

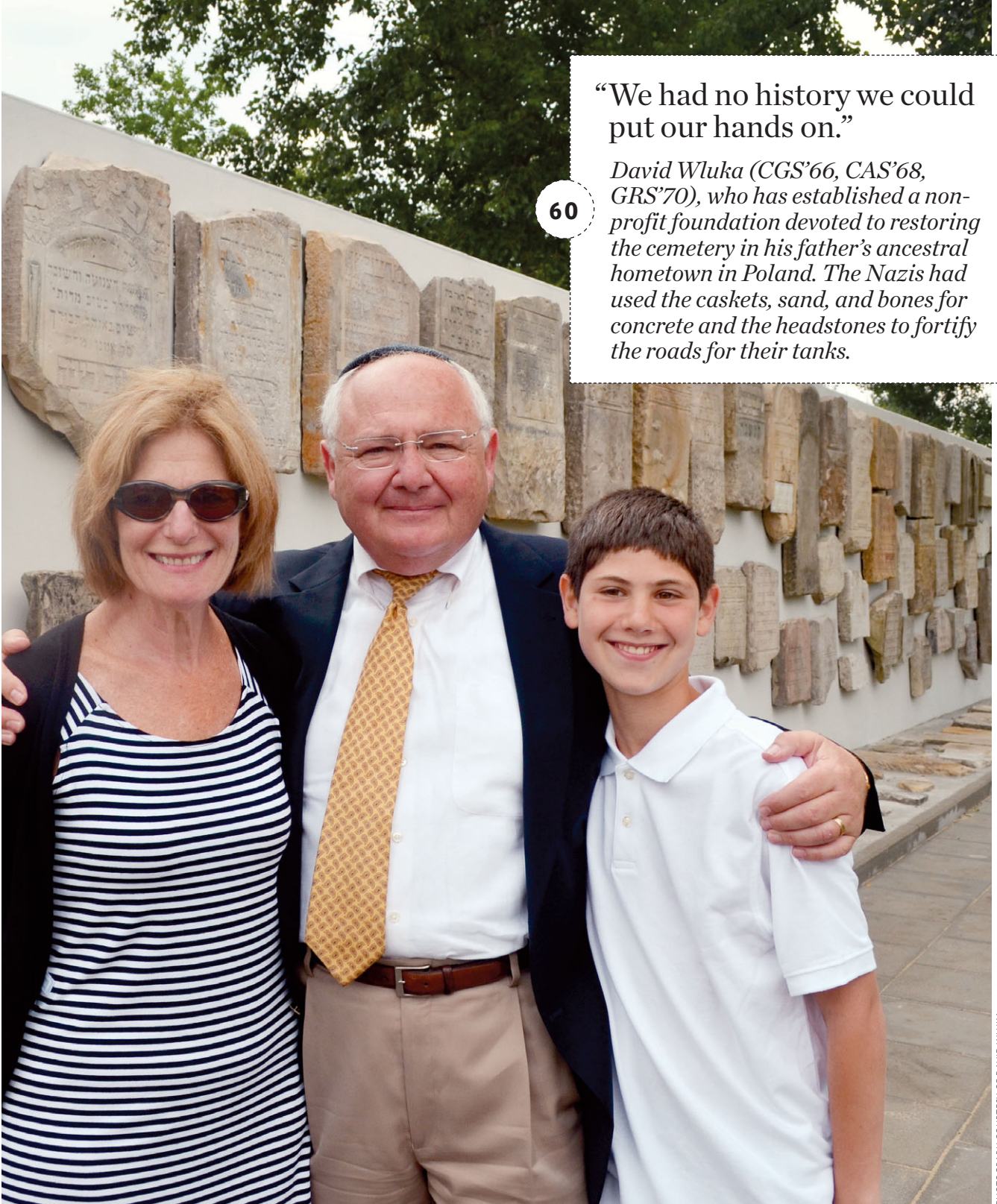
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“We had no history we could put our hands on.”

David Wluka (CGS’66, CAS’68, GRS’70), who has established a non-profit foundation devoted to restoring the cemetery in his father’s ancestral hometown in Poland. The Nazis had used the caskets, sand, and bones for concrete and the headstones to fortify the roads for their tanks.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF DAVID WLUKA

David Wluka, with his wife, Nancy, and grandson, Zachary, at a memorial wall mounted with the Jewish headstones that were buried in Nowy Dwór, Poland, for more than 70 years.

Restoration

The son of a Holocaust survivor rebuilds an ancestral cemetery

ICEK WLUKA LED HIS SON DAVID through the iron gates of Auschwitz. It was 1988, the first time he had returned to Poland since the war, and he remembered every inch of the camp where his seven siblings had died. Wluka showed David the barrack where he had slept from the time he was 20 to 23, the crematorium where he had been forced to work, and the field where he had sown potatoes with a rifle pressed to his head.

Hoping to evoke the life the Nazis had ripped him from 46 years earlier, Icek brought his son four hours north to his ancestral hometown, Nowy Dwór, Poland. He wanted to show David where he came from: his house, his father's blacksmith shop, the synagogue, and the cemetery where his father was buried. But the Nazis had purged every trace of the 4,000 Jews who once lived in Nowy Dwór. Even the cemetery was gone. The Nazis had used the caskets, sand, and bones for concrete and the *matzevot* (headstones) to fortify the roads for their tanks.

"There was no sign that it ever was a cemetery," says

WEB EXTRA

David Wluka remembers his father, a Holocaust survivor, at bu.edu/bostonia.

David Wluka (CGS'66, CAS'68, GRS'70). "It was just a big vacant field with holes." Squatters had taken up residence on the land that "belonged to no one. There was no place to go back to, where our roots were, and see the house or go to the cemetery. We had no history we could put our hands on."

Father and son said the Mourners' Kaddish for the Jews who had been exhumed, and Wluka was swept with emotion, watching his father praying in the barren field. When they left Poland, David and Icek were determined to save the cemetery. But life intervened, and it would be more than 20 years before David could revive the lost history of the town where his father was born.



David Wluka describes the headstones, inscribed with biblical passages, poetry, and songs in Hebrew, as works of art. They are mounted on a memorial wall in Nowy Dwór, Poland.



COURTESY OF DAVID WLUKA

In 2010, to honor Icek, establish a site of remembrance, and give his own children and grandchildren a link to their heritage, Wluka, along with Ze'ev Shaked, whose father had been Icek's father's partner in the blacksmith shop, established the Nowy Dwór Jewish Memorial, a nonprofit foundation devoted to restoring the cemetery and the Jewish heritage of Nowy Dwór. In collaboration with the city's mayor and residents, the Jewish community of Warsaw, and the chief rabbi of Poland, Wluka and Shaked secured the cemetery property. They evicted the squatters, filled in the empty graves, and constructed a fence to protect the land. Just before the groundbreaking ceremony, a municipal utility crew made a poignant discovery: 12 headstones buried beneath a nearby road.

"Now that we know roughly where the headstones are, we will be careful with future work, but we can't dig up good streets looking for them," the mayor told Shaked. But when the groundbreaking ceremony garnered attention from the local press and Polish national television, that's exactly what the city did.

To date, they have unearthed 125 of the estimated 800 *matzevot*. Because there is no record of the original burial plots, the foundation commissioned a memorial wall on which to mount the stones. They are "works of art," Wluka says, inscribed

with biblical passages, poetry, and songs in Hebrew. "To think that they had been buried six to eight feet underground since 1942...When I touched the headstones at the dedication ceremony, I just lost it. I broke down completely."

Wluka and Shaked have since expanded their undertaking to honor all 4,000 of the city's Jewish residents who perished in the concentration camps, and for whom there are no graves. They established a 100-foot memorial wall of black granite inscribed with the names of the dead. The wall has reunited families separated by the war—as have the foundation's efforts to publish the Jewish records from local archives.

"I've seen the handwritten record of my father's birth. I've seen the handwritten record of my grandfather's marriage," says Wluka, who so far has traced his family back to 1832. "It gives us a sense of history and who we are. It is that sense of who you are, where you came from, who you were that helps you go forward." The foundation is translating the records and posting scans on the project's website (nowydworjewishmemorial.org) to help other Jewish families trace their roots to Nowy Dwór.

Wluka's work figures into a widespread movement to reestablish the Jewish culture stripped from Poland during the Holocaust. Polish Jews,

with assistance from the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, are restoring synagogues and monuments throughout the country. Thanks to a 1997 law granting Jews the right to reclaim communal property, they are repossessing more than 1,400 cemeteries, many of which were plundered by the Nazis.

Nowy Dwór has embraced the effort; the Taxi Drivers Association has commissioned a four-foot stainless steel Star of David for the cemetery fence, and the mayor has spearheaded a Jewish walking tour of the town. The tour booklet illustrates the former locations of Jewish landmarks—the synagogue, the literary presses, the rabbi’s house, and even Icek’s father’s blacksmith shop.

Wluka and Shaked also launched an annual tolerance essay contest at the local high schools, and collaborated with Wluka’s cousin in Gadera, Israel, to bring 120 children from Gadera to Nowy Dwór for a three-day conference on tolerance with their Polish counterparts. The Nazis so eradicated the Jewish culture from Poland that before this conference, “the Polish kids had never seen Jews before,” Wluka says, a fact echoed by 15-year-old Bartosz Cheda in his award-winning essay: “I don’t know any Jewish citizen personally, but I know one important thing—I belong to the generation

brought up in a free, democratic country....We must know that xenophobia, bigotry, nationalism, and hostility toward all the ‘others’ are actions which sooner or later will lead every society to nothing.”

While his work has expanded in ambition and scope, Wluka remains dedicated to his original goal of restoring the cemetery to give his family—and thousands of other Jewish families—a history they can “put their hands on.”

He wishes his father were here to see it. Soon after returning to the United States in 1988, Icek suffered a heart attack, and though he slowly recovered, early-onset Alzheimer’s stole his final years, as the Holocaust had stolen his youth.

“When we would visit my father in the nursing home, he had no clue who his great-grandson was,” Wluka says. “You think about how he came to this country with virtually nothing and made a life for himself and my mother and had three sons and put us all through college....After all he went through, to not have a peaceful end to his life was dramatically unfair.”

Wluka is raising funds to unearth the remaining 600 *matzevot* that have been buried beneath the roads for more than 70 years. He hopes his grandfather’s is among them. **LARA EHRLICH**



When Wluka first visited the cemetery, it was a vacant field with holes where the headstones stood before being plundered by the Nazis.



COURTESY OF DAVID WLUKA

Center for Community Progress, a social service agency in Providence. The award is given annually to a person who exemplifies unselfish giving—whose quiet efforts, performed with no expectation of reward, make a significant difference in the world. Robert is senior vice president of Stifel Nicolaus, a brokerage and investment banking firm. He serves on the boards of the Make A Wish Foundation and the Tomorrow Fund, is the past president and chairman of the Da Vinci Center, and is a supporter of many other charities. Robert is also a Vietnam veteran who received the Silver Star for Gallantry in Action, a Purple Heart, and four other notable citations for his service.

DAN KAIN (COM’71) of West Hartford, Conn., has been inducted into the Silver Circle of the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, Boston/New England chapter, for his significant contribution to the community and television industry.

GARY LARRABEE (COM’71) of Wenham, Mass., has researched, written, and published two books: *Sensation at Salem: The Legendary Babe Zaharias’s Historic 1954 U.S. Open Victory* (Cricket Press, 2013) and *Kernwood Country Club: The First 100 Years, 1914–2014*. His next project is *The 100-Year History of the New England Professional Golfers Association, 1916–2016*. Contact him at gary@garylarrabee.com.

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PETER H. BLOOM (CAS’72) of Somerville, Mass., presented a recital-lecture on the illustrious 19th-century flute maker Alfred G. Badger at the Animusic-Portugal Organological Congress in July 2014 in Braga, Portugal. Last fall, he concertized in New England, New York, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Minnesota, and Nebraska with diverse chamber music and jazz ensembles. Highlights included the premiere of David Owens’ *At the Landing* and the premiere of his own composition *Ablaze* for flute, viola, and guitar (published by Noteworthy Sheet Music), as well as concerts with the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, whose founder and music director is **MARK HARVEY** (STH’71, GRS’83). When he wrote, Peter was planning to serve as a faculty member for the Snow Pond Composers Workshop in Maine in June 2015.

JEAN KILBOURNE (SED’72,’80) of West Newton, Mass., has been named a recipient of the 2015 Wellesley College Alumnae Achievement Award, the college’s highest honor. Jean, who created the acclaimed documentary film *Killing Us Softly: Advertising’s Image of Women*, is a writer, filmmaker, → 63