through a small art gallery in the former East Berlin. He sat with map in hand next to Ben-Joseph, 46, who was driving through Brandenburg into Poland. Her van bounced past the

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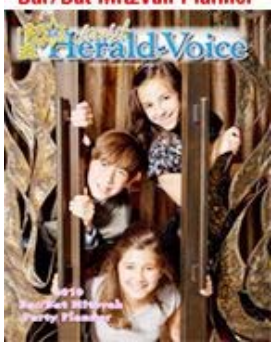

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disbanded border posts and zipped along wet roads. The sun glanced furtively from behind fast-moving clouds.

In the village of Cedynia, narrow streets winded uphill past old farmhouses and crumbling brick walls. On a well-mown slope overlooking the surrounding plain, several tombstones stand lovingly restored but face the wrong way.

Several miles on, past low hills fringed with birch trees, another cemetery – marked by a memorial plaque – lies along the wall surrounding the town of Moryn. Ben-Joseph crouched between a hedge and a tree, pulling tenacious vines from a stone in search of names.

In the town of Mieszkowice, chickens strutted and pecked in the yards, chasing their own reflections through puddles. Ruthenberg said this is a "typical cemetery used as a garden after the war. You see almost nothing left." Nearby, a man scraped at the earth with a shovel, seeking potatoes.

Not far away, in Boleszkowice, a sign among trees points to the forest cemetery. A stone wall encircled the secluded plot. Tombstones lay asunder, the soft earth turned up around them – probably by wild boars, Ruthenberg said.

He knelt near a fallen stone. A trace of gold gleamed in the groove of a Hebrew letter. Only the rustle of footsteps in dry leaves and the chirp of a bird broke the silence.
— JTA

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