

DOROTA
Michael Nevins



In late 2015 I received an e-mail message from a high school language teacher in Dabrowa Bialostocka in northeastern Poland from where my paternal grandparents emigrated during the 1890s. Dorota Budzinska explained that she and her students were studying the history of their town's former Jewish community and also were clearing their abandoned cemetery. Now she was planning a Jewish Culture Day to be held the next spring and would I be willing to come and speak? Dorota had read an on-line translation of a memorial (*yizkor*) book that I'd written in 1982 and considered me to be an authority on this place — so how could I say no? So on May 24, 2016, along with my son Ted and grandson Sam, we spent a memorable day in my grandparent's shtetl and in 2017 and 2023 returned again with other members of my family and on each of these visits spent several hours in Dabrowa getting to know this remarkable woman and her students.

In 2019 Dorota Budzinska was nominated for the prestigious POLIN Award which honors individuals “who preserve the memory of the history of Polish Jews and contribute to shaping a common future, mutual understanding, and respect.” What follows here (slightly edited) is adapted from certain things she has written about how and why she became interested in preserving local Jewish history.

I am a teacher and a pedagogue, so I am aware that my attitude, opinions and behavior have an impact on the youth I work with. I try to account for my activism so that young people ‘get it.’ I have to be authentic in whatever I say or do. For this reason I make it clear that by studying the town’s Jewish history I am also studying a history of our community, our “small homeland”, something that has passed but continues to endure — not only in material form, but also in mentality. In an environment where a variety of nations and religions exist, it is vital to teach tolerance through joint activities and shared knowledge.

My first point of reference was the Jewish cemetery in my hometown of Lipsk [Leipzig], a curious place where I studied the “stones” with cryptic symbols – yet fascinating for a child. I remember placing my own hands against those carved on the headstones. Then there were some family secrets and talks of Jews hidden in the cellar of my grandparents’ house during the war....This is also the time of attempting to understand the “phenomenon” of a large community that had existed and disappeared; a community that was not only “wiped out” by historical events, but also erased from human memory of small towns and big cities. Later, Dąbrowa’s Jewish cemetery was like a silent reproach – although it was surrounded with a fence, it was a neglected and littered site and It took me a long time to reach a decision to change this state.

Dąbrowa has a rich history and multicultural population, but Jews no longer live here — nevertheless] hey are still present buried at the Jewish cemetery. As a Polish language teacher, I’ve been teaching about the Holocaust anti-Semitism and intolerance for many years and also have counted a number of Tatar families among my friends, I have experienced criticism and heard opinions that these people are foreign, different, and there is no reason to be friends with them. However, this distinctiveness is what fascinated and attracted me to them and it is my impression that knowing them has enriched me and allowed me to better understand others and the world around me.

A turning point was my participation in the Summer School on Teaching about the Holocaust and, when I came back from Kraków, decided it was now or never that I would attempt to retrace Dąbrowa's Jewish past, even if I had no professional training as a historian. However as a teacher I'm aware that my attitude, opinions and behavior have an impact on the youth I work with and I try to account for my activism so that young people "get it". I have to be authentic in whatever I say or do and made it clear that by studying the town's Jewish history I am also studying a history of our community, our "small homeland"; something that has passed, but continues to endure – not only in material form, but also in mentality.

Every year, I have new students who get involved in various initiatives, and continue receiving support from my school's graduates. I hear praise from some local residents and receive support from regional and school authorities. Also, words I read or hear from descendants of Dąbrowa's Jews, as well as their visits and artworks make me happy. Of course, I also encounter negative feedback, unfortunately even at my own school but I continue my mission, with a firm belief that my activism has a purpose.

In an environment where a variety of nations and religions exist, it is vital to teach tolerance through joint activities and shared knowledge. Stereotypes, intolerance and indifference all stem from lack of knowledge, among other things. Despite some difficulties and criticism, I have the impression that – together with the young generation – we have managed to do what was most important — to restore the memory of Jewish Dąbrowa and so this memory lives on. Paraphrasing the poet Jerzy Ficowski, our patron, we 'read the ashes' but also hope to create a better future, free of prejudice and collective amnesia.



Dorota and her students cleaning Dabrowa's Jewish cemetery. She's written that "the Jewish cemetery [for me] was like a silent reproach; although surrounded by a fence, it was a neglected and littered site...Students' efforts make town inhabitants familiar with the Jewish past of their town and by bringing back the memory of places like the cemetery, we can safely say that their memory lasts.



Zooming to the USA

ADDENDUM: From an e-mail concerning recent resurgence of intolerance in Poland that I received from Dorota, August 5, 2026.

“...Unfortunately, we have learned nothing from the past—from human tragedies, murders, and hatred. In Poland, I am watching with concern the rise of anti-Ukrainian sentiment; there have been attacks and beatings of Ukrainians. In polls, more than half of Poles express hostility or hatred toward Ukraine and its citizens. They accuse them of competing in the labor market, fraudulently obtaining social benefits, and taking advantage of social “privileges.” Under pressure from far-right parties, the government has withdrawn aid for children and people with disabilities from Ukraine. A misguided “historical policy” (referring to the so-called Volhynia massacre of 1943, when Ukrainian nationalists murdered over 100,000 Poles) is being used to fuel hatred. This is very sad and disturbing....”

