

Kletters, Geislers work to ensure that 800,000 Belarusian Jews slain in Holocaust are not forgotten

By MARILYN SHAPIRO

How does one keep the memory alive of the 800,000 Belarusian Jews killed during the Holocaust? For two Capital District Jewish families, and a couple from England, the answer was simple: One monument at a time.

The Republic of Belarus is a landlocked country in Europe bordered by Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. It was part of the Soviet Union when World War II began. Military operations during the war devastated the area, which lost about a third of its population and more than half of its economic resources. It was also the site of some of the most brutal mass slaughters of Jews perpetrated by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

In the first half of the 20th century, the Jews of Belarus were its third largest ethnic group. The population of cities such as Minsk, Pinsk, Mahiliou, Babrujsk, Vitsyebsk, and Gomel was more than 50% Jewish. Some 800,000 Jews—80% of the Jewish population—together with transports of Jews brought for extermination from the remaining communities of Western Europe, were killed in Belarus during the Holocaust. Many were killed by mass shootings, or by what is sometimes termed a “Holocaust by bullets,” in which victims were massacred in their own villages as their neighbors watched.

A Memorial Project

In 2006 Dr. Michael Lozman, a Capital District orthodontist, an activist for Jewish cemetery restoration in Europe, and in the Capital District for a Holocaust memorial, told Dr. Warren Geisler, an Albany dentist, of the “Holocaust by bullets” in Belarus. As a one-time partnership they, together with personal donations and with the help of community donations, built a memorial in Grozovo, Belarus to the 433 victims of the Holocaust there.

The late Dr. Miles Kletter, also a Capital District dentist and a friend of Geisler, donated to the building of the memorial at that site but felt that more should be done.

“Miles and Warren felt strongly about the injustice of the Holocaust and the tragedy of the Shoah,” said Marilyn Kletter widow of Miles Kletter. “They knew more needed to be done to remember the victims and serve as a warning to the future generations of what hate and bigotry can create when the people fall silent.”

Kletter researched and located Michael and Diana Lazarus in London, England, who had been building memorials since 2003 through their Simon Mark Lazarus Foundation. After multiple discussions, the dentists and their spouses, Miles and Marilyn Kletter and Warren and Beverly Geisler and their families each formed foundations in 2008. Their donations, together with that of the Lazarus family, would be placed into what was called the Belarus Holocaust Memorials Project (BHMP) through the American Jewish Committee in New York City.

Kletter Children Increase Involvement

These three foundations, together with Jewish communities and organizations across Belarus, established the Committee for the Preservation of Holocaust Victims’ Memory in



A monument placed in Orsha, Belarus.

the Republic of Belarus. The Committee, comprised of dedicated members of the community’s representative bodies, provides support in identifying the locations and coordinating the construction of Holocaust memorials.

In 2012, after Miles died of cancer, Cary and Joni Kletter, the son and daughter of Marilyn and Miles Kletter, took over their father’s work and now manage the project. They are involved with BHMP in a variety of ways: facilitating the foundation’s financial involvement, designing and managing the BHMP website; traveling to Belarus for ceremonies; coordinating with officials in Belarus; and working on the content and layout of the website.

500 Mass Killing Sites

Through research and the help of those individuals who lived in the area during the war, over 500 mass killing sites have been identified. The number of Jews that died at each site ranges from two to thousands. Each year, the Belarus Holocaust Memorial Foundation selects up to six sites. As of May 2018, 110 Holocaust memorials designed by Belarusian architect Leonid Levin have been erected where massacre occurred. The goal of the BHMP is to have memorials at every site.

At each mass killing location, a black granite stone, set on a flagstone platform is mounted on a pedestal. Each contains inscriptions in Belarusian, English and Hebrew stating that this monument was erected in memory of the victims of Nazism. When known, names of the victims are noted.

Recognition of the massacres also includes a plaque placed on a bridge abutment by a river where 3,400 Jews from the Baranovichy Ghetto were pulled off cattle cars, shot, and dropped in the river in the Zeliony Most region. Another memorial has been placed in a rolling field near Bagerovo, Belarus, a village where 4,670 Jews were forced to strip to their underwear, lined up, and shot and buried in an anti-tank trench.

Apologies And Appreciation

Dedications of the memorials at each site



At a monument in Belarus to Jews murdered in a “Holocaust by bullets” are several of the memorial organizers. The late Dr. Miles Kletter and Marilyn Kletter are in the front. Dr. Warren Geisler is back row center, with his father Mortimer Geisler, left and his nephew, Joshua Geisler.

draw hundreds of people. Many are from Belarus: representatives of the local authorities, members of the Jewish community, and representatives of Jewish organizations functioning in the region. The Israeli ambassador to Belarus as well as ambassadorial staff members

from Germany, United States, Great Britain, Israel, and the United States have also attended. Cary Kletter reports that at a dedication in 2017 the ambassador from Germany to Belarus publicly apologized to him and to all the attendees for the atrocities that had been committed.

Representatives of the Geisler, Kletter and Lazarus families have attended every ceremony, “Families suffered unspeakably tragic losses in Belarus during the Nazi occupation,” said Cary Kletter. “It is our earnest hope that knowledge of these memorials, in the cities, towns, villages, farmer’s fields, and forest clearings, the very sites where the massacres took place, will afford some small comfort.”

Geisler said one his most unforgettable moments was when the last living survivor of the Minsk ghetto came to a dedication. After introducing himself,

he thanked the dentist and the BHMP for what they are doing.

Those who lost relatives or witnessed the atrocities also attend. A member of one of the still grieving families said, “Now we have

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somewhere where we can stand to remember and mourn.”

Participants at a dedication light candles in memory of the victims, say prayers, including the Kaddish and El Malei Rachamim, and place flowers and stones on the monument. “It is a Jewish value to honor the dead,” Kletter said.

Zachor


Geisler stated that there is urgency to build more of these sites as survivors and witnesses to these crimes of humanity die. Along with the 500 recognized sites in Belarus, more than 1,200 exist in the Ukraine alone. “There should be a memorial for the people, a memorial for where it happened,” said Cary Kletter. “If nothing is done, these locations are lost to history.”

The recent rise of anti-Semitism in Europe has been disconcerting, noted Dr. Geisler. In 2014, the Belarus Government requested that a memorial be placed at a site where 2,500 children from the Orsha Ghetto were killed in November 1941 soon after their brutal separation from their parents. The dedication was attended by many Belarus government officials and was broadcast on national television. Soon after the dedication, the site was set afire and vandalized. Although it was rebuilt, the specter of bias hatred remains.

“Let the world know this insanity must never be tolerated again,” said Geisler at one of the many dedications he has attended. “Hundreds of years from now, visitors of future generations coming to these killing sites will bear witness to what happened.”

Information about the Belarus Holocaust Memorials may be found at the website <http://www.belarusmemorials.com>.

Marilyn Shapiro, formerly of Clifton Park, is now a resident of Kissimmee, Fla. A compilation of articles printed in The Jewish World, There Goes My Heart, is available. Marilyn Shapiro's blog is theregoesmyheart.me.



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SATURDAY, JUNE 2

Maccabi Fund-raiser, 7 -10 p.m. Emack and Bolio, 366 Delaware Ave., Albany. 10% of profits and tips support local 2018 Maccabi team. Info.— Andrew Katz, Albany JCC, 518-438-6651.

SUNDAY, JUNE 3

Kingston Multicultural Festival, 1-5:30 p.m., Gallo Park on the Strand, Rondout District. Free. International foods, dancers and musicians. A project of Reher Center for Immigrant Culture and History. Info.— www.rehercenter.org.

JWC Eat. Love. Pray. 11 a.m. The Hyatt Place, 20 State Farm Pl, Malta, \$20 before May 25, \$25, after. Gala buffet brunch for Jewish Women's Circle women's group. Rus Devorah Wallen to lead songfest. Sponsored by Chabads of Saratoga County. Res. 518- 495-0779, cliftonparkchabad.com.

New York City Celebrate Israel Pa-

rade, 7:30 a.m. – 8 p.m. New York City, 57th St. on 5th Ave., Manhattan. Jewish Federation of Northeastern N.Y. bus trip: \$30, includes bus, T-shirt. Parade participants must walk entire parade route. Spectators also welcome. Info.— mgalinkin@jewishfedny.org or 518-783-7800, ext. 239. Ulster Federation: Info.— on-line at www.jewishorangeny.org/2018parade, or 845-562-7860.

Broadway Voices, 3 p.m. Temple Emanuel, 243 Albany Ave., Kingston. \$50, \$37.50, seniors, \$25, students, children under 13, no cost. Four Broadway singers to perform mix of classics and new songs. Complementary reception. Info.— 845-338-4271 to reserve tickets, or www.cehv.org.

Beth Israel Sisterhood's Donor Luncheon, 11:30 a.m. Beth Israel, 2195 Eastern Parkway, Schenectady, \$35, members \$40, others. Also auction. Res. by Wednesday, 5/23. Info.— 518-399-8476.

Agudat Achim's Shomrei Kehillah Awards, 12- 3 p.m. Agudat Achim Synagogue, 2117 Union St., Schenectady. \$54. Congregation to honor Linda Birnby, Dick Medeleson, Mark and Barrie Handelman, Jeffrey and Eileen Handelman and Murray and Marsha Jaros. Info.— 518- 393-9211.

Temple Sinai Dinner Gala, 5-9 p.m. Embassy Suites, 86 Congress St., Saratoga Springs.

Shavuot, celebrating the giving of the law ...

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Defenders of the Heart.

Too many visits to the in-laws? For those who go to the mother-in-law's every week, she wonders, “Why not set up your own rituals and invite her over?”

As to conflicts over in-laws giving stuff to your kids on your do-not-serve list, Kagan observes, “If grandma is going to give their grandchild some ice cream, it's not go-

ing to kill them. Yours is the house in which the fire burns, why the power struggle?”

And as if asking us all to be a little more Ruth-like in our responses to what might seem like potential mother-in-law conflict, Kagan counsels first thinking, “Let's see if we can find a way to make this work.”

Edmon J. Rodman is a columnist who writes on Jewish life from Los Angeles.



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