Etz Chaim Men’s Club - 1711
Holocaust Memorial Garden Renewal Project

Introduction

With a commitment in hand of full funding from a synagogue family, a Holocaust Memorial Garden was constructed at Congregation Etz Chaim in 1996.

Through the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, the project developers acquired a section of a railroad tracks from the Treblinka Death Camp and original cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto; these were incorporated as major elements of the Garden design. The completed Holocaust Memorial Garden included a black marble pillar atop a Star of David-shaped pedestal surrounded by a shallow pool and topped by a gas-fed symbolic Ner Tamid. Landscaping included trees and plantings; in addition, three wood benches were placed in the Garden for visitors. In addition, bronze plaques were affixed to the section of concrete lying between the railroad tracks: one dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust and another noting the donor family’s contribution. A small bronze sign mounted on a post marked the entrance to the Garden.

For reasons not germane to this account, the donor family was unable to complete their funding commitment; the Garden was completed with monies supplied by the synagogue general fund.

Unfortunately, no dedicated group within the synagogue was tasked with responsibility for the Holocaust Memorial Garden and its upkeep. Over time, issues concerning the maintenance and safety of both the gas flame and the pool led to decisions to cap the gas line and fill in the pool area with concrete. Not having been properly finished, the concrete was painted and repainted many, many times; trees, plants and shrubs grew without management or design; and the seldom-used wooden benches fell into disrepair.

When plans were considered in 2008 for constructing a new edifice, there was no plan to keep the Holocaust Memorial Garden as part of the synagogue infrastructure. Those plans were shelved in view of the economic downturn’s impact on the congregation; instead, a smaller-scale renovation of the synagogue lobby and entrance area was planned for completion by fall 2012. That renovation also would have required the removal of the Garden.

Men’s Club Activity

In 2010, Etz Chaim Men’s Club incorporated the Holocaust Memorial Garden as the centerpiece of its Yom ha-Shoah Yellow Candle program “The Unity of Community” - a program that was given a Golden Torch Award in 2011.

In the culmination of a several week-long project and through a combination of donations, sweat equity from Men’s Club members and the enthusiastic support of our seventh grade Hebrew School class, the Garden was rejuvenated: it was cleaned up, its central column
repainted, and new landscaping was installed. These were stopgap measures, however, and were not sufficient to derail the congregation’s plans to remove the Garden as part of its entrance area renovation.

The Project

Etz Chaim Men’s Club, believing that the Holocaust Memorial Garden with its artifacts from Treblinka and the Warsaw Ghetto was a valuable educational resource as well as an ideal location for future Shoah-related programming, decided to “adopt” the Garden. The Club would need to convince the congregation’s Board of Directors to retain it as part of the overall renovation plan, upon which the Club would undertake to rebuild it beyond its initial beauty. Over the ensuing months, Club members were solicited for ideas and input, and Men’s Club member Alan Strulitz stepped forward with a complete design and landscaping plan.

To fund the project, the Club solicited individual contributions at Men’s Club “Best Breakfast in Town” programs; revenues from the annual Men’s Club / Sisterhood Golf and Tennis Tournament were earmarked for the project as well.

In January 2012, the Men’s Club presented its proposal to the congregation’s Board of Directors; the project was approved.

Reconstruction and Renovation

The Holocaust Memorial Garden Renewal Project incorporated numerous reconstruction and renovation elements. Originally, the concrete base area was to be chemically etched and stained, but this turned out to be impractical. A decision was made to tear out the concrete and replace it in its entirety with inlaid bricks (which would also afford a further fund-raising opportunity through the sale of commemorative bricks). The final project plan included:

- Removing concrete and installing brick
- Polishing the marble pillar
- Cleaning cobblestones
- Installing low-voltage lighting technology for Ner Tamid
- Landscaping garden and entry areas, including removal of existing trees and shrubs
- Constructing fence-like structure on wall incorporating vines and faux barbed wire
- Replacing old wooden benches with polished marble benches
- Replacing entry post
- Relocating bronze plaque to head of railroad track area
- Redesigning Holocaust Torah display case and relocating to garden window
- Placing directional signage in synagogue and on door leading to garden

One of the dramatic design elements included in the renovation design was a fence-like trellis that forms the backdrop of the Garden. In appearance, this structure was meant to recall the barbed-wire fences that surrounded the concentration camps (for safety considerations, “mock” barbed wire was used in lieu of real barbed wire). Eventually it would be covered with flowering vines, symbolizing the renewal of Jewish life after the Holocaust.
Proposed Design (Artist’s Rendering)
Wrap-Up / Financial Results

Ground was officially broken for the Holocaust Garden Renewal Project on Yom ha-Shoah in 2012, with much of the “heavy lifting” in mid-August. Exterior work was completed by mid-September 2012 in time for the High Holidays. The renewed Garden was the focus of a Re-Dedication Ceremony held on November 11, 2012 – one day after the seventy-fourth anniversary of Kristallnacht – attended by members of Congregation Etz Chaim and its Men’s Club, and the Catholic Church of St. Ann, with whom our congregation has forged a growing relationship as a result of our “Unity of Community” programs in 2010 and 2011.

The cost of the project (as of May 1, 2013) was $7,009, consisting of $5,636 for garden renovations and landscaping, $951 for bricks and engraving, and $422 for brochures and publicity.

As of May 1, 2013, total revenues were $9,376, consisting of general donations ($1,406), brick purchases ($3,890), certificate purchases ($80), and bench purchases ($4,000). This yielded a surplus of $2,367, which amount (and additional net income going forward) will be used for the maintenance and upkeep of the renewed Garden.

Original Holocaust Garden, showing filled-in concrete pool area and non-functioning Ner Tamid atop pillar (L), old wooden bench (R). Note railroad tracks from Treblinka and cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto.
Renewed Holocaust Garden, showing trellis fence with faux barbed wire, new benches, functioning Ner Tamid, and commemorative bricks.