

# Who is Miriam, daughter of Yehuda?

**Just a dozen days ago, no one expected such discoveries. Human remains were also found in the mound between the tombstones.** August 23, 2022.

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On a hot August day, over the Jewish cemetery on ul. Wschodnia in Białystok carries the melodious voice of Rabbi Yitzhak Rapaport, singing psalms and reciting prayers. The burial is attended by a group of about a dozen people - members of the *The Białystok Cemetery Restoration Fund*, representatives of the Jewish religious community in Warsaw, volunteers, Białystok residents. It's a moving moment.

Found over the past week, bones dug up on the hill adjacent to the cemetery on Boya-Żeleńskiego Street, were deposited in paper bags. Filip Szczepański - a representative of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries on behalf of the Warsaw Jewish Religious Community, together with Rabbi Yitzhak Rapaport wrap the bags in thick white canvas. And holding them in their arms, they gently carry them to a grave dug in the cemetery on Ul. Wschodnia.

- Anyone can honor the dead and help bury them," says the rabbi and hands over a shovel to those willing to do so. When the grave is covered, prayers are said. Josh Degen of the *Cemetery Restoration Foundation* and Andrzej Rusewicz of the *Social Museum of Białystok Jews* lay a stone boulder found on the ground a few hundred meters away, already behind the cemetery fence, on the aforementioned hill. The stone comes from the same place where last week both bones and over 120 gravestones from the early 19th Century.

- We did what in all this is most important - we buried human remains, giving them the respect they deserve - says Filip Szczepański, who, on the orders of Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich checked whether, during the excavation of the matzevot, the excavator would not come across on human bones. In the end, it did. The bones, found in recent days have been waiting for the moment of dignified burial probably several decades - as there are many indications that the bones were mixed in the mound together with the matzevot, brought in the 60s-70s to the vicinity of the Bagnówka cemetery from a completely different necropolis. The matzevot were abandoned on today's Boya-Żeleńskiego St, they were backfilled with earth, creating an artificial mound, around which a settlement of single-family houses quickly began to grow. According to sources, the dug mound, although already outside the current fence, is within the historical boundaries of the cemetery.

## Link with the Rabbinic Cemetery

Are they walking from another place? This is told by inscriptions found on them: the oldest matzeva found on the hill comes from 1809, so it is older than the cemetery Jewish cemetery established here ca. 1890 by almost 80 years! So, if by virtue of age they do not belong to the Jewish cemetery on Ul. Wschodnia, where and when were they moved here?

- The oldest dated tombstones suggest that the matzevot belong to the cemetery of the rabbinical cemetery, buried several decades years ago in the center of the city, where today stretches the large Central Park [on Kalinowskiego Street - ed.]. It was this cemetery that was the only functioning Jewish cemetery at the time - from which the tombstones come. It was active from 1760 until 1890, That is, until the cemetery was established on Wschodnia Street was established. According to sources, the matzevot were cleared in the 1960s. The sources say that the matzevot were removed in the 1960s

and transported to a new area, and then covered with soil, to hide their presence," says Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski, professor emeritus of religious studies at Central Washington University's Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies and a specialist in Hebrew inscriptions. For almost two weeks after a pandemic three-year hiatus, Prof. Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski has again been working at the Bialystok Jewish cemetery on Wschodnia Street along with American and Polish members of the Cemetery Restoration Foundation (*Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund*). The two American couples have been involved for years in the restoration work at the Bialystok cemetery: Joshua and Amy Halpern Degen and Prof. Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski and Frank Idzikowski. Restoration work (as part of the next stage of the program carried out for more than a dozen years in cooperation with the Center for Civic Education Civic Education Center Poland-Israel and the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw) were due to be completed as early as the beginning of last week. The Americans were planning to return to the United States. They just wanted to see what was hidden in the green hill about 3 meters high and measuring about 75 m by 25 m. The hillock is already located outside the fence of the Jewish cemetery, but within its historical boundaries - a dozen meters or so from the fence, on the Boya-Żeleńskiego Street side. They had been waiting for permission for a long time, when a few years ago, while walking near the hill they found a stone with Hebrew inscriptions.

### **120 Matzevoth in 6 Days**

Finally, the approvals came - members of the of the foundation got permission to explore the site from Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich and from President Tadeusz Truskolaski. So, they decided to dig up the hill even before they left. And suddenly all premonitions became fact. It only took a few moves with the shovel to come across the first gravestone, immediately followed by another. When a week ago Joshua Degen, a stonemason by passion and profession, began to remove the top layers of soil with a specialized excavator - literally within two hours more than a dozen tombstones. By noon - more than 30, a week later there were already 120. Already on the first day, after digging up only a few meters of earth, the American enthusiasts knew, that they had to change the date of their return.

- So many unusual, improbable things were happening! Just two weeks ago, if someone had told us that we would find the matzevoth, that the mountain would hide so many secrets - we would have said he was crazy," says Amy Degen.

Already after cleaning the first few slabs, Prof. Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski placed on them the dates of the burials: 1820, 1831, 1851 - it became clear that the discovery was much more unusual than it would seem. The historical value of the found of the tombstones from 1809-1851 is indisputable. Also electrifying is the already-confirmed information about the origin of the found tombstones: for it allows, at least ,a little to fill the black hole in the dark period of Bialystok's postwar history. It has finally been known for many years that the destroyed during World War II Rabbinical cemetery (on Kalinowskiego Street) was devastated in the following years - it was probably carted away with rubble from the liquidated Chanajki district, covering up what was left of the necropolis after the war damage. Communist decision-makers in the 1960s and 1970s also disrespected the dead - the cemetery and human remains were covered and human remains with earth, and on the occasion of the 1973 Central Harvest Festival, a park was created in its place. In recent years, more is known about the buried necropolis, but even now many walkers don't have any idea that they are walking through the former Jewish cemetery, where, among others, rabbis were buried (in 1789, among others, Rabbi Kalman was laid to rest here) or wealthy merchants (such as wealthy philanthropist Isaac Zabłudovsky, who died in 1865). By 2007, less than two tombstones had survived, including one with a legible inscription, which was moved to the cemetery on Wschodnia Street.

What happened to the rest of the matzevot from the 18th and 19th Century? Some, if not stolen, rest deep underground mixed with the remains of Bialystok's Jews. And some - as the historical find indicates - were taken away to another location.

(Photo: In the mound between the tombstones, human remains, which last Tuesday were placed in a symbolic grave at the Wschodnia Street Cemetery.)

### **Every day brought discoveries.**

The unearthed matzevot are most often simple gravestones, typically Ashkenazi, made of field stones, with ascetically carved inscriptions, informing in Hebrew about the name of the deceased, the name of his father, the date of death. Plant ornaments can be seen on some. As, for example, on a matzevah found as one of the first from 1831, commemorating a of a man named Cwi (Tzvi). At the top and bottom, the stone slab is decorated with a simple flower with softly-rounded petals. - Tzvi is a male name that also means the word "deer" in Hebrew. It may sound unbelievable, but a few days earlier, as soon as we arrived, in the Jewish cemetery among the tombstones we saw a deer! Pure magic! It must have been a sign... Who would have expected that a week later we would find not far away a matzevah of a deceased named Tzvi. And such an old matzeva! - said Heidi to us a few days ago.

Meanwhile, every subsequent day brought more discoveries and even older tombstones: from 1818, from 1809... It is not known who were the dead whose tombstones commemorate, but one thing is known: they most likely remembered such ancient times, when the Bialystok was still ruled by Countess Izabela Branicka, née Poniatowska (who died in Bialystok in 1808).

Joshua Degen tirelessly unearthed more matzevot, while Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski circulated among them, reading out successive details, such as the names of fathers and dates of death. And she took notes: - Feja daughter of Jehiel d. 1841; Josef of Tiktin (Tykocin), d. 1848; Bash, son of Kalonymus Kalman, d. 1839; Tova, daughter of Isaiah, d. 1848; Beyla, daughter of Baruch, d. 1830; Pesach, son of Dov Ber, d. 1830; Gitl, daughter of Ari Hirsh, d. 1851; Ester Frejda, daughter of Yosef Halevi, d. 1851; Rivke, daughter of Isaiah Hacoheh, d. 1839; Chaya Riba, daughter of Yosef, d. 1838; Fruma, daughter of Yitzchak, d. 1838; Chana, daughter of Shlomo Zalman, d. 1834;.... And dozens of others.

### **Who was Miriam, daughter of Jehuda from Orla?**

Just before the end of the work, Joshua Degen unearthed a matzevan more than twice the size of the others. Prof. Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski: - After cleaning this granite stele more than 2 meters large, we saw an amazing inscription, unlike any of the previously excavated tombstones style boulders. The inscription reads:

"Here lies  
a woman of valor ... /  
In the gates her deeds [will be praised]. This  
is / none other than Miriam, daughter of the prodigal, [---], a God-fearing /  
Rabbi, our teacher, our rabbi, Yehuda:  
From the holy community of Orla.  
She had no children [---].  
Her spirit returned to God on Wednesday evening, 26 Nisan 5600 [March 26, 1840]./.

May her soul be bound with the bonds of  
of eternal life./

[---] her? is among the dead with the rest of your people, Israel.  
Amen.

- The biblical references to Proverbs 31 and Isaiah are unmistakable. Exciting  
there are also several rabbinic-style notations.

Who exactly is this Miriam, daughter of Yehuda of Orla? Another mystery to be discovered!

- excites Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski.

She also points out that in addition to mentioning the town of Orla, enthusiasts found a reference to Tykocin (Yosef of Tikin/Tykocin) on another matzevah. - And this shows that the history of this cemetery reaches far beyond Bialystok itself," says prof. Heidi Szpek-Idzikowski. She also emphasizes, that many matzevot are united by interesting floral ornaments reminiscent of cornflowers. And that only one of the matzevot found was placed with a name - Halpern, otherwise the same as the name of Rabbi Chaim Herz Halpern placed on the ohel in the cemetery on Wschodnia Street.

### **MACEVES ARE the PROPERTY of the Dead**

Last Tuesday, during a press conference held at the hill, where the matzevot were found, Deputy Mayor of Bialystok Rafal Rudnicki thanked representatives of the Cemetery Renovation Foundation for the toil and effort they have been putting into the restoration of the cemetery on Wschodnia Street for years.

- They have been encouraging for a long time to take care of the hill near the cemetery.

Finally, thanks to the cooperation of Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich and Bialystok Mayor Tadeusz Truskolaski, all approvals were granted. Works near the cemetery on Wschodnia Street were conducted in full agreement and cooperation with us," said Deputy Mayor Rudnicki. - For the time being, the matzevot will go to the cemetery on Wschodnia Street, but we will look for a solution to return them to their place, i.e. the area of the current Central Park. We will try to find a suitable space there and a way to expose the matzevot. Tradition dictates that the matzevot should be returned to their original place, but this does not, however, this does not mean that we have to restore this place in its entirety, the commemoration can have, for example, a modernist form. We will most likely organize a competition to creating a memorial site. We want to agree on the form with representatives of the Jewish community. I don't want to talk about specific dates, because first we have to secure funds in the budget, but we will try to bring about the creation of the memorial as soon as possible," Rudnicki said. - We are committed to bringing another piece of Bialystok's multicultural past back to memory. This, such as the Evangelical cemetery in the Sienna Market area, where we have made a decision, controversial to some, to turn off the site of the former cemetery, used for years as a parking lot, to deactivate it and create a worthy memorial to multicultural Bialystok.

Filip Szczepański stressed: - Matzevot are the property of the dead, they should never leave the cemetery. Thus, what happened during the communist years, was therefore something against tradition. Now time has come, however, that we can put it right. We certainly can't put back in rows - in the Jewish tradition we cannot give a false witness. The only thing that remains is a form of lapidary. Thank you for your willingness to cooperate, so we will look for a solution together. We have temporarily provided the matzevot with respect and security at the cemetery on Wschodnia," Szczepański said.

And he added: - I thank the authorities of Bialystok for their good will, their awareness of the fact, That respect for history is important. It is therefore important to rectify what happened - both in terms of matzevot and human remains. We are already outside the fence, but within the historical boundaries of the cemetery, which was partially built over during the communist era. It turned out that information that there might there could be remains here, bone fragments - was confirmed - we found mixed fragments of human bones in the ground. My task was to secure them and bury them respectfully in the fenced part of the cemetery.

Joshua Degen of the *Restoration Foundation Cemetery*: - We are working here to right a wrong. Our goal is to right all the terrible things that happened from the Communists and Nazis," Degen said. - I want to thank everyone we met on our way for any expressions of kindness. From the moment we started our work - we met exclusively with kindness. I would like to thank the city government for the relationship we have developed, which we would like to maintain. I want to thank the volunteers who helped us, Filip Szczepański, who worked here with us worked hard, Lucy Lisowska from the Center for Civic Education and many other good people, thanks to whom we are now where we are. It's not that what we're talking about is exclusively Jewish history, the history of the Jewish residents of Bialystok, such as the ancestors of my wife, who were burned in a Bialystok synagogue. It is the history of all the residents of Bialystok. And it should be important for all of us to commemorate it. On behalf of the Chief Rabbi of Poland, the authorities of Bialystok and members of the Cemetery Restoration Foundation were also thanked by Rabbi Yitzhak Rapaport: - I would like to thank you for cooperation and kindness. Together we can do more.

### **THE CEMETERY MAY BE AVAILABLE**

During the press conference, there was also an assurance that the cemetery on Wschodnia Street will soon be more accessible for visitors (currently the gate is locked).

- In the spring-summer season, but also in autumn, we would like the gate to be open six days a week so that visitors could see the cemetery. We need to think about the form of access to the cemetery, think about securing the necropolis," promised the imminent opening of the of the cemetery by Deputy Mayor Rafal Rudnicki. - It is so worth it that more tourists and residents can see it, the Bialystok cemetery is one of the largest and better preserved in Poland. As for the place where we are now [on the dug-up hill where the matzevot were found - ed,] we would like, as suggested, to create a pocket park here.

### **AMERICANS IN BIALYSTOK**

Over the past several years, American enthusiasts at the Wschodnia cemetery have worked with dedication already many times. They clean the matzevot, raise the tombstones, restore the inscriptions. This result of many years of cooperation between the Center for Poland-Israel Civic Education Center, as well as the Cemetery Renovation Foundation and the Jewish Religious Community of in Warsaw. After many efforts, volunteer work and restoration of the matzevot, the cemetery on Wschodnia Street already looks completely different than it was a dozen years ago.

- We started almost two decades ago," says Lucy Lisowska, who heads the of the Poland-Israel Center for Civic Education in Bialystok, who initiated the idea of cleaning the tombstones. Students from the US, Israel and Europe started coming to Bialystok to volunteer. In 2010 Lucy Lisowska was contacted by the German organization Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste (ASF), wanting to establish cooperation. As it turned out - fruitfully: between 2010 and 2015, the ASF organized at the Bagnówka several summer restoration camps. The following year, the camp together with the CEO had already been organized by

an American couple from Massachusetts: Amy Halpern Degen, who lost relatives in the Great Synagogue fire in Bialystok in June 1941, and Josh Degen, who is not only an expert stonemason, but also operates mechanized equipment, so that new techniques could be used to speed up the process of renovating the technique. For the past 12 years, Prof. Heidi Szpek, professor emeritus of Central Washington University, has also been working with the Center for Civic Education. She comes to the cemetery together with her husband Frank Idzikowski. In 2013, she joined activities initiated by the ASF organization, and in 2016, together with the Degen couple, took up the efforts they initiated, translating, and analyzing tombstone inscriptions and reconstructing the history of Bagnówka. Prof. Heidi Szpek has a true passion for the Bialystok Jewish cemetery. She has even written a book about it: "Bagnowka: A Modern Jewish Cemetery on the Russia Pale." We owe a lot to her, she sorted out a lot of issues for us when it comes to inscriptions and the history of the matzevot. Since many years in this matter Heidi has been our guide, thanks to her we are moving further and further. She has revealed to us many things about the cemetery, of which we were not aware. It was she, for example, said that there are rows here where lie only women," says Lucy Lisowska. - I am also tremendously pleased with the cooperation with Joshua and Amy Degen. They have done a tremendous amount of extraordinary work. Before, we tried to do as much as possible, but we also didn't have professionals like Joshua, for example. Anyway, the last few years have been a period of very good cooperation - also with the authorities of Bialystok. Previously, we knocked on various doors and usually they were closed. From the current Mayor and his deputies, we really received a lot of help. For which we thank you very much. +

- More information about the activities of American and Polish enthusiasts from the Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund, search on [www.bialystokcemeteryrestoration.org](http://www.bialystokcemeteryrestoration.org)