

Keeping Jewish heritage in Bardejov - Interview with Mr. Cyril Bogoľ

Cyril Bogoľ calls himself 'the only Protestant Jew in Bardejov'. He proudly shows Bikur Cholim Synagogue and the Jewish Cemetery in Bardejov to visitors from all around the world since 2005, when he replaced Mayer Spira – the last Jew in Bardejov who was the caretaker of Bikur Cholim and the cemetery. Together with his wife they take care of the synagogue, which is a Slovak National Monument, and share their knowledge and passion for the Jewish heritage.

What was your first connection to the preservation of Jewish Heritage? How did you—as a non-Jew—become the caretaker of the Bikur Cholim synagogue and the Jewish cemetery?

"I started on June 1st, 2005 after the death of Mr. Mayer Špira, an Orthodox Jew—the caretaker of the synagogue and the cemetery—who died on May 25th, 2005 in the US while visiting his children. We were neighbors, living in the same building. The Špiras were living on the 2nd floor and we were on the 6th floor. Mr. Špira's sister, Mrs. Šimonovičová, was also living on the 2nd floor and when she learnt about the death of her brother, she asked me if I could possibly take upon myself Mr. Špira's duties. I agreed to do it out of respect, and then it became personal and close to my heart. Since 2005 I have put my efforts on preserving this beautiful synagogue and also in caring for the cemetery and making sure the place is kept respectful and reverent. At the beginning I had to clean everything and the whole family helped me. The cemetery was a true jungle. I was lucky to meet Mr. Fish—after some time—who was very interested in what needs to be done to improve the condition of the cemetery. Thanks to him the cemetery is in its current state. He also managed to create a map of the cemetery so now I have a map of all readable Matzevas and I can help visitors locate the graves of their ancestors. I also guide tours of the synagogue, explaining about the Jewish heritage and helping visitors reconnect with their past. The synagogue has a solemn atmosphere with remnants of the past. I consider it very important to dedicate time and effort to people who decided to travel so far to learn more about their origins and to see the places of their ancestors."

What inspires you about preservation of the Jewish heritage?

"With the years it became very close to my heart mostly because I learned more about the Jewish community that lived here and about Judaism in general. I now know Jewish people, I learnt about their religious life and I understand their culture. I try to read and educate myself more and this is also how I realized that the Jewish people deserve our respect. Furthermore, I believe that if there were no Jews, our religion would not have existed neither. People willing to understand Judaism will understand its essence but there is not much we can do to change thinking of people who have no intention to comprehend it."

What do you consider important for the future development of Jewish heritage in Bardejov?

"I can say that Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities in the Slovak Republic (ÚZZNO) really takes care of Bardejov's Jewish sites. They come often to Bardejov trying to meet our requirements. Currently they are preparing to repair the roof of Bikur Cholim Synagogue and the fire-wall from which bricks were falling to the neighbor's garden. I think that it is very important to invest in restoration because otherwise, in 10-15 years the building may be too deteriorated and restoration might not be possible

anymore. Mr. Fish tries very hard to keep Bardejov Jewish Heritage. When he comes we talk about our needs and he also tries to help us improve the sites. We developed a true friendship. Lastly, ÚZŽNO helped with restoration of the Old Synagogue that became a beautiful cultural site replacing the storage place that it used to be before. Different than the Old Synagogue, in Bikur Cholim nothing was added or taken away. It was kept in its original state and needs to be protected as such. I hope that we will manage to advance on planned projects such as the roof and windows restoration."