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Gazeta Krakow

Olkusz: Removed Jewish gravestones embedded into the school fence

By Katarzyna Ponikowska, November 3, 2015

On Tuesday, November 3, 15 fragments of gravestones, or Jewish tombstones were removed from the fence of the former high school in Olkusz. They were taken to the Jewish cemetery down the street.

Volunteers from the Foundation From the Depths took apart the ledge around the former high school on Pilsudski street in Olkusz, in order to extract from it the gravestones. The action took place in the framework of the national "Matzeva Project", which aims to save Jewish tombstones once used as building material.

"We were notified of a fence made of tombstones a few months ago by residents Olkusz, so we went to check it out. It turned out that many stolen Jewish tombstones made up the wall, so we removed them and transported them to the cemetery," says Lena Klaudel from the From the Depths Foundation. "Unfortunately we ran out of time to focus on the entire fence. Now our team came back with more tools. Within a few hours we excavated 15 pieces of gravestones. but not even the half of the wall was demolished. There are very many tombstones. We will have to go back again," says Lena. Another visit is planned, likely to take place later this year.

Ireneusz Cieślik, a resident of Olkusz and author of numerous publications on Jewish subjects was happy that someone finally took care of the wall. "We knew about it for a long time, but nobody cared," he said. "As it turns out, the whole courtyard behind the school, where they often held once school celebrations, is lined with tombstones. The text side is facing up, so everyone knew it was there. People celebrated on the tombstones of their neighbors. Sometimes you could read their names," adds Cieslik.

The school at Pilsudski street was built before the war. It used to be the only high school in Olkusz. During the war, around the years 1941 or 1942, Germans used Jewish tombstones to make the courtyard. In the '80s the courtyard was covered with asphalt. In the future, the Foundation also intends to take care of this place.

Today's action involved volunteers from Poland, Israel, and the United States. Among them are Jews and non-Jews. Chelsea Roston, an American student from Wellesley College, volunteered for the project. "We are very pleased that we can participate in this, our generation is the last that has a chance to meet with survivors of the Holocaust. It's important to do something for these people to preserve their memory after them," emphasizes the American.

"When someone dies, the only thing left behind is their name. When someone takes the name, there is nothing," says Jonny Daniels, the founder of the "Matzeva Project" and the From the Depths Foundation.

The "Matzeva Project" started one and a half years ago. Before the war, in Poland there were about 1,300 Jewish cemeteries. Most were destroyed, and tombstones from them were used by Germans and Poles as a building material over the years. The matzevas are now hidden in walls, buildings, and courtyards. The project aims once again have them see the light of day and go back to where they belong. "It's not just Jewish heritage, but the history of all of us" says Lena Kludel. It started from Warsaw, where a local journalist pointed out to people from the Foundation tombstones in Park John Szypowskiego, where walking paths were built with tombstones. Matzevas were excavated and transported to the cemetery in Brodno. When the Foundation publicized the project, they were notified about similar places all over Poland.

If anyone has any information on tombstones that can still be saved, you may contact the Foundation to indicate the place: info@matzeva.org or 501 183 871.