

# Zamosc Jews – Memorial and Resurrection

Israel Schek

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## On the Occasion of Uncovering the Plaques on the Ramp

Prezydent Miasta Zamościa Andrzej Wnuk,

Chief Rav of Poland Rabbi Michael Schudrich,

Dear friends and distinguished guests,

76 years have passed since Pesach of April 1942. Jews were murdered in cold blood, in the last Akcja in the streets of Zamość.

The surviving Jews of Zamość and its vicinity, together with Jews brought here from places as remote as western Germany, were cruelly gathered from the Ghetto, conveyed to this very railway ramp, and transferred to their last journey, to the extermination camp at Bełżec.

There they shared their terrible fate with their brethren from all over southeastern Poland – all doomed to the Satanic Final Solution.

In this very spot there was no segregation: a shoemaker along with a rabbi, a teacher along with a tailor, a scholar and a simple person, a midwife with her neighboring cook maid, a Zionist and a Bundist and an Orthodox. A baby, an embryo, an old lady and a young girl, all were thrown into the furnace, on the charge of being Jew.

Thus came to an abrupt termination the splendid life of a Kehila more than 350 years old.

At the eve of the Second World War there were about 12,000 Jews here, about 45% of the total population of Zamość.

Like the Jews of other cities and towns in Poland and neighboring lands, the Jews of Zamość had a cultural autonomy. They educated their children in a vast system of schools, published many newspapers and books, even enjoyed political and religious Polemics, organized political parties and extensive youth movements, schools like Kadima Tarbut, libraries, synagogues and Talmud Tora, theaters and sports clubs. They lived, loved, worked, and also quarreled.

At the same time, they were loyal citizens of the Polish state. Members of my family served in the Polish Army. This was common for Jews in almost all countries.

Here in Zamość the majority dreamed of taking part in the creation of their own sovereign homeland in the Land of Israel. For this purpose they established Zionist organizations; HeChalutz was a prominent one, preparing to make Aliyah to Palestina – Eretz Israel, their homeland.

Unfortunately, only a small percentage managed to realize this dream before the War burst out in September of 1939.

Today I speak as the Chairman of the Organization of the Jews of Zamość and its Vicinity – in Israel.

But, above and beyond that, I speak as a representative of my own beloved relatives – my own grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and 60-70 members of my extended family, who were sent to their death on that bitter day 76 years ago.

Akcja Reinhardt culminated the Churban, the Destruction, of our sister-Kehiles: Hrubieszów, Chełm, Horodło, Wojsławice, Krzeszów, Lublin, Rejowiec, Tyszowce, Izbica, Biłgoraj, Radzyń, Szczebrzeszyn, Krasnystaw, Janów, Piaski, Włodawa, Goraj and many others. In some of these shtetls my family lost dear relatives.

Most of them ended their path of life at Bełżec or Majdanek, unless they were massacred on the spot or murdered on the way.

In Bełżec alone some half a million Jews from the area around and between Lublin, Kraków, Lwów and Radom perished. You surely understand my emotional ties to this region.

I am absolutely aware of the awful experience of the Polish people, who suffered, humiliated, transferred and murdered during the terrible War. The terrible fate of the Polish people is obvious.

But unfortunately for us, a third of our nation died and murdered.

Less than 10% of the Jews in Poland survived, mostly those who fled into the Soviet Union, excluding of course those who left before the Shoah. Similar numbers apply to whole East Europe.

I was born in Israel after the Shoah. It was in the midst of our War of Independence – מלחמת העצמאות.

I and my sister should have grown up and lived without the painful feelings of loss and destruction. But from my dear parents, and even against their wishes, we inherited and carried on the sense of a truncated family, a body with amputated limbs. It is not only us. I know well that our whole generation walks under the same heavy cloud.

On my desk there are painful photographs of our Kehila, including my family members, gathered at this very site, carrying bags on their shoulders, holding parcels, as much as was allowed by the Nazis, persuaded to think that they were just being re-located. They realized the awful truth just a few hours later when they got off the train at the final station, at Bełżec.

In the years that followed, my parents, their surviving relatives and friends, and others, who did survive the Shoah, gathered their strength and began anew. Not by a heavenly miracle, but through persistence and labor, they managed to build; they even re-built families, like new shoots growing out of a burnt tree.

In spite of their deep and persistent pain, they took part in building Israel's society, fought in the hard struggle for independence and security, and created a precious homeland for generations to come.

They always worked hard and spared no effort in order that their children should get proper education, should enjoy their youth, should live normal lives as much as possible; and they hoped that in turn we should continue to build, and bequeath normal lives to our children.

Still – they always had a shadow of hope that maybe someday a brother or sister who disappeared would suddenly appear and the family would be reunited, even in small part. But this was not to be.

I do recall my Mother and Father at the early 1950s, waiting in vain for a piece of dear information about their sisters and brothers from the Search Bureau for Missing Relatives of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Thus it was an eternal disappointment.

Our Organization was established in May 1945 in Tel Aviv by survivors who felt, so close to the Shoah, the need to be near their old neighbors.

I recall seeing as a young child how my parents' generation met, laughed, and cried, looking desperately for consolation.

Then the mantle was assumed by my generation, welcoming also the third generation, our children. We discuss and lecture about not only the Shoah, but also the previous, sometimes glorious, periods of the Kehila.

At its peak our organization numbered several thousand members. Naturally, the number of participants at our annual meeting, in the month of Nissan ניסן – April, is decreasing with time.

We still keep the flame burning. Personally, I am sure that my daughter and son and their children would carry it on.

Jeremiah, our great prophet of Destruction and Consolation – חורבן ונחמה – promised:

"ל"א, הַנְּגִי מִבֵּיא אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ צָפוֹן,  
 וְקִבְּצָתִים מִיִּרְקְתֵי-אֶרֶץ--בָּם עוֹר וּפְסָח, הֲרֵה וְיִלְדֵת יִחְדּוּ:  
 קֶהֱל גְּדוֹל, יִשׁוּבוּ הִנֵּה.  
 ל"א, הַ בְּבִכִי יִבְאוּ, וּבִתְחִנּוּנִים אוֹבִילֵם--אוֹלִיכֵם אֶל-נַחְלֵי מַיִם,  
 בְּדֶרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל יִקְשְׁלוּ בֵּה:  
 כִּי-הָיִיתִי לְיִשְׂרָאֵל לְאֵב, וְאֶפְרַיִם בְּכָרִי הוּא."

*"See, I will bring them from the land of the north  
 and gather them from the ends of the earth.*

*Among them will be the blind and the lame,  
 expectant mothers and women in labor;  
 a great throng will return.*

*They will come with weeping;  
 they will pray as I bring them back.*

*I will lead them beside streams of water  
 on a level path where they will not stumble,  
 because I am Israel's father,  
 and Ephraim is my firstborn son."*

"קוֹל בְּרִמָּה נִשְׁמַע, נְהִי בְּכִי תִמְרוּרִים, רַחַל מִבְּכָה עַל בְּנֵיהָ  
 מֵאַנָּה לְהִנָּחֵם עַל בְּנֵיהָ כִּי אֵינָנו."  
 "מִנְעִי קוֹלְךָ מִבְּכִי, וְעֵינַיךָ מִדְּמָעָה  
 כִּי יֵשׁ שִׁכָּר לִפְעֻלַּתְךָ נָאִם ה', וְשָׁבוּ מֵאֶרֶץ אוֹיֵב.  
 וַיֵּשׁ תִּקְוָה לְאַחֲרִיתְךָ נָאִם ה', וְשָׁבוּ בָנִים לְגְבוּלֵם"

*“Sing with joy for Jacob;  
shout for the foremost of the nations.  
Make your praises heard, and say,  
‘Lord, save your people,  
the remnant of Israel.’*

The idea of erecting this very Monument arose in August 2010. My son Ori and I met President Marcin Zamoyski, in his office and discussed the subject with the Historians, our dear friends, Krzysztof Banach and the gifted late Robert Kuwałek.

And then of course, we owe many many thanks to the good friends here in Zamość, mostly Marek Cołcon, who worked hard to design this impressive Monument and make it a reality.

Personally and as a representative of our Organization, I am thankful to our devoted dear friends Maria Fornal, Adam Kopciowski, Artur Bara, Krzysztof Banach, Tomasz Panczyk and more.

These memorial plaques in Hebrew Polish and English commemorate the worst human evil. To my feeling Yiddish is missing.

We are all not naïve, but let us hope that nothing like this will ever happen again, anywhere or anytime.

Thank you all, Dziękuję bardzo, תודה רבה