

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project

Bialystok, Poland

Implemented by

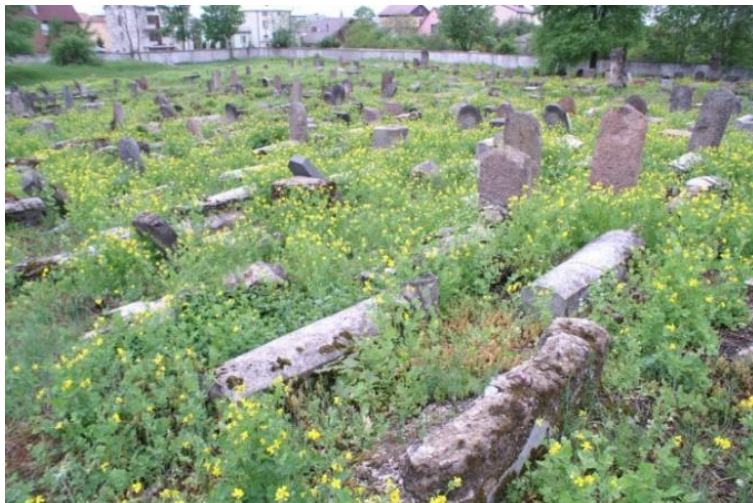
Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund, 2024

www.bialystokcemeteryrestoration.org

Prepared by Dr. Heidi M. Szpek, Vice-Chair,
Translator, Historian (www.jewishepitaphs.org)



Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery, Bialystok, Poland, 2019 (above) and 2007 (below)



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Executive Summary

This prospectus details the vision of the Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund's project (BCRF) to restore the dignity of Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery in Bialystok, Poland, and makes this pre-eminent Jewish heritage site a living museum that will both preserve the memory of Jewish Bialystok and foster respect for Jewish tradition in Poland and Eastern Europe.

Founded about 1890, Bagnowka was the last Jewish cemetery established for the Jewish community of Bialystok. Devastation occurred in the immediate post-WWII years with neglect, vandalism and misuse of the cemetery grounds continuing until the mid-2000s. Today, about 5000-6000 tombstones are extant; nearly 4000 have been documented. Of these, nearly 2000 have been restored by the BCRF from 2016 to 2022.

Prior to our August 2022 work, this prospectus sought support for several immediate needs, which included: (1) an adequate water supply required for restoration work; (2) grass-cutting prior to each restoration season and grass maintenance; (3) cutting and clearing of the remaining woods on this cemetery; and (4) open access to the cemetery with posted days and hours. We are pleased to announce that these immediate needs have been coordinated with the City of Bialystok during our 2022 meeting with Vice-President Rafał Rudnicki of Bialystok.

In 2023, nearly 400 tombstones were reset, cleaned and documented during August Summercamp worked. One monumental restoration project was completed: the full restoration of the Memorial Pillar that remembers victims of the 1906 Pogrom and two 1905 massacres. Stone conservation specialist, Bartosz Markowski (Warsaw) transferred the pillar in June to his workshop outside of Warsaw, with work completed and the pillar reset in November 2023.

While the BCRF will commence resetting and restoring tombstones in 2024, in the SE quadrant of the cemetery and in sections now covered with woods once cleared, the following *long-range projects* are critical to restoring key features on this cemetery; (1) restoration of Rabbi Halpern's *ohel* (mausoleum), including a new tombstone with his inscription; (2) creation of a symbolic *ohel* on the former burial site of Rabbi Szmuel Mohilewer, including a symbolic tombstone with his inscription; and (3) repair of the cemetery's walls to accommodate new entrance gates as well as replacing damaged fencing units along the cemetery's eastern border. The following pages provide historical and current photos for these projects as well as artistic renderings of each restoration. *Future project visions* include a memorial wall (lapidarium) for this cemetery's orphan fragments as well as such functional components as directional and informational signage, QR Codes and security equipment. Future plans also include a small visitor's center/museum on the site of the former burial/caretaker's house on Bagnowka.

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It is critical to note in this prospectus that many of the BCRF's planned projects parallel the suggestions reported by Bialystok Commissioner Barbara Tomacka in her 1985 report *Cmentarz Żydowski: Studium historyczne opracowane na zlecenie Rejonowego Przedsiębiorstwa Gospodarki Komunalnej w Białymstoku*, 1985.

This prospectus also includes repayment of funds borrowed from the BCRF general fund to defray the unexpected costs of extraction of 124 matzevoth from a mound on the unused land of Bagnowka Cemetery in August 2022. In 2023, 20 additional matzevoth were extracted from a mound in Bialystok's Central Park. These matzevoth were removed from the Rabbinic Cemetery located near the city center, the current site of Central Park, in the early 1960s under Communism. The matzevoth from the Bagnowka mound are currently stored in Bagnowka Cemetery and those from the Central Park mound are on display near the mound with plans to develop a memorial on the Rabbinic Cemetery in cooperation with the City of Bialystok, Dr. Jerzy Uścińowicz, Professor of Architecture, Bialystok University of Technology, and the BCRF. Phase I (of III) begins in 2025.

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project Board of Directors

Josh Degen, Chairman, Founding Officer

Amy Degen, Treasurer, Clerk, Founding Officer

Heidi M. Szpek, Ph.D., Vice-Chair, Translator, Historian, Webmaster

Andrzej Rusewicz, Ph.D. Bialystok Logistics Coordinator



BJCP Summercamp 2018



BCRP Summer 2022

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project

KOMISJA RABINICZNA DO SPRAW CMENTARZY

ul. Twarda 6
00-950 Warszawa
tel. 22 526 54 59

December 31, 2019

To whom it may concern,

The Rabbinic Commission for Cemeteries in Poland (RCC) supports the work of the Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund in the Bagnowka cemetery in Bialystok (BCR). Their goals and methodology are both in line with that of the RCC. They have demonstrated their dedication to respecting Jewish law in principle and practice in their selfless work to preserve, protect and restore the Bagnowka cemetery. Their methods combine the use of the most advanced technology with rabbinic oversight and boundless compassion. They are lovingly rescuing Jewish memory from oblivion and restoring dignity to the resting place of our forefathers.

Members of the Rabbinic Commission have visited the group while working at the cemetery on numerous occasions. We observed their methods, materials and use of machinery. It was all found to be in compliance with Jewish law. Whether it is something as complex as a mechanized excavator or as simple as gold paint, the BCR is exacting in the use of their tools and precise in their application. The BCR is in close contact with the RCC in terms of goals, planning and methodology. They are constantly researching new methods for their work and consult the RCC regarding these technologies to make sure that they comply with our tradition.

Cemetery restoration is challenging work, requiring patience, expertise and vision. The Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund in the Bagnowka cemetery in Bialystok consistently demonstrates it has these qualities and more. Their dedicated work in the Bagnowka cemetery is saving the cemetery from destruction and beautifying the city of Bialystok.

Please extend any help within your expertise to aid the BCRF in their holy work. If you have any concerns or questions please contact the Rabbinic Commission for Cemeteries or me directly at jeellis@gmail.com.

Rabbi Yeshoua Ellis

Director of Rabbinic Commission
for Cemeteries in Poland



Rabbi Michael Schudrich

Chief Rabbi of Poland

1. Capital Campaign 2024-25: The Mound Matzevoth Memorial, Cost \$50,000 USD

In August 2022, 123 boulder-style and one megalithic granite stele were extracted from a mound, located on Boya-Zelenskiego Street, on the unused land that belongs to Bagnowka Cemetery. They date from 1809-1852, suggesting their provenance is the Rabbinic Cemetery (c. 1781-1900) now buried beneath Central Park in Bialystok. Prior to 1831, no other cemetery existed for Bialystok's Jewish community. This mound of matzevoth with human remains has long been known, dumped in this area in the 1960s amidst construction of the Communist Party Headquarters in Bialystok. These matzevoth are temporarily stored within Bagnowka Cemetery. In 2023, the BCRF rescued an additional 20 boulder-style matzevoth, dated 1850-1856, from a mound in Central Park near the Opera House and one 18th Century Orthodox tombstone returned to the nearby St. Mary Magdalen Parish. The goal is to create a memorial with these matzevoth on an area that adjoins Central Park in Bialystok and was once part of the Rabbinic Cemetery. The human remains were reinterred at Bagnowka Cemetery and now await a memorial stone in remembrance. The BCRF loaned funding for this project at a cost of \$6500 USD. That loan has been repaid but an additional \$50,000 is needed to realize this memorial. Phase I (preparing the land and setting the matzevoth in place) is planned for August 2025; Phase II (pathways and symbolic wall) is planned for 2026; to be followed shortly after by Phase III (signage and lighting). Initially, the BCRF had hoped to begin this project in 2024 but arranging permits has caused a short delay.



Extraction of matzevoth from mound (top and bottom left), river of matzevoth stored on Bagnowka (bottom middle); reinterment of human remains on Bagnowka (bottom right), August 2022.

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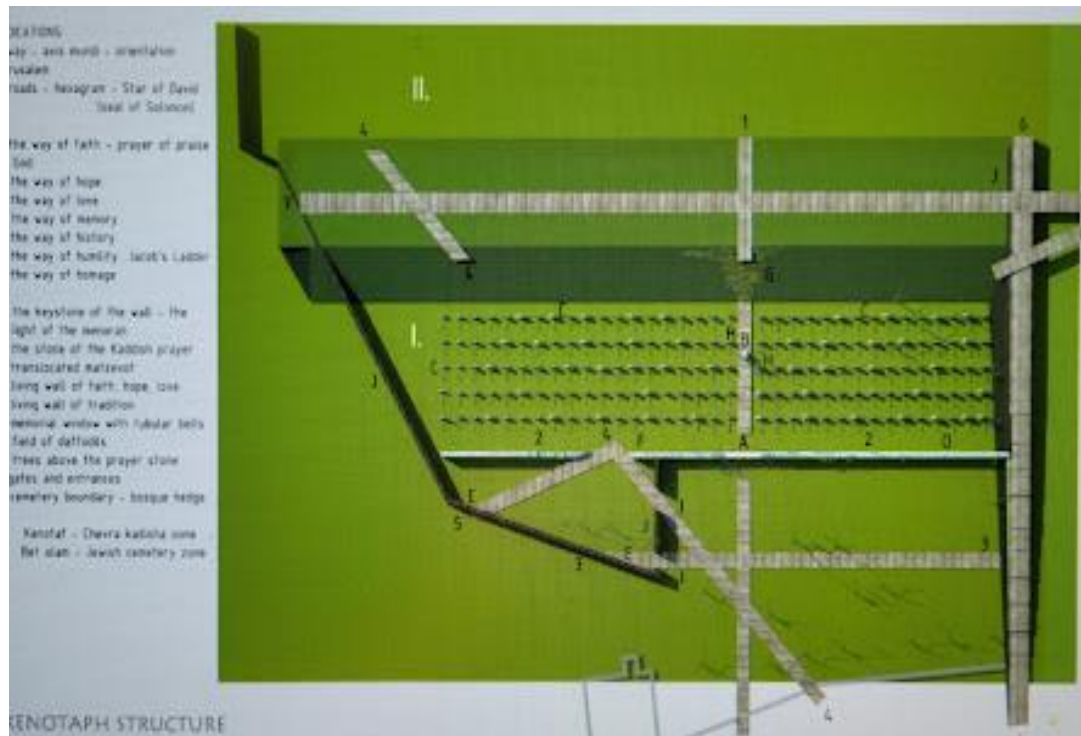


Reinterment of bones, Bagnowka, 2023 (left); display of matzevoth from mound near the Opera House, Bialystok, 2023 (right)

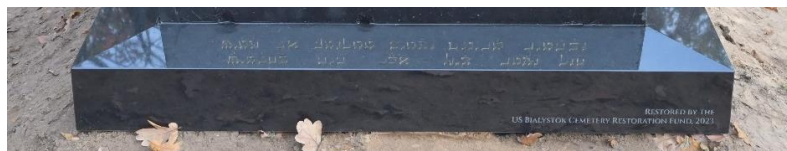
Design Concept: Dr. Jerzy Uścińowicz, Professor of Architecture, Bialystok University of Technology



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2. Memorial Pillar: Full Restoration completed 2023, Cost \$40,000 USD



Full restoration of the Memorial Pillar was funded by donors of the BCRF and undertaken by conservator Bartosz Markowski, Warsaw, from June to November 2023. For the full story of the pillar's restoration visit:

<https://bialystokcemeteryrestoration.org/memorial-pillar-restoration/>

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Memorial Pillar: Historic Photos, pre-WWII to 2023



Memorial Pillar (left to right), pre-1941; vandalized in 1981 and partially restored in 1985 at a new location; and until 2023 missing upper register and damaged by the elements.

3. Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern's Ohel, Cost \$20,000 USD



Ohel for Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern (d. 1919) in 1922, and today.

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Restoration of the Rabbi Halpern *ohel*. Watercolor, 2021. (© Heidi Szpek)

4. Rabbi Mohilewer's Symbolic *Ohel*, Cost \$100,000 USD



Location of Rabbi Mohilewer's *ohel* (upper), in Luftwaffe Aerial Photo (Sept 1944). Enclosed in left box, the upper white structure is Mohilewer's *ohel* just N of Rabbi Halpern's *ohel*; (bottom left) former gravesite of R. Mohilewer after exhumation and transport of his bones to Israel in 1991. The *ohel* of Rabbi Halpern is in the background; (bottom right) remnants of foundation of Mohilewer's *ohel* today.

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Symbolic restoration of the Rabbi Szmuel Mohilewer *ohel* (d. 1898).

Watercolor, 2021. (© Heidi Szpek)

Design Concept in progress by Dr. Jerzy Uścińowicz, Professor of Architecture, Białystok University of Technology

5. Color Restoration: Tombstone of Rabbi Benjamin Paszkowski (d. 1933), Cost \$7500 USD

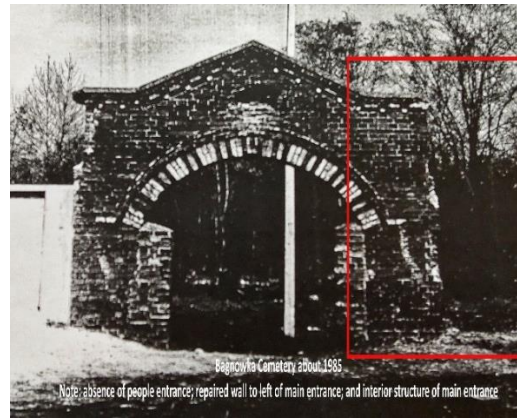


*Two parts of Rabbi Paszkowski's tombstone (top and left) 2015.
Rabbi Paszkowski's tombstone was partially restored in 2018. His epitaph records his book, Amuday Ha-shulhan, which is still studied today and visited here by New Jersey yeshivah students in 2019.*



Color restoration inspired by historic white on black funerary photographs (e.g., right).
Watercolor, 2021. (© Heidi Szpek)

6. Main and Pedestrian Entrances, Cost \$12,000 USD



Main Entrance (upper left) post-WWII with pedestrian entrance right of processional entrance; (upper right) absence of pedestrian entrance c. 1985; (middle left) post-War gates, 1991; (middle right) gates replaced, 2006; (bottom) today.

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Bagnowka Cemetery Main Entrance with restored brick detail, internal columns, and pedestrian entrance. Watercolor, 2021. (© Heidi Szpek)

7. Fencing: Replacement of Damaged Fencing, Cost \$25,000 USD



Approximately, 250 meters of fencing needs to be replaced along part of the current eastern border of the cemetery, marked here in dark blue. The cost is 100 USD per 1 running meter and an additional 3 USD for one sliding metal gate. The estimation is 24,053 – 30,066 USD.



Chair, Josh Degen, examines three types of fencing currently in place to mark the cemetery's eastern boundary (left); BCRP Board members meet with fencing contractor in nearby city of Zabłudow (right).

Restoration History

In 1993-95, Samuel Gruber and Phyllis Myers published *A Report to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad*. Bialystok's Jewish cemeteries were surveyed in respect to size, number of tombstones, and challenges to preservation. A decade earlier, mapping, and initial documentation near the main entrance by Bialystok's conservator's office was undertaken. The topographic map that was prepared also highlighted landmarks on this cemetery. Photographing of sections 1-5 was ostensibly completed. In 1991, the earliest cleanup effort on Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery with volunteers from the Netherlands was organized by Bialystok photographer and volunteer, Mirosław Szut. From the late 1990s to c. 2012, local historian Tomasz Wisniewski, Ph.D. engaged in substantial documentation of Bagnowka Cemetery, assisted in translation by Heidi M. Szpek, Ph.D. and later Sara Mages. These efforts can be found at www.bagnowka.pl and <https://www.jewishbialystok.pl/dokumentacja-cmentarza-zydowskiego-bagnowka,5569.html>

With the establishment of *Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej Polska-Izrael* in Bialystok (www.bialystok.jewish.org.pl), care for Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery took on new directions under its president, Lucy Lisowska. A large gap in the cemetery's western wall was repaired. An extensive wall adjoining the Catholic Cemetery was rebuilt, and the wall on Wschodnia Street was repaired and repainted. These projects were funded by Bialystok Holocaust Survivor, the late Samuel Solasz, and the City of Bialystok. Since the early 2000s, cleanup efforts were initiated and maintained through *Centrum*, often with the assistance of local school children. Restoration efforts also ensued with the volunteer efforts of international students from the United States, Israel, and Europe, coordinated by *Centrum's* Lisowska with onsite materials and strategies for restoration by Bialystok volunteer, the late Waldemar Mierzejewski. From 2010 to 2018 *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* (ASF) held eight Summercamps devoted to restoration, coordinated by Lisowska and Mierzejewski. In 2010, Heidi M. Szpek, Ph.D. began collaborating with *Centrum* and in 2013 with ASF in their efforts on Bagnowka.

In 2012 and 2013, *Centrum* and ASF worked to restore Sections 3 and 5, just inside the main entrance, at right. Mierzejewski further developed and constructed a pulley-chain tripod device to assist in lifting stones. A simpler version had been constructed by ASF team leader Dr. Andreas Kahrs in 2010. In 2013, ASF and *Centrum*, in consultation with Szpek, prepared a tour of Bagnowka. In 2014, Szpek guided ASF and *Centrum* in major restoration efforts on the Memorial Complex. In 2015, efforts turned to Sections 1, 2 and 7, just inside the main entrance, at left, with some additional work in the Memorial Complex. In total, these restoration efforts cleaned several hundred stones whose vital details were added to the Bagnowka database, less than 100 were reset owing to weight and equipment limitations.

Since 2016, restoration on the cemetery took on a new direction, drawing on the vision and expertise of stone contractor Josh Degen and his wife, Amy Halpern Degen, of Massachusetts (USA). On a roots and educational tour in 2015, Amy, with ancestral roots in Bialystok and

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nearby Sokolka, unexpectedly came upon ASF working on the cemetery. As a stone contractor by trade, Josh Degen immediately recognized the potential of utilizing mechanized equipment on the cemetery to facilitate a more speedy and effective restoration. The Degens along with Massachusetts friends, Howie and Paula Flagler, founded the US NGO 501(c)(3) *Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund* (BCRF) in 2016. Gathering a group of volunteers from the United States, Germany, and Israel, along with local Poles, 301 tombstones were restored in 2016, 349 in 2017, and 310 in 2018 during one-week Summercamps. Dr. Szpek and her husband/photographer, Frank Idzikowski joined these volunteers. In 2018, Dr. Szpek joined the BCRF Board. In 2019, over 400 stones were restored in a 10-day Summercamp. Bialystok's Waldemar Mierzejewski served as local liaison for the BCRF until his passing in 2018. The position of Bialystok liaison was then taken up by another longtime volunteer, Dr. Andrzej Końdej. The COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020 temporarily halted restoration work but local volunteers organized by Dr. Andrzej Rusewicz, Przez, *Spółeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku* (www.jewishbialystok.pl), coordinated a cleanup effort in 2021. In 2022, Dr. Rusewicz joined the Board of the BCRF. The uncertainty of the post-COVID-19 Pandemic world and the onset of the War in Ukraine necessitated postponement of a formal Summercamp until 2023. However, the Summer of 2022 held the first formal workshop on the cemetery by BCRF Board Members and volunteers. Nearly 20 local volunteers learned best practices in cemetery restoration, restoring nearly 65 matzevoth by hand. BCRF Board Members also met with key individuals and organizations related to the restoration work and projects detailed in this prospectus.

As noted earlier in this prospectus, in August 2022, 123 boulder-style and one megalithic granite stele were also extracted from a mound, located on Boya-Zelenskigo Street, on the unused land that belongs to Bagnowka Cemetery. They date from 1809-1852, suggesting their provenance is the Rabbinic Cemetery (c. 1781-1900) now buried beneath Central Park in Bialystok. Prior to 1831, no other cemetery existed for Bialystok's Jewish community. This mound of matzevoth with human remains has long been known, dumped in this area in the 1960s amidst construction of the Communist Party Headquarters in Bialystok. Temporarily stored within Bagnowka Cemetery, the goal is to create a memorial with these matzevoth on an area that adjoins Central Park in Bialystok and was once part of the Rabbinic Cemetery. The human remains were reinterred at Bagnowka Cemetery and now await a memorial stone in remembrance.

2023 brought an international group of volunteers from the US, including two Suffolk University students from Boston, volunteers from Germany, from Israel as well as local Polish volunteers, including a dedicated contingent of students from the University of Bialystok. This year also saw the return of nearly 20 members of the Pearlson Family from Israel. In 2019, several Pearlson family members traveled to Bialystok to restore the tombstones of their grandmother and great-grandmother. Work in Bialystok, Poland was conducted at two work sites: excavation of a mound on the former Rabbinic Cemetery now buried beneath Central Park and restoration and documentation of Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery.

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Twenty additional boulder-style matzevoth and one 18th Century Orthodox tombstone were extracted from a mound in Bialystok's Central Park. These matzevoth were also removed from the Rabbinic Cemetery located near the city center, the current site of Central Park. Human remains were again reinterred at Bagnowka Cemetery. The Orthodox tombstone was returned to the nearby parish of St. Mary Magdalen. The matzevoth are on display near the mound in Central Park with plans to develop a memorial on the Rabbinic Cemetery in cooperation with the City of Bialystok, Dr. Jerzy Uścińowicz, Professor of Architecture, Bialystok University of Technology, and the BCRF. Phase I (of III) begins this August 2025.

The crowning achievement of BCRF's 2023 restoration efforts, however, was the full restoration of the Memorial Pillar that remembers victims of the 1906 Pogrom and two 1905 massacres in Bialystok. Special thanks are extended to the exceptional stone conservation skills of Warsaw conservator, Bartosz Markowski, *Rabbinic Council For Jewish Cemeteries in Poland* representative, Filip Szczepanski, who oversaw this project, Aleksander Schwartz, georadar expert, [*Zapomnienie*](#) (Poland), local liaison and BCRF Board Member Andrzej Rusewicz, who coordinated onsite work, as well as principal fundraisers, BCRF Board Members Amy and Josh Degen. While the pillar is fully restored, landscaping is planned for 2024-2025 and a rededication of the pillar on August 11, 2024.

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Financials

Project	Cost USD	Funding Source(s)	Funding Notes	Total
Memorial Pillar Design Concept	200	BCRF		Completed
Memorial Pillar	40,000.00	3,400 BCRF; GoFundMe; Donors		Completed
Rabbi Halpern Ohel	20,000.00	Donors		20,000.00
Rabbi Mohilewer Ohel Design Concept	2000	Bialystok Jewish Museum	In Kind	Completed
Rabbi Mohilewer Ohel	100000	Donors		100000
Rabbi Paszkowski Tombstone	7,500	Donors		7,500
# Cemetery Walls		City of Bialystok	In Kind; Cemetery is owned by the City of Bialystok with select projects under their purview	
Entrance Gate and new Pedestrian Entrance	12000	Donors		12,000
# City Water Hookup		City of Bialystok	In Kind; Cemetery is owned by the City of Bialystok with select projects under their purview	Completed
Select Fencing Replacement	25,000	Donors		25,000
# Cemetery Clearing Woods & (2) Grass Cuttings (annual)	20000	City of Bialystok	In Kind; Cemetery is owned by the City of Bialystok with select projects under their purview	20000
Georadar Rabbinic Cemetery and Bagnowka Cemetery (6 areas)	8,000	Polytechnik Institute, Bialystok	In Kind	Completed
Mound Matzevoth Loan from BCRF	6,500	Donors	funds loaned from Annual Restoration Budget	Completed
Mound Matzevoth Memorial Design Concept	2000	Bialystok Jewish Museum	In Kind	2,000
Mound Matzevoth Memorial	50000	Donors		50000
Annual Restoration Budget	40,000	Summercamp Volunteers; Various Donors	Volunteers contribute c. \$3500 each for travel, lodging, food and select restoration expenses	40,000
Total				276,500.00

W. L. Clements

