Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project

Bialystok, Poland

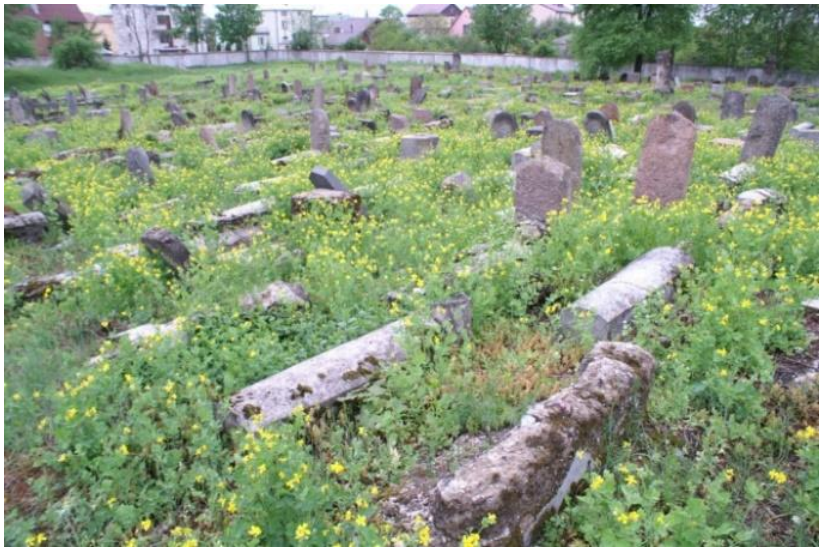
Implemented by

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund, 2023

www.bialystokcemeteryrestoration.org

Prepared by Dr. Heidi M. Szpek, Board Member,
Translator, Historian (www.jewishepitaphs.org)

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



Executive Summary

This prospectus details the vision of the Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Fund's project (BCRP) 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 in 1891, 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; 3500 have been documented. Of these, nearly 1600 have been restored by the BCRP 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.

While the BCRP will commence resetting and restoring tombstones in 2023, in the SE quadrant of the cemetery and in the sections now covered with woods once cleared, the following *long-range projects* are critical to restoring key features on this cemetery; (1) restoration of the memorial pillar to the 1906 Pogrom and 1905 Massacres and placement of an informational plaque at the original site of the pillar; (2) restoration of Rabbi Halpern's *ohel* (mausoleum), including a new tombstone with his inscription; (3) creation of a symbolic *ohel* on the former burial site of Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer, including a symbolic tombstone with his inscription; and (4) 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.

It is critical to note in this prospectus that many of the BCRP 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. 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 are currently stored in Bagnowka Cemetery with plans to develop a memorial on the Rabbinic Cemetery in cooperation with the City of Bialystok, Dr. Jerzy Uścinowicz, Professor of Architecture, Bialystok University of Technology, and Dr. Andrzej Rusewicz, President, Association of the Museum of Bialystok. This rescue project may lead to additional rescue projects by the BCRP of other tombstones buried beneath the current Central Park in Bialystok.

Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project Board of Directors

Josh Degen, Chairman, Founding Officer

Amy Degen, Treasurer, Founding Officer

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

Andrzej Rusewicz, Ph.D. Bialystok Logistics Coordinator

BJCP Summercamp 2018

BCRP Summer 2022

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 rabinic 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

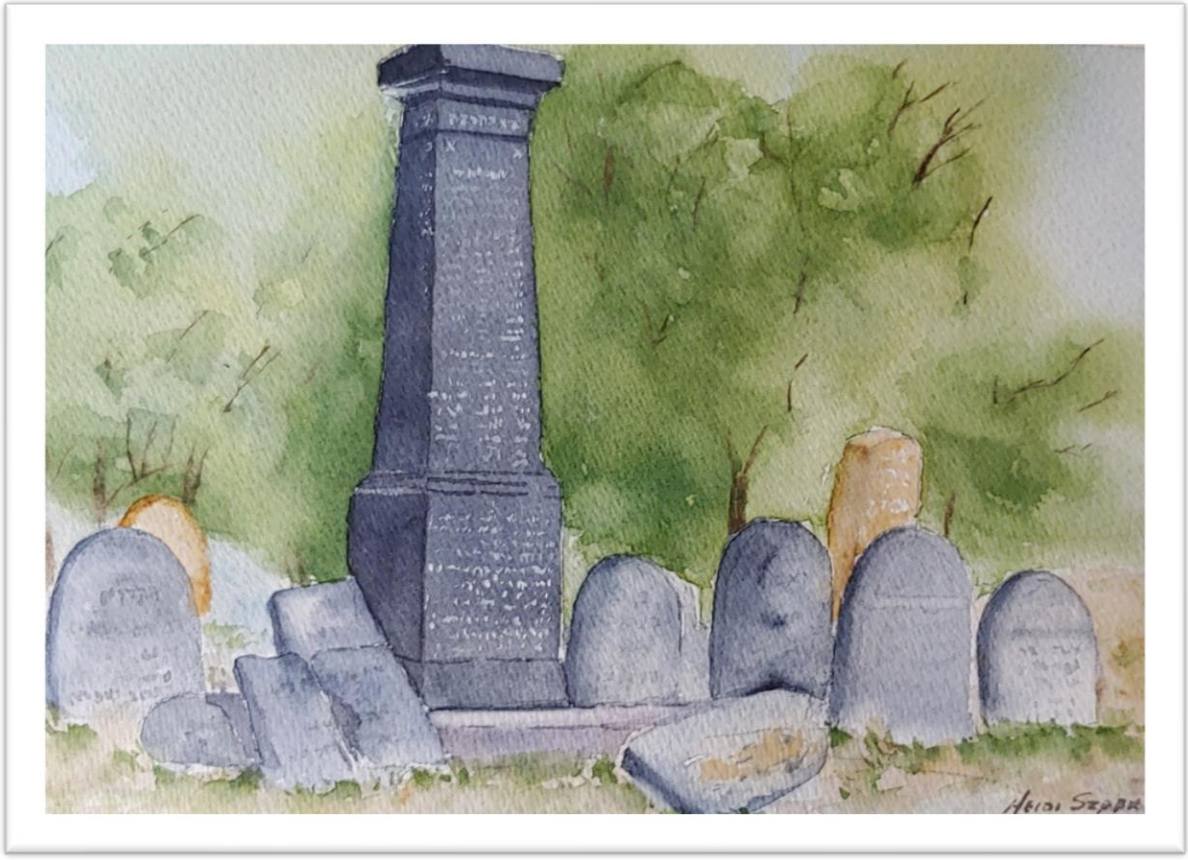
Rabbi Michael Schudrich
Chief Rabbi of Poland

The Union of Jewish Communites in Poland Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Schudrich

1. Memorial Pillar

שמעון באַרטאַוויסקי וויזט די צעשניטענע טיילן פון דעם פּאָגראָם דענקמאָל.

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



Memorial Pillar with restored upper register. Watercolor, 2021 (© Heidi Szpek)

2. Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern's Ohel

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

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

3. Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer's Symbolic *Ohel*

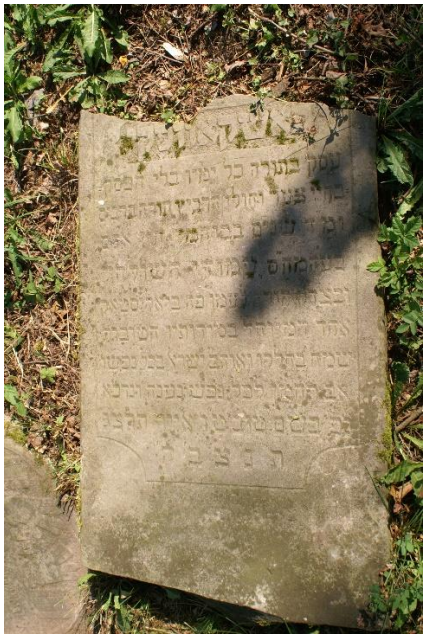
דער פונדאַמענט פון אוהל אויפן באַגראָבקער בית־עולם
ביים חרובן קבר פון הרב שמואל מאַהילעווער ז"ל
מיטן סימן באַצייכנט אונדזער לאַנדסמאַן דוד באַגאַן

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.

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

Watercolor, 2021. (© Heidi Szpek)

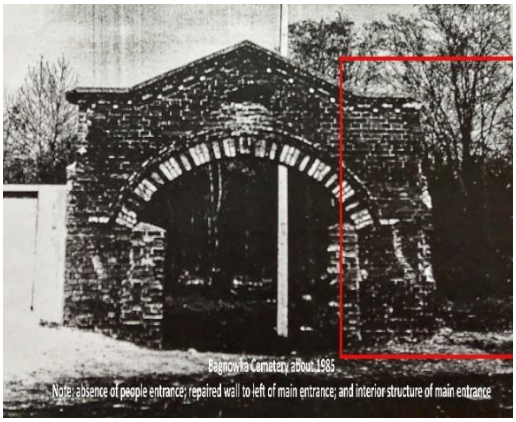
4. Color Restoration: Tombstone of Rabbi Benjamin Paszkowski (d. 1933)



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)

5. Main and Pedestrian Entrances



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.

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

6. Fencing: Replacement of Damaged Fencing

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 Zabludow (right).

7. The Mound Matzevoth and Memorial

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. 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 reinterned on Bagnowka Cemetery and now await a memorial stone in remembrance. The BCRF loaned funding for this project at a cost of $6500 USD.

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

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, Miroslaw 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 Suhnezeichen 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.

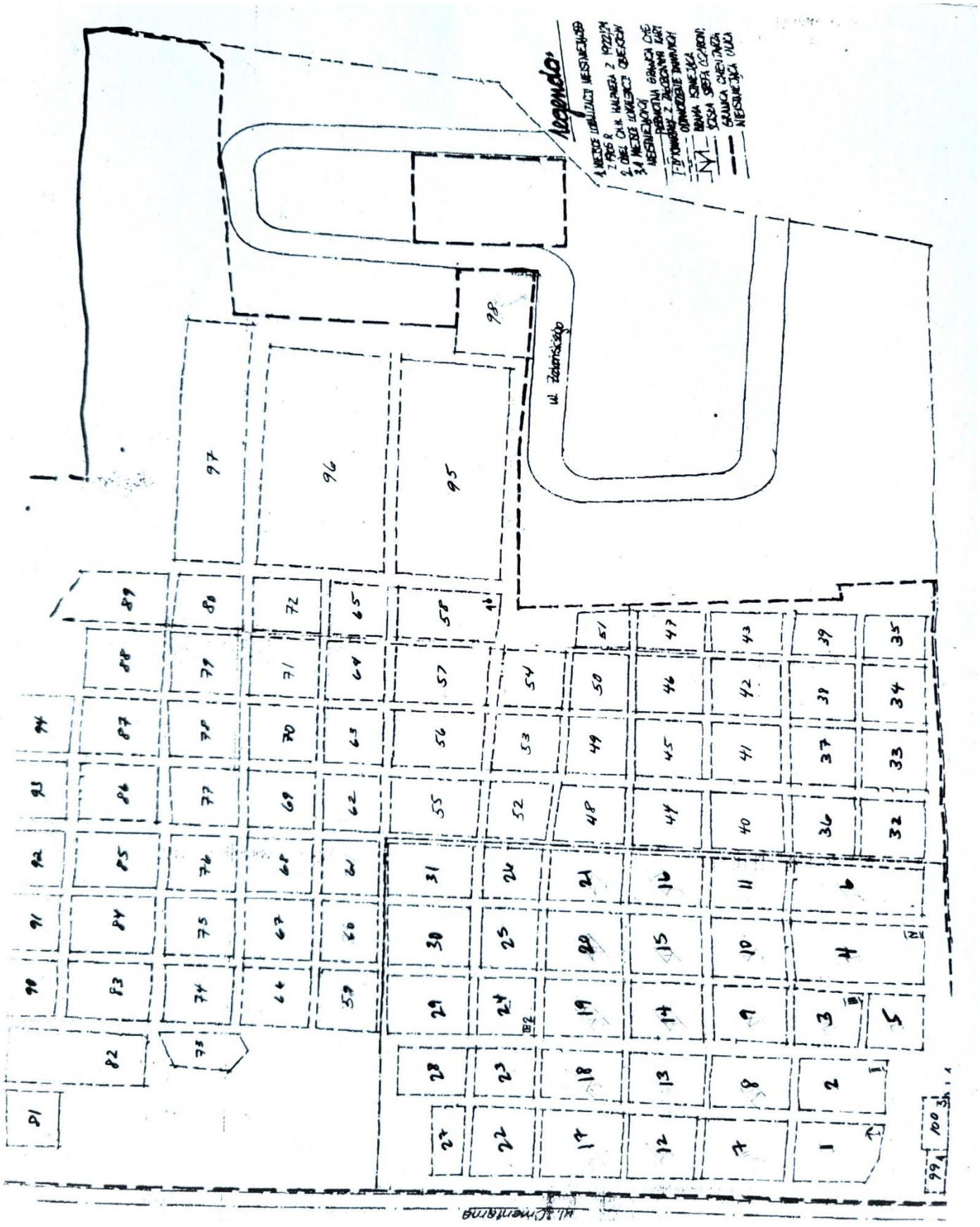
Since 2016, restoration on the cemetery took on a new direction, drawing on the vision and expertise of stone contractor Josh Degen and his wife, Amy Halpern Degen, of Massachusetts

(USA). On a roots and educational tour in 2015, Amy, with ancestral roots in Bialystok and 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 Ruszewicz, Przez, *Społeczne 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 BCRP 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-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. 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 reinterned on Bagnowka Cemetery and now await a memorial stone in remembrance.

Financials

Project	Estimate	Design Concept	Cost USD	Funding Source(s)		Total
Memorial Pillar	200			BCRF		200
Memorial Pillar			33,354.44	3,400 BCRF; GoFundMe		33,354.44
Rabbi Halpern Ohel	N/C					
Rabbi Halpern Ohel			16,963.78			16,963.78
Rabbi Mohilewer Ohel		2,000		SMŻB	In Kind	2,000
Rabbi Mohilewer Ohel			TBD			
Rabbi Paszkowski Tombstone	N/C		7,500			7,500
Cemetery Walls				City of Bialystok	In Kind	
Entrance Gate						10,000
City Water Hookup				City of Bialystok	In Kind	
Select Fencing Replacement			25,000			25,000
Cemetery Clearing Woods				City of Bialystok	In Kind	
Georadar Rabbinic Cemetery and Bagnowka Cemetery (6 areas)			8,000	Polytechnik Institute, Bialystok	In Kind	8,000
Mound Matzevoth Loan from BCRF			6,500			6,500
Mound Matzevoth Memorial		2,000		SMŻB	In Kind	2,000
Mound Matzevoth Memorial			TBD	City of Bialystok	In Kind	
Annual Restoration Budget			25,000	1. Summercamp Volunteers: 10-15,000 2. Various Donors 10-15,000		25,000
Total						136,518.22


Legenda:
ul. Żelaznickiego
ul. Jemiołowa