

Etz Chaim Garden Honors the “Six Million”

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Just off the front entrance of Congregation Etz Chaim in East Cobb is a little garden. It's filled with shrubs, a few trees and two granite benches.

It also includes cobblestones from the Warsaw Ghetto and railroad tracks that six decades ago spilled into Treblinka, the Nazi death camp in northeast Poland.

The garden manages to be both a quiet oasis and a jarring reminder of the Holocaust and it's exactly what Barry Riesenbergs had in mind when he envisioned it several years ago.

“I've always been touched by the relics in the garden; the tracks and stones,” Riesenbergs says. “I've been to these places in Poland and it's all very moving.”

The memorial garden was actually built in the mid-1990s; but it hadn't been maintained and Riesenbergs, a long-time member of Etz Chaim and, at the time, president of the synagogue's Men's Club, thought it was a project waiting to happen.

The problem was figuring out what needed to be done to bring the garden back to life and who best to handle the work. The issue was solved one morning when Riesenbergs was having breakfast with a friend, Irwin Weitz, after morning minyon.

“We were discussing the garden and trying to think who might be able to help,” Riesenbergs says. “That's when Allan Struletz walked into the Waffle House and I knew we had our answer.”

Struletz, also a member of Etz Chaim, is a landscape architect and the owner of Creative Scapes, a firm in Marietta that specializes in landscape projects. It turns out he was exactly the creative sort of person to take Riesenbergs's vision and ideas and turn it all into a workable plan.

Struletz, who had been involved in creating the original garden, realized there were certain elements that could remain part of the project – the rails, cobblestones, bits and pieces of the landscaping.

“But the garden was overgrown and fully enclosed,” he says, “and we wanted to create a place that was open and inviting, a place where you could spend time and meditate quietly.”

It took a few months, but the pieces began falling into place. Struletz managed to turn Riesenberg’s vision into a first-rate plan. Now all that was needed was a project manager, someone to do the actual work. Say hello to Hank Needle.

“Hank is our go to guy, a master of all trades,” Riesenberg explained. “You never have to ask for a volunteer when Hank is around.”

Much of the heavy lifting – placement of pavers and sprinkler system, bushes and trees – was handled by Outdoor Expressions, a landscaping firm based in Canton. But Needle, another long-time member of the shul and past president of the Men’s Club, took control of the most dramatic – and creatively challenging – element to be added to the garden.

Struletz wanted a fence around the backside of the area; a structure that would provide a boundary for the memorial but also be a vivid reminder of the Holocaust. His solution was to design a concentration camp-type fence that eerily echoes the structures that surrounded death camps across Eastern Europe during World War II.

“It was really a great project,” Needle says. “There were many different things that needed doing, so lots of guys from the Men’ Club were able to help.”

Sometimes projects work out; sometimes not so much. “This project” Needle says, “exceeded all my expectations.”

Today, the entire area has been scrubbed clean and warmed up with new landscaping. Concrete flooring has been replaced with pavers and the entire garden is set against the chilling new fence. Nearby, an eternal light hovers atop six pieces of cut stone, offering up a warm glow and reminder that the “Six Million” will never be forgotten.

Just as Rosenberg hoped, the new, updated garden manages to be both melancholy and uplifting – recalling the past while honoring the Jews and others who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis. It will be officially dedicated on Nov. 11, Veteran’s Day and the 74th anniversary of Krystallnach.