

# Jewish artist creates memorial for post-WWII pogrom in Poland

by Ruth Ellen Gruber for Global Jewish News: [www.jta.org](http://www.jta.org)

KIELCE, Poland, May 7, 2006 (JTA) -- The American son of Holocaust survivors is creating Kielce's first permanent public memorial to Poland's most infamous episode of postwar violence against Jews. The monument, designed by New York-born artist Jack Sal, is to be unveiled July 4, the 60th anniversary of the so-called Kielce pogrom, an attack by a Polish mob that killed 42 Jewish Holocaust survivors and injured another 50 or so.



"It will stand here, on this grassy area," Sal said, pointing to an open space at the side of a major artery cutting through this bustling city in southern Poland. The site is prominently located near the center of town, halfway between the modest building at 7/9 Planty Street where the pogrom took place, and Kielce's former synagogue, which now serves as the local archives.

Kielce city authorities provided the site, while the monument's construction is being financed by the U.S. Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad. "It began as a private initiative which is publicly supported," Sal told JTA.

The Kielce pogrom was the worst of a series of Polish attacks on Jewish survivors returning to their homes after the Holocaust. Kielce had 27,000 Jews before the war, but only a few hundred survived. Sparked by rumors that the returning Jews had killed a Christian child to use his blood for ritual purposes, the pogrom became a landmark in fostering the image of ingrained Polish anti-Semitism and sparked the mass emigration of some 100,000 Polish Holocaust survivors.

Nine people were hastily tried and executed for the murders by Poland's Communist authorities, but the pogrom remained a festering and bitterly divisive memory for decades. Many Poles refused to accept that ordinary people could have carried out such carnage and blamed the attack on provocation by Soviet-backed secret police. Public discussion of the affair during the Communist era was virtually taboo.

The Polish government made an official apology for the pogrom 10 years ago, on the 50th anniversary of the attack, but during that ceremony Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel bluntly raised the issues and questions that had blighted the memory of Kielce for half a century. "True, the killing was perpetuated by hoodlums," he said. "But what about the soldiers who reportedly took part in them? And what about the others, the onlookers, the bystanders? And where were the 'solid citizens' of the town? How many of them even tried

to stop the massacre? What happened in this place showed that normal citizens could be as cruel as the killers of any death camp," he said. "Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, Chelmno were German inventions; Kielce was not. Kielce's murderers were Poles. Their language was Polish. Their hatred was Polish." The affair has remained a touchy issue.

Privately placed plaques on the building on Planty Street commemorate the victims, but Kielce itself had not erected a public memorial. Monuments placed at the former synagogue honor the more than 25,000 Holocaust victims from the city, as well as Poles who saved Jews during the war. Partly because of the reluctance to deal openly with the issue over the years, Sal, who describes himself as a conceptual artist, calls his monument to the pogrom victims "White/Wash II."

The memorial will be shaped like a big number seven, lying on its side, as if fallen, to recall both the address on Planty Street and the month of July -- the location and time of the pogrom. More than 750 square cement blocks will make up the exterior surface. Forty-two of them will be covered with lead sheets and placed at random across the face of the work, representing the 42 victims. Next to the seven, there will be a column bearing a commemorative plaque with inscriptions in Polish, English and Hebrew. The entire surface of the monument will be painted with a white limewash, which will be maintained by the city.

"This recalls that before the war, Jews in Kielce were active in the quarrying and manufacture of lime," Sal said. "The limewash will wash off and then have to be replaced. Thus, the monument is both permanent in structure but, like a memory, ephemeral in its maintenance. The opportunity to create a work that will be highly visible and easily visited by the public will allow a meeting of the past and present out in the open, a forum of great importance for this wound of Planty Street to begin to heal."

The Kielce monument is not the first time that Sal has dealt with the Holocaust in his work, and he readily acknowledges that his family history has influenced him. Sal's father, born in Lithuania, was liberated from Dachau after surviving the Holocaust in numerous Nazi concentration camps. His mother, born in what is now Ukraine, survived the war by hiding with her parents in the forest for two years. The two met after the war's end in a displaced persons camp near Munich and eventually moved to New York, where Sal was born in 1954. In 1998-2000, Sal created a sculptural installation in Munich outside the apartment building where his newly married parents lived after the war.

The work, sponsored by the Munich Public Art Commission, entailed a bronze cast slab, approximately the size of two large paving stones, with its surface mostly covered by scored markings. The remainder was smooth, as if it had been wiped clean -- or eradicated.

Ruth Ellen Gruber

[www.ruthellengruber.com](http://www.ruthellengruber.com)

author of:  
Virtually Jewish: Reinventing  
Jewish Culture in Europe  
UC Press



To read more about the monument, see the artist's website:

[www.jacksal.com/permanent\\_installations](http://www.jacksal.com/permanent_installations)