

# **A Jewish Cemetery Preservation Demonstration Project for Western Ukraine**

Marla Raucher Osborn

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The region of eastern Galicia (now the westernmost oblasts of Ukraine) was multicultural for centuries until World War II, despite changing governments, laws, and economic structures. Nearly all Jews in the region were murdered in the Holocaust, and subsequent Soviet policy displaced ethnic Poles and Ukrainians. These events created a nearly monocultural population with fragmented connections to the land and settlements. Ukraine's independence has inspired vigorous interest in its heritage by citizens in all regions, and curiosity about the many cultures which once flourished in the country. At the same time, foreigners whose ancestors once lived in the region are traveling there to better understand those earlier lives. Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews are all interested in finding and preserving the physical evidence of cultural heritage which connects them. Some small successes have been achieved, usually by driven individuals. However, a general lack of knowledge, tools, funding, and especially communication causes many efforts to dissipate, which impedes broad and stable preservation progress.

I have many years of experience with Jewish heritage preservation projects in western Ukraine. Therefore, I am well aware of the challenges facing local and foreign activists. With Fulbright funding and with the support of host institutions and regional experts, I propose to conduct a specific heritage preservation project in the western Ukrainian town of Rohatyn, and to develop the research results as a knowledge base for use on other projects in the region.

## **Project Overview**

Until WWII, Jews made up approximately 10% of the population of what is now western Ukraine (vs. about 2% currently in the United States). Rohatyn was typical of small, mixed urban-rural settlements, having a total population around 8000, of which 40% were Jewish. As in other towns, the Jewish community built a number of synagogues, schools, and ritual bath houses, and established two large cemeteries. Jews lived in Rohatyn for nearly 400 years, and were present in nearly all aspects of the life of their town, especially in business, which brought them into regular engagement with the Ukrainian and Polish communities of the area.

More than 95% of Rohatyn's Jews died in the Holocaust, the majority by gunfire over pits at the outskirts of town. The Nazis aimed to eliminate not only the Jews in the region, but also their cultural and physical heritage. By the war's end, most Jewish community buildings in Rohatyn were deliberately destroyed or damaged, and, typical of eastern Galicia (but unlike elsewhere in Holocaust-impacted Europe), the Jewish cemeteries had been largely stripped of their headstones for use in road and building construction. Postwar economic constraints and Soviet policies of indifference to other cultures led to further decay of the surviving buildings and cemeteries. Today, evidence of this heritage and its original community purpose is nearly invisible, and many local residents are ignorant of the shared local history.

I am a descendant of Rohatyn Jews who emigrated to the United States before the Holocaust. This stimulated my life-long interest in the town and its history. On one of my first visits to Rohatyn in early 2011, a Ukrainian local historian and retired teacher showed me a small number of Jewish headstone fragments abandoned at a roadside, and asked what should be done –

meaning, what could I do. That encounter began an informal project to recover Jewish headstone fragments from around Rohatyn and return them to one of the Jewish cemeteries. In the seven years since, well over 500 fragments have been recovered and returned, most of them a third to a half of an original complete headstone. Many fragments are engraved with epitaphs and carved with iconography typical of Ashkenazi grave markers of central Europe. These stones are visually striking, and serve as symbolic proxies for the lost Jewish community, providing a window into the multicultural history of the town of Rohatyn.

Since my initial encounter with the stone fragments, I have visited western Ukraine dozens of times, for a few days or a few months. I have worked at the heritage sites in Rohatyn, participated in other Jewish heritage projects and activities in the region, and learned about the many cultural perspectives and histories which overlap there. I have begun to develop contacts among academics and professionals with interest and experience in disciplines related to the broader heritage issues I face in Rohatyn. I have also interacted with many local government officials, NGO leaders, and activists in heritage, education, and civil action.

Two years ago, my husband and I took an unusual step to continue this work: we rented an apartment in Lviv and formed a Ukrainian non-profit NGO "Rohatyn Jewish Heritage". The NGO and its activities are primarily funded from our personal savings, with some help from small private donations. The NGO website conveys the history of Rohatyn's Jewish community as a component of the overall history of the town and nearby villages. The website also documents the status of our projects to protect and preserve the sites, and provides reference information which serves other projects in the region. As information is added to the website, it is translated into Ukrainian to make it available for further research and to support a dialogue with the Ukrainian residents of Rohatyn today, and others in the region.

Apart from the ongoing recovery of Jewish headstones from streets, buildings, and gardens in Rohatyn, most of our work to date has been on intangible heritage preservation, including historical research and publication. We have made significant progress in telling the story of Rohatyn's lost Jewish community, and we have taken important initial steps to study and document some components of the surviving physical heritage in town, including a non-invasive archaeological survey of the WWII Jewish mass graves. A critical next step is to secure/protect the tangible heritage, to help re-integrate memory of the former Jewish community into the modern life of the town.

My project will focus on the old Jewish cemetery in Rohatyn, with four specific outcomes:

- clearing and cleaning a half acre portion of the cemetery of wild vegetation and debris
- gathering and consolidating recovered Jewish headstones into that cleared space
- creating a conservation and management plan for the entire cemetery, incorporating a memorial on the site which makes appropriate use of the recovered headstones
- developing the data, methods, and tools I generate through the project work as a knowledge base and case study for the discipline in the region and beyond

To achieve this, I will seek guidance from a variety of expert advisers in key academic and professional disciplines, especially in Lviv and western Ukraine. Forming these connections is an essential part of the project, and for my future heritage work in Rohatyn and the region.

## **Project Methodology**

Today the old Jewish cemetery in Rohatyn is a nearly-empty field of grass and wild shrubs, roughly one hectare (about 2.5 acres) in area. The place appears barren, and is rarely visited. Only about a dozen broken standing headstones and grave covers remain in place from the thousands of stone markers which once filled the centuries-old space.

My education in the law, and my professional experience in legal research and developing agreements and contracts, will support the project's need to negotiate with government officials and form alliances with local and regional administrators. Through my NGO, I already have a signed cooperative agreement in place with the City of Rohatyn (which owns the cemetery land) which will facilitate my project to research and develop heritage preservation plans for the site.

The Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, an institute of historical scholarship in Lviv, will help me develop working relationships with academics and professionals in the city and the region, for research and development in the fields of architecture, history, urban planning, archaeology, law, engineering, and cultural heritage conservation. Importantly, the Center will integrate me with their robust public history program, and provide resources and expertise as well as venues for workshops and other project events. The Center has already initiated contact on my behalf with the Institute of Architecture at Lviv Polytechnic National University, where three departments focus on disciplines applicable to my project. I will also draw on a variety of other academic, professional, religious, and lay sources for some aspects of the project, when unique knowledge or skills are needed.

The project is organized in overlapping phases; key elements of the methodology include:

- Research and Analysis: statutory and religious law, state and community archives, literature of the applicable disciplines
- Strategy: communication, community involvement, integration with City plans
- Surveys: landscape 3D, fixed feature inventory, headstone materials, soils, accessibility
- Concepts: landscape architecture, headstone conservation, memorial monument, signage
- Engineering: headstone tagging tools and methods, documentation, database
- Workshops: ideas and issues exchanges with students and colleagues
- Reviews: academics, Rohatyn civic leaders, rabbinical authorities, experienced practitioners
- Costed Plans: landscape architecture, headstone conservation, memorial monument, signage, site management
- Site Preparation: clearing and organizing the land and recovered headstones
- Documentation and Skills Sharing: designs and supporting data, tested best practices, case study for heritage forums, conferences, seminars
- Publications and Exhibitions: Jewish Heritage Europe web portal, Rohatyn local history museum, RJH NGO website, international family history forums, social media forums

I will continuously review my progress on the project to document practical and process issues and decisions for inclusion in the planned knowledge base materials and to support developing heritage networks and information hubs in the region and in Europe. I will document both the strengths and weaknesses of the project's outcomes, and the factors which affected them.

I have organized the project plan in phases so that earlier research efforts will inform later design and development work, and so I can build and apply relationships with regional academics and professionals. The proposed project schedule is a two-term, 10-month grant period beginning

September 2019, allowing for seasonal weather (affecting field work such as surveys, sampling, inventory preparation), suitably-timed student workshops, and reasonable response times from archives, businesses, and government officials.

Physical realization of the cemetery conservation and memorial design is outside the scope of the Fulbright project, but I hope to begin fundraising to support that work in late 2020.

### **Dependencies and Risks**

Based on preliminary planning and discussions with long-term advisers, I believe the project is feasible in the proposed time period, and sufficiently flexible to adapt around schedule and resource issues which may be encountered during the work. Key institutions serving as hosts for this project are robust in their faculty and staff, reducing my dependence on individual experts. I have considered other factors of language, cultural relations, and political conflict as well.

This project will bring together the local Rohatyn community (and other Ukrainians in the region) with the Jewish diaspora in the United States and elsewhere, and many other interested individuals and groups around the world. For the project outcomes to be successfully realized, it is essential that all project documentation created in one language (English or Ukrainian) be summarized or fully translated into the other. I am a native English speaker with beginning Ukrainian language skills (improving slowly with time). However, I am already accustomed to the dual-language requirement in my other work for the Rohatyn Jewish Heritage NGO, and I routinely hire interpreters for meetings and translators for publications and the website. I will of course continue this practice throughout the proposed project.

Intercultural tensions between Ukrainians and Jews are generally low in western Ukraine, and my ongoing work in the region provides opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and appreciation. In my frequent and sometimes extended visits to Rohatyn, and in travel across the region, I have never been subject to anti-Semitism. Instead, I am often approached with genuine curiosity and appreciation, and treated as an informal cultural ambassador for America and for Jews, a role I accept with pride. Incidents of anti-ethnic vandalism at heritage sites certainly occur in the region, and my project designs will need to anticipate that, but the severity, frequency, and causes of incidents are currently no worse than in many places (including the United States). Because the proposed Fulbright project completes before physical implementation, this risk is more theoretical than practical.

Serious risks associated with the armed conflict in the Donets river basin in eastern Ukraine are likely very small, as is true throughout western Ukraine. Disruption in government services and banking procedures plus economic constraints on local and regional administrations due to the conflict are expected to continue at moderate levels, all tolerable to the project and already part of my experience in Ukraine.

### **Importance of the Project**

Visitors to Ukraine from America and elsewhere are often inspired by their first encounter with Jewish heritage in need, and seek ways to study, engage, and support. Through my own heritage project in Rohatyn and my volunteer work on other regional projects, just in the past two years I have been contacted for information and discussion by more than a dozen Fulbright scholars and students, ten Peace Corps volunteers, and many other visiting academics from across America, Europe, and Israel, either for input to their projects or simple interest. I am also frequently contacted by Americans and others with Jewish roots in western Ukraine, looking to find and

support heritage projects in their ancestral towns, but without the knowledge or practical means to do so.

In parallel, over the past several years I have met many Ukrainians, mostly non-Jewish, who aim to start or advance Jewish heritage projects in their own towns, and a few who actively run volunteer organizations with components related to education and heritage preservation. These individuals and small organizations face the same challenges I do, and look to me for advice and recommendations on many topics. Together we are forming an informal network of regional Jewish heritage activists, sharing lessons learned and new issues in need of problem-solving. The volunteer spirit is high in the region, but individuals and small organizations cannot each do the necessary research to determine best ways to organize, design, and implement heritage projects.

Local and foreign people now realize that Jewish heritage in Ukraine is shared heritage, reflected in the name of a key early agency established to identify and protect heritage in central Europe: the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. I believe my project provides an opportunity to put this philosophy into practice, to demonstrate cooperation between peoples across cultural and political borders, and to create and strengthen connections between knowledge workers in western Ukraine and practical and cultural concerns in the region.

### **Outcomes, Contributions, and Benefits**

Dissemination of the qualitative data, methods, and learning from the project is a major component of my proposal, and the impetus for my application. Many Jewish heritage preservation projects are conducted in isolation, and few are documented publicly as case studies to promote discussion and learning by interested activists and institutions. The unique circumstances and needs of Jewish heritage projects in western Ukraine are under-studied in European and international cultural heritage programs, and under-funded by international governmental and NGO organizations. Communication of the issues and results of this project in the form of workshops, conferences, seminars, exhibitions, and published case studies will be a significant contribution, both during and after the grant period. These publications and events can be useful for researchers, educators, and students at my formal and informal host institutions, for Ukraine, and for the discipline of cultural heritage preservation as it is applied in the region.

Clear and practical benefits for my future work and for the City of Rohatyn will be the physical preparation of a portion of the cemetery, and the detailed designs which can be used to plan and implement the cemetery rehabilitation, headstone conservation, the memorial monument, and information signage. The resources, contacts, and learning gained through the project process will also aid future heritage projects I lead in Rohatyn and support in the region.

If carried into physical implementation of the resulting designs, the project also has the potential to produce important outcomes which are typical of cultural heritage site development, including increased heritage tourism (benefiting both the local economy and visiting foreign descendants) and more direct dialogue between Ukrainian residents and Jewish visitors seeking shared history. In my experience working with citizen activists and volunteers to rehabilitate Jewish heritage in western Ukraine, even the simple act of joint work days clearing a cemetery or recovering headstones can lead to greater appreciation of cultural similarities between groups, and greater tolerance of differences. An inherently cooperative project such as this one should resonate both locally and at a distance, inspiring others in America and elsewhere to consider how they may be able to engage with their own shared heritage.