

The Legacy of the Jewish Community of Serock

By Helen Albert

A heartfelt thank you to the citizens of Serock, to Miroslaw Pakula for all his astounding efforts, and to Mayor Artur Burkowski for his wonderful leadership. I hope to return to Serock soon to see these accomplishments in person.

My mother, Doba Drezner, was born here in 1932. Her father, a teacher and blacksmith, her mother, a small shop owner, and her brother lived on Ulica Warszawska. Her family's roots were firmly embedded in the community. In September of 1939, the Germans invaded and announced that all Jews come to the main square. My mother remembered the fear. After that, life for them in Serock was never the same. Her father was immediately imprisoned and expelled.

Word soon spread that the Nazis were coming house to house. My mother and her family then ran to the very cemetery you are in today. In the dark, they hid in the frigid cold and escaped to Legionowo. My mother was 7 years old. By the end of the war, my mother had not only escaped from cemeteries, but also from two ghettos including, at the age of 9, through the sewers under the wall surrounding the Warsaw Ghetto. Her father perished in Treblinka and her mother and brother were killed in the Legionowo Ghetto. In 1942, she wandered the nearby countryside and was eventually taken in by poor but compassionate farmers. Later in life, she put them in for the designation of Righteous Among the Nations for their acts of courage and mercy. Of the 1,000,000 Jewish children in Poland merely 5,000 survived who were still in the country. My mother was put into an orphanage in Czestochowa and immigrated to America to live with her uncles also from Serock.

In New York, my mother met my father who had survived the Rzeszow Ghetto, five concentration camps and was liberated by the U.S. Army on a death march to Dachau. Both my parents, despite having been the victims of immense violence and animosity, were individuals of benevolence and charity. Theirs was not a legacy of bitterness. They chose, despite all of the horrors foisted on them in the beginning of their lives, to believe in the best of humanity.

My mother remembered well her grandmother Leah's burial in this cemetery in early 1939 - probably one of the last funerals before the invasion. In 2014, my mother returned to Serock. She came for a ceremony dedicating the granite lapidarium you see before you that my daughter Hannah helped to build. It was a difficult journey. My mother was returning to the town that she was born in, to the cemetery that was destroyed and that her family was buried in, and to the place that she hid the night the Nazis pounded on her door.

My mother sat in front of the memorial waiting for the speeches. First came the U.S. Ambassador, then the Vice President of Bank Polski, and then Rabbi Shudrich. Next the U.S. Commissioner who headed up the delegation. Then came my daughter Hannah. She looked to my mother for inspiration and then began by thanking in great measure the town of Serock. She ended by repeating the deeply felt words her grandmother had written for a long-ago speech, "Remembering alone is frightening but remembering with others is healing." My mother passed away a few years after that ceremony.

But if I have to leave you with one thought as a family born of this hamlet - the legacy of the Jewish community of Serock, once half the town, is not one of death and despair – it is of resiliency and optimism. Those former citizens have cast a wide net in service to the greater good despite earlier circumstances. Descendants of those who left before, and who survived, the war, have left their mark on the world in important ways. One became a U.S. Congressman representing part of NYC. In just my family, I have been the acting head of two federal departments in Washington, D.C. as an Inspector General, my brother is a professor at Columbia University, many of my cousins are physicians saving lives including in the most recent pandemic, and cousins in Buenos Aires are well-known professors in the field of chemistry. Others are engaged in teaching and the arts or are executives of major businesses.

In Judaism, burial grounds are sacred sites and must remain undisturbed in perpetuity. Through the unveiling of a headstone, the memory of a person's life is etched permanently into the collective memory of the community. During the Holocaust, all of these acts were carried out in an attempt to erase Jewish culture. It was not only a genocide of a people but also an attempt to erase any vestiges of centuries of Jewish existence in eastern Europe.

There are also two important concepts in the faith. One is called a "mitzvah" or what is commonly translated as "doing a good deed." For example, it is a mitzvah to leave a small stone on a grave. This is a sign to others that someone has visited and are fitting symbols of the lasting presence of the deceased's life. Another is called "tikkun olam." It refers to noble action intended to repair the world by participating in justice or righteousness or acts of loving kindness. It shows that we all have an obligation to each other and have a stake in the improvement of our surroundings. Today is a real 'tikkun olam' in the making. Jewish cemeteries in a once thriving, but now mostly gone, Jewish sector of Polish life now have defenders and caretakers.

You, in the towns where these lives once lived, are now the guardians of memory so that your history is accurately portrayed and not erased. But it is more than just a remembrance. You have, by your actions today, brought your former citizens back. When my daughter made her speech that day in front of her grandmother born here, she quoted from a famous author, "they say you die twice – once when you breathe your last breath and, then again later, when your name is spoken for the very last time." Thank you to the citizens of Serock for keeping

alive their names in your minds by bringing back a memory of the people who can no longer speak.

When families gather together to honor their loved ones at the grave, it is a tradition to recite from the Book of Psalms. As you stand here in commemoration and remembrance, my family and I leave you with these words and a great representation of your actions today:

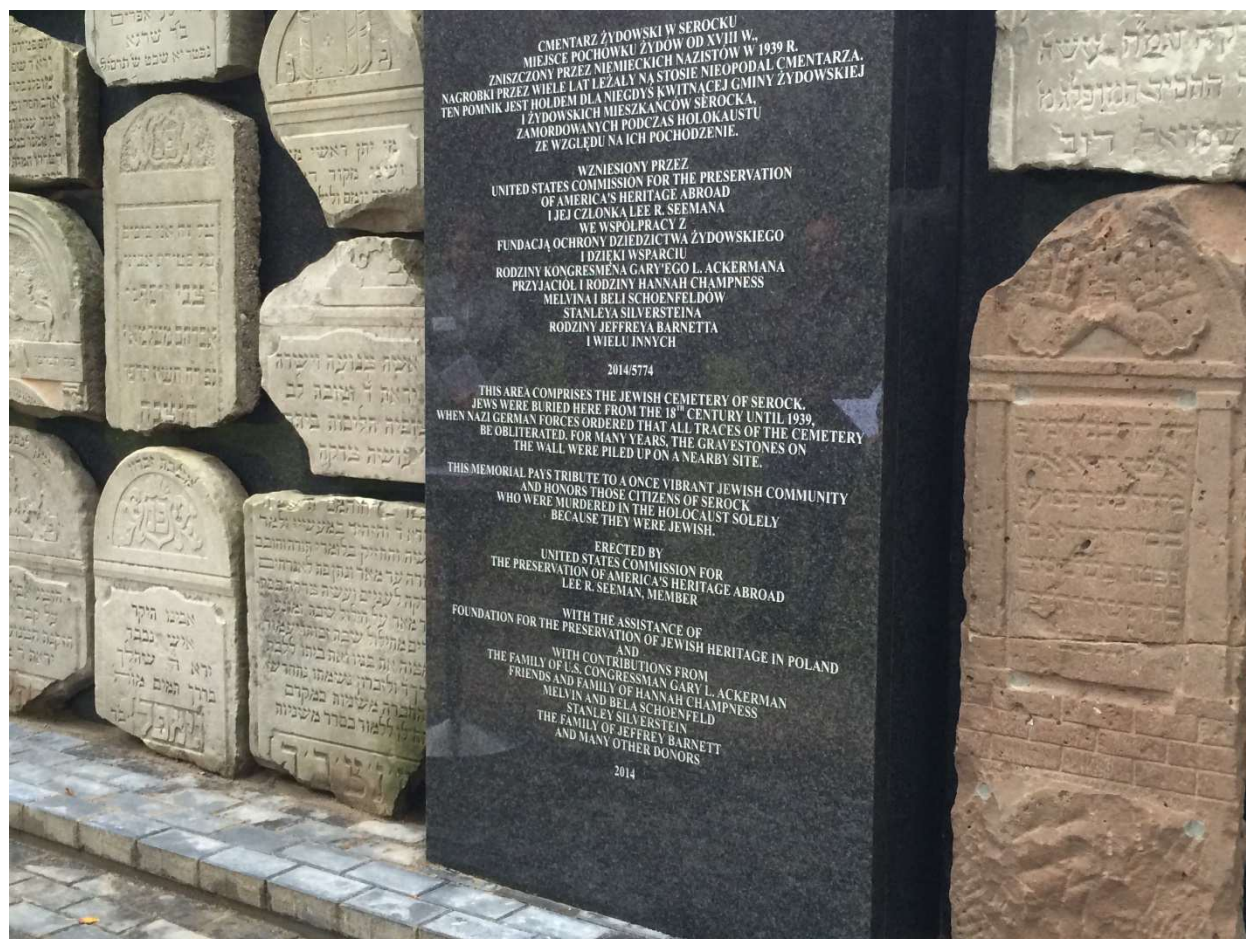
Psalm 71:20

"You have allowed me to suffer much hardships
But you will restore me again
And lift me up from the depths of the earth
You will restore me to great honor
And comfort me once again"

Hannah, myself, my brother David, and my mother went to Poland for the ceremony in 2014 (my mother's first return since leaving in 1949 as an orphan after having survived the Warsaw Ghetto). Hannah's bat mitzvah was in October 2011, fundraising completed the next year, and then construction of the lapidarium began (with tombstones that had been located earlier over the years and brought to the grounds).



A good portion of Hannah's fundraising came from TRS members contributions as part of her community requirement.



The cemetery fell into disrepair after transfer to the Jewish Committee in Warsaw (from the private owner Bank Polski who used the desecrated blank field as a park retreat for their employees) who could not take care of the more than 1,000 cemeteries transferred into its care. During Covid, local high school students spent many days and cleaned it up.



The town of Serock then petitioned for ownership from the Jewish Committee in 2021 and applied for local government grants to begin an effort to rebuild and create a defined cemetery.



The Nazis desecrated the cemetery during WWII and used tombstones (matzevah) to build roads and staircases. Much of the town was destroyed in the war by the Germans and Soviets in 1944 and tombstones, during the communist period, were also used as building materials. As part of this restoration effort, the town started an effort to reclaim all the matzevah embedded from all over the town. Here workers, who had been hired, are unearthing the tombstones used for a staircase to the river from the cemetery (hence why so many survived intact and unbroken).



Here is some of the finished work prior to the rededication ceremony in 2023. Bank Polski paid for a fence to encircle the perimeter of the cemetery.





Here is the cemetery recently in the autumn of 2025. The town maintains the grounds and hosts visitors who come from all over the world – some descendants of those from the town and some from other municipalities to see how to replicate an effort within their towns and cities. You can see the river in the distance. Today the town hosts a number of hotels along the river and is a resort destination for Poles who come to sail at the confluence of the Narew and Bug rivers. It is about about 45 minutes north of Warsaw in the Masovian region and neighbors the Radziwill Palace in Gmina Serock.

