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The Reclaimed Headstones Memorial Project

The Brest-Litovsk Jewish Cemetery Memorial



Introduction

The Brest Litovsk Jewish Cemetery

The Brest-Litovsk Jewish cemetery has a harrowing history. In present day Belarus, it cannot be seen, it has no markers and no-one would know that it ever existed. However, in the last twenty years, gravestones that once stood in the cemetery have surfaced all over the region. What started as a trickle became a tidal wave and now there are approximately 1250 reclaimed gravestones, some broken and some fully intact. Nine years ago we started the conversation to create a memorial park using the reclaimed headstones in order to preserve the past and to create a symbol of hope marking the revival and regeneration of a new Jewish Community in Brest, Belarus.

Belarus is an undiscovered box of gems, with a history rich in heroism, tragedy and despair, natural wonders of great beauty and a people who have endured such privations over the centuries, but whose hospitality is like no other that I have encountered'.

(Source: The Bradt Guide to Belarus, by Nigel Roberts)



Brest is in the South West of Belarus on the border with Poland. It is 165km (102 m) west of Pinsk and 220 km (137m) south of Grodno/Hrodna . Brest is a major city and administrative centre of the Brest province of Belarus. It is situated at the junction of the navigable river Mukhovets with the western Bug. Today it has a population of nearly 300,000. Brest is a major point of rail entry to Belarus from Poland and is a river port serving light industries.

History

The Bug River now divides Brest from neighboring Poland. Under the Czars, the town was in the heart of the Pale of Settlement, the area of Imperial Russia in which Jews were permitted to reside. Jews first arrived in the medieval town in the 14th century. At its peak, at the turn of the 20th century, Brest was almost seventy percent Jewish.

The discovered gravestones date from after 1830, when the old city of Brest was destroyed to make way for a massive fortress that serves as the modern city's main tourist attraction. The town was moved a mile to the east, and a new Jewish cemetery was founded on its outskirts.

Brest was a centre of Jewish thought and culture for centuries. Brisk is the Yiddish name for Brest-Litovsk, and Brest-Litovsk is the Russian name for Brest of Lithuania. In Russian documents it is also referred to as: Brestye or Berestov. The Jews from Brest called themselves Brisker. The Brisker Jews referred to themselves as Litvish - or Litvaks which means Lithuanians. Between 1386 to 1795 Brest existed as part of the The Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, formally known as the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Brisk had a great history and was home to many famous rabbis such as Solomon Luria and Joel Sirkes and three generations of the Soloveitchik Rabbinic dynasty . Jacob Epstein the great Talmudist at the Hebrew University, Menachem Begin, and many other major religious, literary and political leaders had roots in Brisk.

It has been said that 'Belarus is the birthplace of the State of Israel' (source: [Times of Israel](#)). The Jewish state of Israel's founding generation were born or had roots in Belarus: Shimon Peres was born in Vishnyeva, Minsk Region, Chaim Weizmann was born in Motal, Brest Region), Ariel Sharon's father, Shmuel Scheinerman, was born in Brest-Litovsk, Yitzhak Shamir was born in Ruzhany (Brest Region) Menachem Begin was born in Brest-Litovsk and Yitzhak Rabin's mother, Rosa Cohen, born in Mogilev. A monument in Begin's honor stands in Brest city centre, next to the Jewish school where he studied as a child. A major seat of Jewish learning, Brest was also the place where the Russians and Germans signed the treaty that took Russia

out of World War I, after the October Revolution. At that time, it was known as Brest-Litovsk. It was Polish from 1919-1939.

Brest fell under Nazi occupation at the outset of Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, in the summer of 1941. At the time, the city's population was just over half Jewish.

Six months later, on December 16, 1941 the Nazis established a Jewish ghetto in the city for approximately 18,000 Jews who still resided there even after months of deportations and ad hoc mass executions. Now, as prisoners of the ghetto, the Jews faced squalor, starvation and deprivation. On October 15th 1942 the ghetto was liquidated in a single day. The Jews were transported by train and murdered in the forests at [Bronna Gora](#). A census conducted by the German civil administration on October 15, 1942, showed that there were 16,934 Jews out of a total population of just over 41,091. However the census record for the very next day has the Jewish figure crossed out, illustrating the elimination of the Jewish community, and that there was no longer a Jewish population in Brest, with the new overall population figure being 24,162.

Miesiąc 194

STAŁYCH MIESZKAŃCÓW

Narodow.	Polska		Białorus.		Rosyjska		Ukraińsk.		Żydowsk.		Różne		Razem		Ogółem
	m.	k.	m.	k.	m.	k.	m.	k.	m.	k.	m.	k.	m.	k.	
Stan na dzień 15. X	15829		4709		2342		1169		16934		88				41091
Przybyło	2		3		4		1								
Ubyło	3		1				1								24162
Stan na dzień 16. X	15828		4708		2346		1169		16934		88				41091
Przybyło	1		1				2								
Ubyło	3		2		1										

The tragedy of the Jews was suppressed throughout the Soviet period and in the 1950's the cemetery land was deemed to be of greater value to the Soviet authorities as a sports facility and all traces of it ever being a

cemetery were eradicated. The cemetery was converted to a soccer stadium and running track and continues as such to the present day.



Proposed site for the new memorial

Outlines the area that was once the original Jewish cemetery



Aerial shot property of Google maps 2014, showing the area that was the original Jewish cemetery.

The Reclaimed Headstones Memorial Project

The establishment of a memorial at the site of the Brest-Litovsk Jewish cemetery is a long awaited and much needed vitally important heritage site.

Vision

- It will put the reclaimed headstones back onto the cemetery land where they belong.
- The memorial will be a place for quiet reflection and remembrance.
- The memorial will reconnect the isolated Jewish community to the Jewish diaspora and will act as a beacon to tell the world that there is a Jewish community in Brest today.

- It will be a tangible connection to the lost cemetery so that Jews around the world who have their roots in Brest, can reconnect with their heritage.
- It will act as a source of education, so that people can learn about the history of the Jews of Brest-Litovsk.
- It will empower the existing living Jewish community, giving them connection to and pride and ownership of a piece of Jewish history that needs to be preserved.

On 17th June 2021, a historic agreement was signed with the Brest Municipality giving The Together Plan's representative organisation in Belarus 'Dialog' exclusive rights to build a memorial which would incorporate the reclaimed headstones from the former Brest-Litovsk Jewish cemetery.

In the summer of 2021 every matzevah in our care was photographed and catalogued. We commissioned the Foundation for Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland to read every headstone and the English database is currently hosted on their website and can be found [here](#).





Articles that document the progress of the project can be found [here](#).

With thanks to the [Illuminate Foundation](#) in the USA, the Texas based artist [Brad Goldberg](#) was commissioned in 2022 and a stunning design has been created. Applications are now being filed in Brest for the project to move to the construction phase.

A fundraising campaign is now live to raise the balance of funds required to complete the project.

[Jewish Tapestry Project](#) is The Together Plan's affiliate non-profit 501(C)3 in the USA and is running the fundraising campaign for US donors. Link to the campaign [here](#).

To donate in the UK click [here](#).

Links to films and articles:

[Brest of My Memory 1930's to 60's](#). This is a website about a stunning book by Vladimir Gubenko - Brest of My Memory 1930's to 60's. The book was created from eye witness accounts.

Brest Memorial - [Signing the agreement](#) - June 2021

[The World of Brest \(Brisk\)](#) blog article about the religious world of Brest (Brisk)

Film of a historic meeting in Brest where it was agreed that The Together Plan would be the exclusive project managers to build a memorial at the site of the Brest-Litovsk Jewish Cemetery.

[Remembering the Brest-Litovsk Jewish Cemetery](#) - film made by The Together Plan in Feb 2020 just before the Covid pandemic.

Sam Webb (Shlomo Wabnick), born 1924 - life in pre-war BrestLitovsk. [Interview with Sam Webb](#) (age 96 in 2021) who escaped Brest-Litovsk in 1938 age 13. He now lives in Australia.

Sam Webb (Shlomo Wabnik) [A Journey Back](#) Sam Webb returns to Belarus after 82 years. Thanks to The Together Plan this was filmed for Belarusian State TV.

The Sunday Times '[Broken Tombstone Tribute to Lost Jews](#)'

The Jerusalem Report '[Saving the Remnants of Jewish Life in Brest](#)' - By Paula Slier

All Together Plan articles can be found [here](#)

For more information please contact:

The Together Plan UK click [here](#)

Jewish Tapestry Project USA click [here](#).