

FOUNDED APRIL 22, 1897

## Preserve Memory of Shoah By Maintaining Memorials

By **WARREN MILLER**

**O**n July 4, while we celebrated independence in America, the Polish town of Kielce commemorated the date in a far more somber manner. That a commemoration was even held, however, is cause for some degree of celebration.

On July 4, 1946, Kielce was gripped by rumors that the Jews who had just recently returned from Nazi death camps had kidnapped a Christian child to use his blood for a Jewish ritual. These survivors were attempting to reclaim their lives, but as the age-old blood libel spread, they were set upon by their neighbors.

As the mob attacked, hundreds of onlookers and bystanders did nothing. Some Polish soldiers and police joined in the attack. Forty-two innocent people were murdered at one site, and many others were killed or seriously wounded that day throughout the city.

While the pogrom became notorious internationally, in Poland it was largely pushed from public memory. Even after Communist rule ended in Poland, many Poles were not interested in being reminded of their responsibility for the pogrom. In 1996, Elie Wiesel went to Kielce and spoke truthfully of the pogrom. He was excoriated by the Polish press.

But after another decade had passed, the Polish people became more forthcoming. In 2006 the city of Kielce agreed to construct a sculpture called "White/Wash II." It was designed not only to memorialize the victims, but to also mark the subsequent attempted cover-up of the pogrom.

The sculpture stands near the heart of town, so people passing through the city center cannot ignore it. It is deliberately painted in a whitewash finish that requires annual repainting — a certain mechanism for memory of the pogrom to be refreshed.

The work in Kielce, however, is just one step in a much longer process. In Poland and in other countries across Europe, many sites of infamy — death camps, ravines and forests where Jews were murdered en masse, as well as cen-

tures-old cemeteries — are ignored or in varying degrees of disrepair.

Visitors to Treblinka, for example, are greeted by an evocative monument but have no way of learning on-site about a concentration camp where more than 800,000 Jews were killed in less than nine months. The Nazis destroyed much of the camp, and in six decades since, the site has been barely tended to. There are no proper facilities or shelter from the elements for visitors.

Across Europe, memorials are needed at many sites but have not been built or funded due to official disinterest. This cannot be allowed to continue.

It is not enough to have these sites as permanent memorials.

They must be maintained and preserved. They must be given thought-provoking education and visitor centers. They must be paired with school curriculums to prepare young visitors to understand what they are about to see. And they must be built with international support.

For survivors now in their twilight years, these were places where they last saw their brothers, sisters, parents and children. And for the rest of us, these sites are reminders of the enormous capacity for evil.

Some think this a fool's errand. They say that Europe, birthplace of modern antisemitism and the Holocaust, cannot be counted upon to protect sites important to Jews long gone.

But in Kielce, such doubters were proven wrong. If a memorial can be built with the support of the local population in Kielce — a site of national shame — anything is possible.

After all, not long ago the citizens of the Polish town tried to whitewash from history the events that earned the city its international distinction. But a new generation of Poles chose to face the truth — and to remember.

*Warren Miller is chairman of the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, the federal agency that funded the memorial at Kielce.*