

<http://www.nationalpost.com/news/canada/story.html?id=2785504>

NATIONAL POST

Saturday, April 10, 2010

The Saturday Interview: Meylakh Sheykhet, protector of Ukraine's lost Jewish cemeteries

Kathryn Blaze Carlson, National Post



Brett Gundlock/National Post

Ever since he ventured into the Ukrainian countryside and saw the remnants of bulldozed Jewish cemeteries, and ever since he saw Holocaust mass graves that lie unkempt in the forests there, Meylakh Sheykhet has fought for the right to remember.

Over the past 20 years, Mr. Sheykhet has found and worked to restore more than 150 Jewish cemeteries in Ukraine and neighbouring Belarus, cemeteries that were destroyed or forgotten under Soviet rule.

With his greying beard and traditional Jewish dress, Mr. Sheykhet is known in Ukraine and beyond as the guardian of Jewish cemeteries. His voice is calm but impassioned as he speaks of his mission to preserve the history of a once-thriving Jewish community.

"When I witnessed the lost cemeteries for the first time, with their tombstones broken and bowed to the earth, I felt deeply connected," said Mr. Sheykhet, who is in Toronto this weekend to address Ukrainian and Jewish audiences on his efforts. "I cannot explain it, but they called out for my protection."

Among the villages assailed by the Nazis is the western Ukraine town of Sambir, which is home to Mr. Sheykhet's latest quest: A centuries-old Jewish cemetery, where a Holocaust mass grave also lies.

On the first day of Passover in 1943, more than 1,200 Jews were shot and buried at the cemetery in Sambir, which was called Sambor when the town was part of Poland. Today, the cemetery -- its tombstones destroyed in 1974 -- doubles as a garbage dump and an overgrown pasture for cattle grazing.

Mark Freiman, president of the Canadian Jewish Congress, made his own pilgrimage to the cemetery in 2007, paying homage with his brother to their grandparents and aunts and uncles who perished there during the Holocaust.

"All of my instincts told me I had to undertake an effort to memorialize this place," Mr. Freiman said from his Toronto home. "Seeing the place, touching the stones, and lighting a memorial candle in front of the mass grave made the history entirely real and entirely personal."

Mr. Freiman's partnership with Mr. Sheykhet began in the fall of last year, and has so far sparked the beginnings of a historic assessment of the site. Their work, sometimes lonely and with few allies, picks up where another Canadian's efforts left off.

Jack Gardner, a Ukraineborn Jew who emigrated to Canada by way of the United States in 1981, spent his dying years trying to memorialize the cemetery in Sambir--first restoring the bullet-pocked execution wall and, in 2000, enacting a Star of David memorial stone near the mass grave.

The site was thrust into controversy a year later, when a group of vandals dug up the stone in the darkness of night, replacing the Jewish symbol with three 30-foot crosses. Nearly a decade later, the crosses -- which were blessed by a priest, complicating their removal--still stand.

"To put up crosses is to say to the Jews, 'You don't have the right to remember,'" said Mr. Sheykhet, adding that the erection of the crosses was a rogue act by a small minority, and that the local population has otherwise been receptive to his efforts.

Mr. Sheykhet's own relatives do not lie in this place -- his family survived the Holocaust working for the Russian army outside the front lines -- but it is a place to which he feels deeply connected, and one he is compelled to restore and protect, he said.

Mr. Sheykhet grew up in a religious family in Lviv, just 75 kilometres from Sambir, and spent much of his life shrouding his beliefs from the KGB, the national security agency of the Soviet Union. He had a secret library of books which he would share with his Jewish friends, later flying to Moscow to join underground circles in fighting for Jewish rights.

"The first time I met Meylakh, I was blown away by the aura of goodness that is attached to him," Mr. Freiman said. "He doesn't just work to protect the final resting place of the dead, he also works to revive the Jewish spark in the remnants of the community there in Ukraine."

Mr. Sheykhet's office is in the old Jewish quarter of Lviv, just steps from what remains of the historic Golden Rows Synagogue, which Mr. Sheykhet is working to preserve through a grant from the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. One of the synagogue's most prominent rabbis, Mr. Sheykhet said, is buried in the cemetery beneath what is today the city's Krakivsky market.

For Mr. Sheykhet, the right to honour the dead in Ukraine is worth fighting for, despite obstacles created by government bureaucracy, which officially declared the Sambir cemetery a park in the late 1970s.

"We are stuck," said Mr. Sheykhet, whose effort to designate the Sambir site as a cemetery was rejected by the courts in 2004. "The Ukrainian people who live in the free world need to speak the truth, and openly say that they don't agree with this."

Much of his hope lies in the Ukrainian-Canadian community, the world's second-largest Ukrainian diaspora.

Paul Grod, president of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, which is involved in the project through consultation, said Sambir represents an opportunity for the Jewish and Ukrainian communities to partner in a way that may not have been possible decades ago.

"Sambir is a perfect example of the challenges that have been created as a result of the Soviet Union," said Mr. Grod, who was approached by Mr. Freiman about the initiative last fall.

"It's incumbent upon us to get beyond our challenging history and start trying to build a bridge between our peoples," he said. "This is a slow process, it's one step at a time."

In Lviv, Mr. Sheykhet said he is thanked by the locals, who tell him, "It's our common history, and we must share this common memory."

Meantime, Jews from around the world have journeyed to the sites Mr. Sheykhet has preserved, paying respect to the dead at the once-orphaned and unmarked grave sites.

"Jews have been disconnected from their past here," Mr. Sheykhet said. "I want to revive this place with our new generation. It may never be like it used to be, but it's still an honour to do this work."

kcarlson@nationalpost.com