

Remarks of Lesley Weiss, Chair
U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad
Dedication Ceremony of a Holocaust Memorial in Berehovo Ukraine
June 21, 2016

Joseph Vays, Deputy Governor Mikulin, Mayor Babjak, representatives of the Government of Hungary, survivors and their families, representatives of the Jewish communities, Rabbi, and all who have participated in the building of this memorial.

As we gather today to memorialize and pay tribute to the Jewish community of Berehovo, we meet in a peaceful place. This moment of peace is all the more remarkable given the grim history of this region and the present turmoil in other parts of the country.

My mother and her family are from Botragy, 27 kilometers away. Her father Meyer Fogel owned a lumber yard in Batyu. My grandfather Hershel Mermelstein owned a flour mill in the same town. Like many of your families, they had lived in this region for generations.

My mother has wonderful memories of living in this area. The family was large, religious, and had good relations with their neighbors. That all came to an end in 1939 when Hungary, having entered into alliance with Nazi Germany, assumed control over Transcarpathia.

Under the newly instituted Nuremberg laws, Jews were systematically excluded from all economic and political life, stripped of their fundamental human rights and, ultimately, deported to concentration and death camps. While my mother, her parents and five siblings were sent to the Munkacs brick factory before they were deported to Auschwitz, the rest of the family was sent to the Beregszasz brick yard, like many of your families. From the immediate family, only my mother and her older sister, Serena, survived. As is the case with many of the survivors, the killing sites are the cemeteries of our families.

In an amazing coincidence, upon meeting Joseph Vays, we learned that my mother was in the same barrack as Joseph's mother, in Birkenau. We are now family.

The United States Government Commission that I chair was established to address the fact that Jewish cultural heritage in Central and Eastern Europe, largely depopulated of Jews during and after the war, was being slowly destroyed by desecration or neglect. The Commission's mandate includes obtaining agreements from governments of the region that cultural properties, including places of worship, historic sites, cemeteries, and memorials, will be protected and preserved.

In 1994, Ukraine signed such a cultural understanding with the U.S. government. Since that signing, a number of restoration projects have been accomplished with private funds and with the support of the government of Ukraine.

I want to express my appreciation for the City of Berehovo and the government of Hungary for their role in bringing these efforts to fruition, and to Joseph Vays and the Shalom Foundation, whose commitment to preserving the memory of Berehovo's Jewish community is an inspiration to us all.

As Chair of the Commission I have been asked to speak on behalf of the United States Government at a number of Holocaust memorial dedications. Each one is personal to me. But at this dedication, I am not only speaking on behalf of the US Government, but on behalf of my mother and the few remaining family members who survived Auschwitz and the other death camps.

This memorial identifies the almost 4000 Jews killed during that dark period. It would not have happened without the leadership and the support of all of you here today. Your work exemplifies what the Commission was founded to do—to preserve, restore, protect and memorialize the cultural history of Europe associated with America, a nation of immigrants.