

## *Fulfilling the Vow*

Every day I reminded myself of the vow I made when I learned how the Jews of Brzozow met their fate. I prayed and hoped to be saved in good health from the hell and valley of death with which fate had presented me and to be able to erect a monument commemorating the 1,400 Jews from my home town who had been tragically killed.

One day my wife's cousin, who lived in Poland, wrote to us that he had been informed, through the Polish communication systems that the Polish residents of Brzozow built an Obelisk monument shaped as a Jewish Star to commemorate the Jews murdered in the forest.

The Obelisk was built at a crossing, at the entrance to the woods, at the place where the Jews were forced to strip naked before being led to their deaths. The monument had the years "1942 – 1962." In addition, a concrete slate sized 6.5 feet by 6 feet was placed at the exact place in which the murder took place and where the victims were buried. It also had the inscription "1942 – 1962."

Inscribing these eight figures and writing nothing else was their meager way of fulfilling some sort of obligation towards the

Jews. Now the vow I had taken was even more meaningful. It was clear to me that I would create the memorial at the place in which the Jews were buried. Twenty years after the massacre I was invited for a ceremony revealing the monument built at the burial ground. Despite my great desire to take part in the ceremony, I was not able to partake in it because in those years it was virtually impossible to get into Poland. I made the decision that there would come a day and I would erect an honorable monument in memory of the Brzozow Jews.

Each year there is a ceremony in Tel Aviv on behalf of the Brzozow Jews in order to commemorate the Jews murdered. In one of the meetings I suggested creating a monument in memorial for those killed. There were many different reactions. There was even some talk regarding the idea of building a memorial in the Holon graveyard. I would not accept this suggestion. I decided to act on my own for this sacred cause.

In 1988 organized groups were allowed to enter Poland. I put myself on a list which also included my wife, my brother Eliyahu, my cousin and my business partner. I took a professional video camera and hired a crew in Warsaw including a professional cameraman. As we reached Warsaw, which was still under Soviet control, I ordered a taxi for a full

day and we started our ride to Brzozow which was far from Warsaw.

The visa we received was of a type which was shared by ten tourists and made it difficult to get a visa from the guide for the journey. Eventually the guide was convinced of the importance of the journey and gave us the visa. When we arrived to the town we stopped at the city square. We immediately drew attention and a crowd started to form around us. Among the people in the crowd there was a person named Kandra. He approached me and asked the nature of my visit to the town.

I told him in short why we had come and added that I was interested to arrive to the woods in which the massacre took place. He offered his help in finding it.

We rode with him for two or three miles away from the town and went off the road at the place where the monument stood. Not far from it now stands a shelter run by nuns intended for the treatment of mentally handicapped children. We entered the structure and immediately felt the panic and alarm of the people who were afraid of strangers during the times of communist regime. Kandra eased the atmosphere and told them the purpose of our visit. The nun, Josepha Zamba, said she knew exactly where the place was and even accompanied us to the concrete monument which was deep in the woods and

covered with leaves. She suggested we keep close eye contact with one another because of the density of the forest. She confessed that at times she comes over there to light a candle and places flowers on the monument.

The road in the thick woods was bumpy and full of obstacles. Mr. Kandra lost his spectacles. Because of an attack of bees and my cousin's weak health, my brother and I had to carry him on an improvised stretcher made of two wooden logs and branches which I cut with a knife I carried with me. We then tied him to the stretcher using our belts.

On our way back to Warsaw I already started to imagine the memorial site that I would erect. I made an accurate sketch of it.

In the meeting of the former residents of Brzozow in Israel I announced to the audience that I was intending to build a memorial site. The reactions were not too enthusiastic. Some were even against it. Despite it all, I did not back down and was decisive about fulfilling the vow.

I began to take action. In my written correspondence with Kandra with whom I created deep friendly relations, I worked out the details. I received warm recommendations from the contractor, Thomas Paschik, to execute the plan.

Although I was under the impression that Thomas Paschik understood my intent very well and that my plan was clear to him, and despite the fact that he expressed excitement from the project, I purchased a visa for him and sent him a plane ticket to Israel and paid his living costs for 10 days in order to go over the details of the plan with him.

I presented the model of the site to him and made sure to translate the plans and the specifications to Polish. At the end of the visit we signed a work contract.

We went over the details of the plan and even talked about the placement of the letters made of brass for those passages which would be imprinted when the concrete would be cast.

In the next meeting of former residents of Brzozow I presented my plan to all those present. Six pillars were to be erected- each pillar representing the name of one of my family members who was killed. When it was suggested that other survivors help and give money for the monument, it was decided unanimously that the pillars would represent the six million and not only the names of my family members.

Planning the monument included six pillars representing the six million Jews, a metal fence which surrounded the site with ornaments shaped as a Jewish Star and a Menorah. There would be twelve of each symbol representing the twelve tribes.

Beams would connect the six pillars and create the shape of the Star of David, signifying the connection to the Jewish people. The front of the structure would have a facade with bronze Hebrew letters molded in concrete. The passage written there would be taken from Ezekiel- Vision of the Dry Bones: "These bones, all the people of Israel are".

The dome above simulates the grave of Rachel (one of the four mothers according to the Bible) in which there is a bronze Menorah as a symbol of the state of Israel. In the site I planned a concrete structure so that it would be possible to light candles safely in the heart of the woods and place them there. The structure reminds one of a crematorium, the horrid incinerators. In 1989 we received an unfortunate message from Paschik saying there were problems receiving authorization to build the monument. I organized a certificate of approval from the rabbinate to build the site as long as there would not be deep digging in the ground, and I also received a signed document from the former residents of Brzozow that recognizes me as the Jewish representative of the town.

Not putting additional thought to it, I flew again to Poland to meet with the mayor and the city architect in order to settle the subject.

Because I spoke Polish I communicated easily and freely with those related to building the monument, and of course I brought a good amount of vodka without which it is very difficult to do anything in Poland.

Currently I am working on planning the metal doors for the candle nook out of which the word "Yizkor" will protrude.

The Poles set strict limitations on me. For instance, uprooting a tree in order to make a path in the woods required a certificate of authorization from the Forester Union. In order to receive the proper licenses I was assisted by Paschik as well as by a friend from my days at elementary school. Of course an additional stock of vodka helped too.

I reached an agreement with the town regarding the paving of the road, so that the town would supply the gravel and I would pay for the manpower. The woods also have a stream running through it that creates an obstacle. It was necessary to build a bridge above it. I decided that I would do the job with local workers and also supervise over the engineering work. Until I received all the proper authorizations and until the project began the stage of execution I arrived to Poland several times and was also assisted by a friend my age, the Priest Pudlo. It was time to plan the event of the ceremonial presentation of the monument.

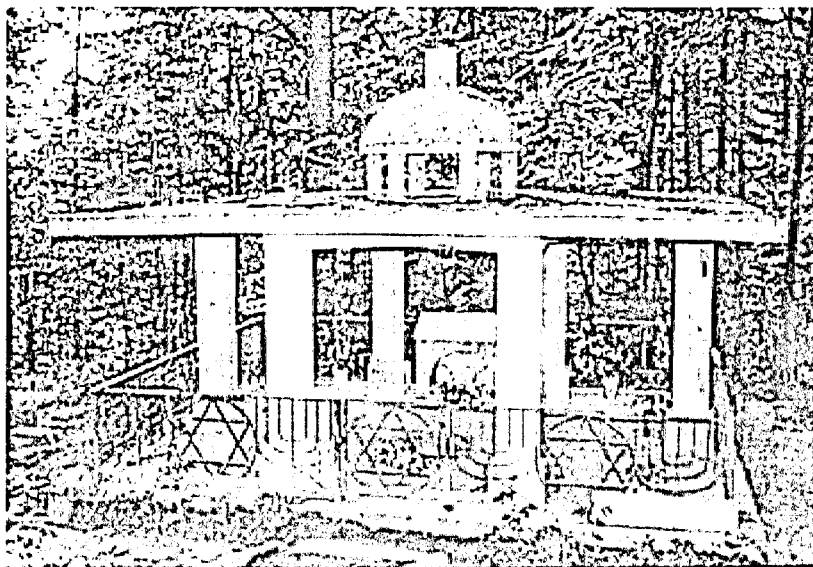


Commemorating the moment entering the forest before reaching the monument

Building the monument was not a simple matter. It was not possible to reach the area with vehicles. We used horses and that too was not easy. We had to build a bridge out of logs in order to cross a stream (as can be seen in the picture).



Supervising the work



The monument at the place of the massacre in the forest  
outside of Brzozow



The caption on the right corner of the monument

My wife, Dreizale, conducted a correspondence In German, Polish and Yiddish with the former town residents scattered throughout the world. Town people were invited to the event, among them the Polish town honoraries and members of Parliament.

In August 1990 the monument was finally presented in a ceremony. At times of heavy rain, 45 people can squeeze under the roof of the structure. The structures measurements are 11.5 feet by 14.75 feet and the height is 7.7 feet.

At the night of the event all those invited, the former Jewish town people and their families, reconvened in a hall which I had hired especially for presenting the details of the monument as well as a briefing before the ceremony.

37 Survivors arrived to the ceremony at the town stadium and from there we rode slowly, a row of cars with lights lit up as is customary in funerals. The ceremony which was called by the Polish people "Kaddish" received full coverage from the Polish press. A band from the fire department took part in the ceremony and played the Polish anthem and "Ha'Tikva."

After the guests were greeted, there were speeches by the town honoraries and the exciting speech by my wife Mrs. Dreizale Weiss. We then placed flower wreathes and lit six memorial candles.

The ceremony ended with the Tehilim verses "El Male Rahachamim" and "Kaddish"



A youth delegation commemorating 60 years to the massacre at Brzozow. In front: The Priest, Town Mayor and me.

## *The Speech by Dreizale Weiss*

### **August 19, 1990, Ceremonial Presentation of the Monument**

Dear Mayor, honorary representative of the county Kroshninski, proud audience!

We are gathered here today in the corner of these small woods, exactly where 48 years ago, tragic and heartbreaking events occurred; savage fascists ruthlessly murdered and exterminated the defenseless Jews, residents of the Town of Brzozow. Even the birds of the woods fled, as they could not stand hearing the yells of the victims killed and their helpless cries.

We, the survivors, were saved miraculously. We never dreamt that the day would come and we could return to Brzozow, to the burial ground of our close loved ones.

This is the way of the Lord. Who knew it? And here we stand today not as prisoners of Fascism, but as free men, as proud

representatives of our free country - Israel, under our national flag, as equals.

Out of the destruction and the ashes we rose anew, out of the blood of our innocent loved ones we rose and at the edge of another world. We started to build a new life, because by their deaths a demand was made that we live on and tell the horrid truth to all those who live in this world.

But we have a long way to travel. You must have heard, dear people, and you may have read that even now there are those who live under fascism, as the smell of the burning bodies of those murdered in the death camps still runs through the air. There are new false prophets, enemies of mankind, who declare a new truth and even advertise new writings and books that with no shame state that Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek never existed, and that they are nothing but lies made by the Jews who want personal gain.

And so my esteemed friends, it is our wish that this monument which has been revealed today, as well as other monuments in Poland,

will be the living testimony to the terror and cruelty of the twentieth century.

We must all together, you and I, shoulder by shoulder stand on guard and make sure that the blood thirsty tyrants wanting power and prestige will not light up the world again in flames of hatred and destroy our desires, our hopes for a better tomorrow, our own lives.

We must listen and tell our children that blind hatred is the source of all the disasters in the world and brings to destruction. Let us remove the blindfolds from our eyes and recognize the real truth: "***love thy neighbor as thyself.***" And then we might be able to welcome a better tomorrow.

Dear congregation, we stand here on the graves of Jews, but we do not forget for a moment, and in this event we want to remind and to remember, that hundreds and thousands of Poles fought against the German monster and sacrificed their lives in the protection of freedom and in honor of the citizens and the entire world.

May we bless them in our memories!

In the first years after we arrived to Israel, when everything was blurry, and we were half awake and half asleep, when we were barely able to organize the thoughts in our hearts and we were undoubtedly fighting wars and had to protect ourselves again, then within all this chaos of events came news which sweetened the bitter pill and made us proud. Here, it came to our knowledge that the people of Brzozow dedicated themselves to holy work.

They collected money from all levels, told the children at school, lectured in front of adults and dedicated their work to build an Obelisk and in it a Star of David, which was planned by the local engineer, Mr. Yazzi Suprenski.

Also a monument was built at the main burial site. We have newspaper sections from the "Zeshov News" which describes the ceremonial presentation of the obelisk on September 30, 1962.

We have pictures and invitations of that ceremony. Unfortunately, the circumstances of the time did not allow us to take part in it.

In the name of all the Jews of Brzozow and the surrounding area who stayed alive, we wish to tell you that we cherish your work which without a doubt served as an example to all the citizens of Poland. We want to thank all who took part in it.

Esteemed colleagues, we are grateful for the help given to building the monument, to all of you together and to each individual person, we thank you for your acts of friendship and the good will that you have showed to us. We would like to share a special thanks To Mr. Thomas Paschik for his professional work, dedication and devotion.

We thank you for coming here today to take part in the grievance ceremony and in this way cherish your town's former Jewish citizens.

As we leave this holy place, we believe it will be treated with the true value it deserves by the esteemed citizens of your town. We believe that for many Jews and other citizens the burial place will become a place to come to as the mayor has improved the path leading to the monument area."

The life work to tribute the Jews of Brzozow was not summed up only by the monument. I was set on preserving the memories of my brothers who lived in the town by any means possible.

When I arrived to Brzozow for the first time in 1988, I was shocked when I discovered in one of my visits at the town square that there were stones on the side walk with Hebrew letters. I immediately understood that these were stones taken from the Jewish graves. In my meeting with the then Mayor Joseph Zapka, I discussed with him the subject of grave desecration. I was told that there are plans to expand the square and that as a result certain rocks were taken out of place. I had to make sure that these stone fragments of Jewish gravestones would be collected and kept from harms way.



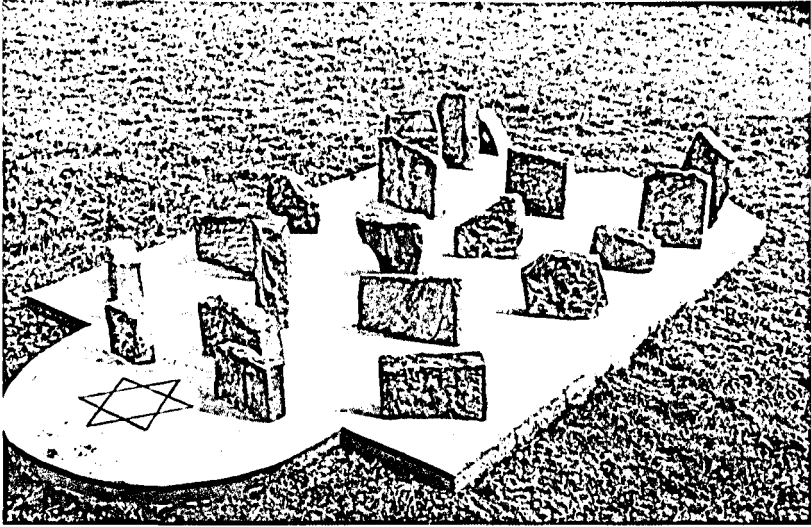
Stone fragments from the Jewish graves  
found on the Sidewalk

We reached a mutual agreement with the town that Mr. Paschik would be responsible for collecting all the fragments - even those with only one letter of Hebrew. And a generous reward was to be given to anyone who would bring such fragments. And so 37 such fragments of graves were collected - some of which I could identify the names of the deceased which I had known in the town.

In the meantime we saved the fragments in Paschik's storage room until my next visit to Poland in which it would be decided what to do with them. After a while I received a telephone at night from Paschik in which I was told that there was a plan to make the graveyard into a playground and parking lot for the use of the richer residents of the neighborhood. As I received the news I was appalled. I flew to Poland immediately and this time I demanded the help of my brother in Chicago to deal with this urgent and sensitive matter. In our meeting with the mayor I proclaimed that it could not be possible that the burial place of my grandfather and grandmother would be desecrated and become a playground and parking lot. I demanded that the area be fenced up and clearly indicated as a Jewish burial ground. I took it upon myself to pay for the fence. I paid for a surveyor to set the exact boundaries of the graveyard and it was found that the length of the lot was 155 feet and 8.2 inches. I would not take any less.

I was waiting for the authorization to start building the fence but the mayor was on vacation. Since I needed him to sign the documents I found out where he had gone to and the name of the hotel and I drove with the documents to the place.

In the area of the old Jewish graveyard in Brzozow we saw that only a single concrete grave was left - that of Ben-Ziyon Trachman who was murdered at Dinof.



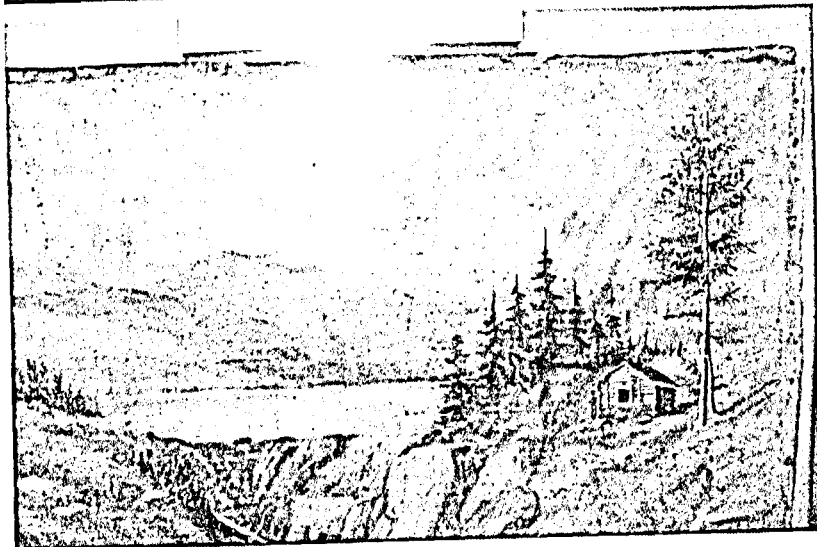
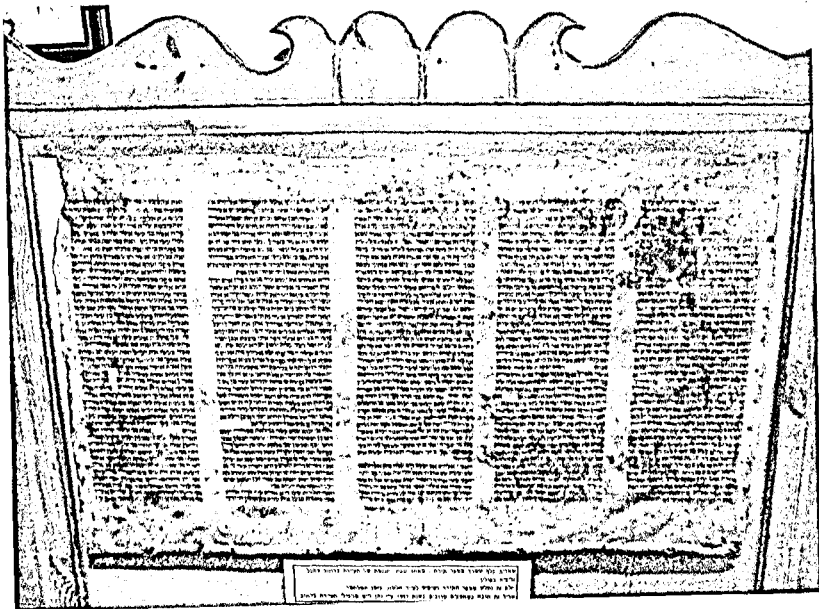
The broken gravestones which were retrieved.



The fence of the old burial ground

The metal fence we made and which surrounded the burial ground was made of repeated elements, each part 3 feet long and in it a Menorah or Star of David interchangeably. The fence and in it a gate, surrounded the entire area of the graveyard.

On one of my many visits to Poland to build the monument, I befriended the Town Museum Manager of Brzozow who on the 50<sup>th</sup> year to the murder of the Jewish residents of Brzozow set a place in memory of the Jews of the town. The place had a presentation of prayer shawls, prayer books, pictures and so on. The town museum manager, a very active and lively woman, asked to meet me. On our meeting she told me that one of the town residents holds an object which belongs to the Jews of Brzozow. We went to see what the "object" was. We discovered that the object was a piece of parchment which survived from a Torah book from one of the synagogues of the town. The parchment was torn. One side of it served as a platform for painting European scenery painted by an unknown painter during the war. It is hard to describe the excitement at seeing the valuable finding. I asked the Town Museum Manager to categorize the parchment for the museum so that I would be able to purchase it and bring it with me to Israel. I paid a fine price for it, 200 dollars, as I was firmly decided not to leave this remnant from a Torah book on Polish land.



The parchment – including both sides: On one side: Chapter 35 of Genesis. On other side: the painting.  
Cased in a glass revolving frame which I made.

I was faced with a dilemma: how to bring the parchment to Israel. The Polish law forbids taking out historical findings from Poland. I asked for the help of Paschik, my good friend, who in his past served as an apprentice for a Jewish tailor. He helped me sew the covering of a suitcase we had unraveled. We placed the parchment in the lining of the suitcase. To my great joy the work was done well and it was not possible to notice that the covering was sewn over. And so the parchment reached Israel safely in 1991.

Later I found out from the museum manager about an additional finding that I might be interested in. In the backyard of the school of a village house known as Goldsova, which is not far from Brzozow, a large hunk of marble was found which was stolen from the Jewish burial ground and brought over there. The resident was interested in getting rid of the stone because he believed it was creating a detrimental effect on his fate.

I rode to the village along with Paschik and accompanied by two additional fellows. I saw the marble in the backyard. With a joint effort we managed to turn over the stone and discovered a wondrous tombstone which was well kept. When I looked at the writing I was astonished. The tombstone was of Rechtche

Trachman, the wife of Ben-Ziyon Trachman. His cement tombstone was the only tombstone left in the graveyard. It was as if she had waited all those years for the tombstone to be completed.

We brought the tombstone of Rechtche Trachman and placed it in the cement concrete next to the grave of her husband and so came the ending to the story of the couple.

The gravestone fragments which served as sidewalks were brought to rest in a cement mold, like a monument, which is in the center of the Jewish cemetery in Brzozow. I felt now that I had fulfilled my vow.

These sites were declared commemorative sites for Jews. They are visited by youth groups and other groups on behalf of the ministry of education of Israel and Poland.