

End-of-Year Report 2025*

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund

Prepared by Dr. Heidi Szpek, Josh and Amy Degen, Dr. Andrzej Rusewicz

In 2025, the *Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund (BCRF)* continued its dedicated efforts at the Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery in Bialystok, Poland, with a strong focus on both the physical restoration of tombstones and significant progress in digital documentation, memorial planning and improvement to the cemetery's infrastructure.

Key Achievements in 2025

- **Funding:** thanks to the extraordinary fundraising of Amy and Josh Degen funds were raised to support the general operating expenses for the 2025 restoration season, and the restoration of a yearly specially-targeted full restoration of a unique historic matzevah. The Degen's fundraising will also enable the BCRF to begin coordinating the restoration of the *ohel* for Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern.
- **Tombstone Documentation:** A major effort in the winter of 2024-2025 involved reviewing and revising the existing cemetery records. In May 2025, an updated master database was uploaded to the [BCRF website](#) and the JewishGen Online Worldwide Burial Registry (JOWBR) with a total of 4,455 documented records. The 2025 field season (which took place in August) rechecked hundreds of epitaphs for incomplete or previously illegible vital details, as well as documenting 536 newly lifted matzevoth, bringing the in-progress database for 2025-2026 to over 5,000 entries. This data was added to the database and submitted in November 2025 to JOWBR with volunteer Ken Arbit taking the lead. This year's incredible data gathering was only made possible because of three documentation teams onsite, coordinated by Ken Arbit, and one offsite with Dr. Szpek, with photographing by BCRF Bialystok board member, Andrzej Rusewicz, and volunteer Art Haberman.
- **Physical Restoration:** The city of Bialystok's clearing of three additional wooded sections in the north area of the cemetery enabled volunteers to access and uncover *matzevoth* (tombstones) that were previously hidden by thick growth. This preparatory work facilitated the uncovering and lifting of many more stones during the field season.



Josh Degen and local crane crew work in the newly cleared sections.

- **Specialized Conservation:** The BCRF funded specialized conservation work on what is affectionately named the “Malka Synagogue” *matzevah* from November 2024 through May 2025, including microchemical analysis to ensure proper preservation. Work was performed again by Warsaw conservator, Bartosz Markowski. Research by Dr. Heidi Szpek, the late Frank Idzikowski, Yiddish translator, Beate Schützmann-Krebs with Russian archive translation assistance from Joanna Czaban, which revealed that the unique symbol of a *beth midrash* on Malka’s *matzevah* was because Malka and her husband had donated their home to serve as a house of study.



Matzevah of Malka Poznyak. Her epitaph reads:
“Truth. Honored is her resting place. Behold, it was a bitter day. I will always remember how she died suddenly, a tough-spirited woman and a widow. She stretched out her palms to the needy and her hands to the poor. The saintly woman, a woman of valor, Malka, daughter of Reb Shmuel, who died on 12 Elul 5660 [August 24, 1900]. May her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.”

- **Memorial Planning Progress:** Plans for the new memorial in Central Park (the site of the former Rabbinic Cemetery) continued to advance, with the goal of using recovered *matzevoth* fragments and reinterring the human remains found in a dump site years prior. This memorial, designed in cooperation with Dr. Jerzy Uscinowicz, professor and architect from the Bialystok University of Technology, is a key component of the project's mission to restore dignity to the victims.



Memorial design by Dr. Uscinowicz

- **Infrastructure:** The highlight of this year's improvement to the cemetery's infrastructure was the complete rebuilding of the cemetery's walls on the southern and western borders. Funded by the City of Bialystok, work began in July 2025 and was completed in December 2025. New wrought-iron gates at both entrances were funded by the Nissenbaum Foundation in Warsaw thanks to the initiative of Amy Halpern Degen. Installation of the new walls also revealed the foundations of the cemetery's burial house just inside the main entrance at left, confirming our [research](#). A visitor's center or welcome patio is planned pending funding.



- Volunteers:** This year nearly 20 volunteers from the US, Israel and Germany travelled to Bialystok to participate in restoration efforts, including five students from Suffolk University in Boston, MA. Volunteers Charlie Cohn and his wife, Leslie Sutcliffe-Cohn, who participated in the 2023 restoration season, returned with their niece, Rabbi Shoshana Tornberg, who held a Shabbath service at the Jewish Museum in Bialystok.



Andrzej Rusewicz, Andrzej Kondej and Josh Degen with crane crew.



(Left) Second-time volunteers Charlie Cohn and Leslie Sutcliffe-Cohn with niece, Rabbi Shoshana Tornberg at ancestral gravesite. (Right) Brother and sister, Ken and Deborah Arbit, documentation crew, discover the gravesites of their great-grandfather and great-grandmother.



Rabbi Shoshana Tornberg officiates at Shabbath Service at the Jewish Museum to a full house.



(Left:) BCRF Amy Halpern Degen (bottom right) with women volunteers. (Bottom:) Suffolk University students at the cemetery.





Capstone visit at the cemetery with Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich (2nd left) and BCRF Dr. Andrzej Rusewicz (left), BCRF Amy Halpern Degen, Prof. Dr. Uscinowicz, and BCR Josh Degen.

Mission

The BCRF's work is driven by a mission to "right a wrong" by restoring the dignity of the Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery, which was largely destroyed after World War II under communist rule. Their work ensures that the stories and lives of the people buried there are not forgotten. This year's efforts reaffirms the mission of this US non-profit organization.

*This year's report was initially generated by AI via Google, which was then adapted by Dr. Szpek in consultation with Josh and Amy Degen, and Dr. Rusewicz.