

[ARC Main Page](#)[Belzec Building Site](#)

## Washington Post 28th Dec 2003

Last Update 1 January 2004

### Unearthing the Horror of Belzec

In Poland, a Forgotten Nazi Camp Becomes Hallowed Ground

By Alan Elsner

Special to The Washington Post  
Sunday, December 28, 2003; Page D01

In a back room at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum just off the Mall, Jacek Nowakowski, the Polish-born curator of acquisitions and research, is laboring over a new exhibit, patiently sifting through archives, assembling rare photographs and documents. But visitors to the museum in Washington will never see this display. Early next year, it will be boxed up and shipped off to Belzec, a small town in eastern Poland near the Ukrainian border. There, it will become an integral part of a new memorial to more than half a million Jews, gassed to death in the space of less than a year in 1942.

The Belzec memorial, due to be formally inaugurated next spring, is especially significant because it is being built on the site of one of the six Nazi extermination camps in Poland where the bulk of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust were murdered. It will also be a Holocaust memorial unlike any other. Visitors will be confronted with a flat, featureless site bereft of vegetation, covered with gravel. As they enter, they will begin to descend a path about 180 yards long that will slowly take them deeper and deeper into the bowels of the Earth. Walls will rise above them on either side as they continue to descend, finally reaching a point 60 feet beneath the surface where they will come to a halt facing a wall of remembrance. To one side, they will see the names of individual victims as well as of the scores of Jewish communities that met their end in Belzec.

"We were looking for a memorial appropriate to the scale and scope of what happened at a site where perhaps as many as one in 10 of all victims of the Holocaust were murdered," said Michael Berenbaum, a member of the jury that chose the winning design submitted by Polish architect Andrzej Solyga. "This design had power and majesty. The visitor will descend, walking as a pilgrim, entering a terrain without an easy exit. It evokes the experience of people confronted with no way to escape. It will not be an easy experience, but it's not meant to be."

After reaching the wall, visitors will move along a side path around the camp perimeter, finally entering the museum, where they will see the exhibits designed in Washington and learn about the unique and evil role Belzec played in world history.

I first visited the site of the Belzec extermination camp in 1993. I was researching a book about my father's experiences during the Second World War and suggested that we travel to the place where his parents as well as many aunts, uncles and cousins had perished. But the camp proved difficult to find. There was not a single signpost in the village pointing to it. We finally found it, a couple of miles out of town next to a sawmill, beside a railway line. There was no parking area. We pulled up next to the gate, beside a private house from which pop music was blaring on the radio. We were the only visitors. We entered the site and began to walk around.

There was not a single Jewish emblem -- not a Hebrew word, not a Star of David, although there was a small statue of the Virgin Mary among the trees. The place was overgrown with weeds; the steps surrounding the central memorial were crumbling. I saw two women with shopping bags taking a shortcut home through the camp. The main memorial consisted of a sculpture of two emaciated figures clutching one another, erected by the Polish Communist authorities in the 1960s. For my father, the experience was overwhelming. As soon as we entered he was overcome with great, shuddering sobs. Yet there was nothing to give a sense

of comfort or consolation. I was overcome by deep anger. How did this sacred site, this place of horror and evil and martyrdom, come to be so neglected, so dishonored?

In Jacek Nowakowski's exhibit, there is a single chilling quotation that explains the historic significance of Belzec. In his book "Ordinary Men," historian Christopher Browning wrote: "In mid-March 1942, some 75 to 80 percent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, while 20 to 25 percent had perished. A mere eleven months later, in mid-February 1943, the percentages were exactly reversed." Belzec was key to this equation. It was the first mass extermination camp, the place where the Nazis perfected their use of the gas chamber. It achieved an average kill rate of 50,000 a month. There were four primitive extermination cells. Carbon monoxide gas from diesel engines was pumped in to kill the victims.

An SS officer, one Lt. Gerstein, saw one gassing. He described how the Jews were packed into the gas chamber so tightly they could not move. When the doors closed, the diesel engine would not work. Finally after three hours, it stuttered to life. "Up till then people were alive in these chambers -- 4 times 750 people in 4 times 45 cubic meters. Another 25 minutes went by. True, many were now dead. After 28 minutes, only a few were still alive. At last after 32 minutes, everyone was dead," Gerstein wrote. They stood there, he wrote, "like pillars of basalt, still erect, not having any place to fall."

Despite its phenomenal killing record, the Germans shut down Belzec early in 1943. They were running out of space for the bodies, which were dumped in nearby anti-tank ditches. Virtually all the Jewish communities in southern and eastern Poland with easy rail links to Belzec had already been destroyed. By then, the Nazis had built other extermination camps at Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz, where they intended to murder all the Jews still living in the rest of Poland, and then the rest of Europe.

When they closed the camp, the Germans tried to erase telltale signs. Bodies were removed from mass graves, bones were crushed with a special machine, the remains were burned and the ashes scattered. Only two or three Jews survived Belzec and few of the Germans who operated the camp were identified or brought to justice. Through the long years of Communist rule, the site fell into disrepair and was half-forgotten, except by historians and the relatives of those who had perished there. Returning to Washington, I wrote several articles about what I had seen and began to receive telephone calls from others who had visited the site. A determination began to build among the relatives of survivors that a new memorial must be built. But it was only when Miles Lerman threw himself into the project that it really took off. A leader in the effort to build the Holocaust Museum in Washington, Lerman was then serving as its chairman. Remarkably, Lerman had grown up only five miles from Belzec and knew the place well. His family had owned a flour mill across the road from the site of the camp. His mother, his sister and three nephews had all died there within sight of the family business. Lerman himself spent the war fighting along with partisans in eastern Poland. "I was determined to see this project through, not just because my family died there but because half a million Jews died there. I was not prepared to allow them to go into oblivion. On one of my own visits, I saw beer bottles and condoms littering the ground. It was a desecration," he said.

Lerman threw all his resources and prestige into the effort. In 1995 he negotiated an agreement with the post-Communist Polish authorities to build a new memorial. The parties agreed to split the costs, with the Polish government picking up half and the other half to be raised privately by Jews in the United States and elsewhere.

"This project has been a model of cooperation. When we have had problems, we have worked them out constructively and amicably. This shows that Poles and Jews can work together to preserve historic memory," said Lerman.

Later, the American Jewish Committee stepped forward as the main U.S. sponsor of the project. In 1997 the design for the new memorial was chosen, and in the following years, an archaeological survey pinpointed the locations of 33 mass graves that were previously unknown. Historians gained valuable new understanding about the way the extermination camp had functioned, including its exact dimensions, the locations of key structures and the disposal of human remains.

Then the project stalled. Not everybody, it seemed, liked the new design. One New York rabbi in particular tried to block it. In articles and in legal action, Avi Weiss, the senior rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, has argued that the descending passage has disturbed the human remains of camp victims. He described it as a gash ripping through the tortured remains of the victims, and argued that it sent a signal that it was permissible to dig into the remains of the dead.

The American Jewish Committee's agreement with Poland took care to protect human remains. Construction was supervised by Rabbi Michael Schudrich, the Orthodox rabbi serving Warsaw and Lodz. He in turn sought counsel from Rabbi Elyakim Schlesinger, regarded as the foremost ultra-Orthodox authority on the preservation of Jewish cemeteries in Europe, before allowing the project to move forward.

"Every effort has been made in every respect, with rabbinical supervision, to try to protect the dignity of the site. Everybody understands that what is being done is to protect this site for all time and to restore to the victims the dignity they deserve," said AJC Executive Director David Harris.

For Lerman, Nowakowski and many others whose loved ones perished at Belzec, the central point is that the memory of the victims be preserved. The Belzec memorial promises to do so in a dignified, powerful and appropriate way.