Jewish Cemeteries in Poland as a Testimony to the State of Affairs

The Ruined Garden, Twenty Years Later ...

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Abstract

This project is a quest into the vanished world of Polish Jewry, a world that flourished for about a millennium until its brutal annihilation in recent history. I investigate the most abundant vestiges of that world: Poland’s Jewish cemeteries, comparing their present states to that of twenty years ago. The inspiration for this project came from an oeuvre of Monica Krajewska, published in 1993, which documents and poetically describes 54 Jewish cemeteries in Poland. My project explores 15 of the 54 cemeteries documented by Krajewska, and compares pictures of the same sites taken twenty years apart: by her, in 1993 and by me, in 2013.

In addition to photo comparison, the project presents rich anthropological material gathered by interviewing people connected in different ways to the cemeteries I visited. The various conditions of these sites including a frequent lack of adequate care, often unsuccessful efforts to rescue them, the questionable involvement of different organizations and individuals, and the financial problems connected to these exquisite sites offer a window into the complex reality of Polish/Jewish relations. The situation of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland becomes a testimony to the current state of affairs.
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The Ruined Garden, Twenty Years Later ...

“There was a people and it is no more. There was a people and it is ... Gone ...”

Song of the Murdered Jewish People, Itzhak Katzenelson, 1944

Introduction

With some difficulty I push open an old, rusty gate and venture a few steps in. Immediately, I am captured by the world that unfolds before my eyes. My subsequent steps are almost automatic, trance-like. I couldn't stop, or go back, even if I wanted to. It is only the vegetation of this ruined garden\(^1\) which will eventually halt my moves, making further advances impossible. But for now, I am immersed in a domain of superbly carved stones enveloped by greenery, a realm of magic and exquisite beauty, flavored with ancient, exotic history and religious reflection. It is Sunday, a cloudy, warm, late summer afternoon, by itself a liminal moment, but standing alone in the middle of Tomaszow Mazowiecki Jewish cemetery extends this time-space toward a totally unearthly dimension.

\(^1\) In the Middle Ages, one of the Latin descriptions for Jewish cemeteries was hortus Judeaorum — Jewish garden. The term ‘ruined garden’ was used to described the vanished world of Polish Jewry by Jack Kugelmass, Jonathan Boyarin and Zachary M. Baker in their book, “From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry.”
Accessing this good-sized cemetery was not easy. I had wandered for some time alongside the wall neighboring a Catholic cemetery. I had even considered climbing over the wall before some locals pointed me toward the gate. The nearest neighbor happened to have a key, which she trustfully handed to me. I entered that world alone and undisturbed, except for some papers in my hand which, after a long moment of enchantment, brought me back to reality. I had a mission:

I wanted to locate a group of tombstones, photographed here in this very cemetery, over twenty years ago. With copies of the photographs in my hand I desperately tried to find them. I didn’t. I was not successful here nor was I in most of the sixteen Jewish cemeteries I subsequently visited that summer, in 2013, in Poland. But my mission was not a failure. My encounters with these exquisite places were, in many ways, fulfilling and gratifying experiences, even if, at times, tainted with bitterness and sorrow. This paper presents the results of my fieldwork in these sixteen Jewish cemeteries and their vicinities.
Behind the Project

The idea for my project was born after the discovery of an album, *A Tribe of Stones*, published in 1993 by Monika Krajewska which is dedicated to 54 Jewish cemeteries in Poland. This is not an ordinary book; rather it’s a multimedia, interdisciplinary work which first captures the reader’s attention with the humble beauty of black and white photos of picturesque remnants of Jewish cemeteries in Poland. The introduction by Rafael Scharf and the author’s text offer historical, artistic, epigraphic and religious expertise on the Jewish culture, with an emphasis on the Jewish cemeteries. The album is embellished by highly spiritual and poetic quotations, which add a philosophical accent to this extraordinary document filled with passion and a nostalgic longing for the lost world of Polish Jewry.

*A Tribe of Stones* is the fruit of a remarkable enterprise undertaken by Monika Krajewska and her husband Stanislaw in the late 1970s, the time in which Jewish themes were enshrouded by ambiguous silence in communist Poland. Post-war was a difficult time for the newly, theoretically independent state which strove to recreate its own national identity. This was a difficult task considering the centuries of Poland’s non-existence on European maps and, more recently, Poland being challenged by an unwelcomed Soviet interference. The Jewish presence, and even their absence, added some uneasiness to the process.

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2 Only some 15,000 Jews remained in Poland after three instances of massive emigration: in 1948, in 1956 and in 1968.
For centuries Jews constituted an undeniable element of Polish culture and, together with several other minorities, created the multiethnic character of the Polish nation. In the post-war reality Jews became a problem. Jewish martyrdom challenged the Polish claim to its own suffering. After all, several million Poles perished in WWII as well. The rivalry in the appropriation of martyrdom, as well as the unconscious (more or less) Polish guilt related to the Holocaust, created tension regarding the Jewish question. The matter was worsened by tying Jews to communism, in which they did have some, even if limited, participation. But regardless of which side the Jews were placed, they were always used as a convenient tool in political struggles of opposing forces. The always-present anti-Semitic animosity maintained by the Catholic tradition did not help.

Suffice it to say, it was not easy to be a Jew in 1970s Poland, nor was it easy to express an interest in things-Jewish and act on that interest. By then, Jews were suppressed from the collective Polish memory, controlled by the state. Krajewska embarked upon her mission, which was focused on Jewish cemeteries, against all odds. Not only was she deprived of any moral, social or data support, but she also had to face unimaginable scarcities, the result of the malfunctioning Polish political system. There was a lack of just about everything, beginning with food, photo equipment, tourist information, overnight accommodations and means of transportation.

During a phone conversation with Monika Krajewska, after explaining my project and receiving her permission to use some of her photos, I listened with the greatest admiration to a report of her struggles to travel to places, to scramble through the vegetation in order to be
able to take pictures and to carry on her project. It was not just a feeling of conventional sympathy on my part. I remember that gloomy time in Poland, when, due to endless lines in stores and a lack of everything (including hope), you had to travel with your own life-saver set, comprised of food, soap, toilet paper and other items of primary importance.

Krajewska’s first publication, *Time of Stones*, appeared in 1983 soon after the official censorship was lifted. It contained the first fruits of her work. That year, 1983, was a fruitful year for me too with the birth of my first child. The excitement of my first motherhood experience and the general stagnation of life in Poland, including limited distribution of books, were probably the reasons why her publication remained unknown to me at that time.

Krajewska’s second book, *A Tribe of Stones*, which is the inspiration of my project, was published ten years later, in 1993. By that time I was no longer in Poland, trying to build my life in Belgium. Once again, I was not aware of her publication. *A Tribe of Stones* was the result of Krajewska’s additional research and deepened insight into the Jewish culture in general and into the art of tombstones in particular. Both publications were the products of tireless effort, ‘schlepping’ hundreds of miles, of her iron will and infinite passion. It was “… a labor of love pursued with zeal and utter dedication,” as Rafael Scharf described it in his introduction to Krajewska’s second book (Krajewska 6-7).

I finally discovered her work a few years ago when taking classes on Judaism at UNC. I was taken aback by the beauty of photographed Jewish cemetery remnants in her album. I am not a stranger to the Jewish cemeteries in Poland. My own family is buried in one of the largest,

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3 In Yiddish and German, *to drag*
if not the largest, Jewish cemeteries in Europe, that of Lodz. I know the unique ambiance of this place, its magic, the taste of mystery of the departed world of my ancestors. I spent countless hours there attempting to somehow connect to that lost world.

Like most of my Jewish friends, I felt a certain kind of alienation; I knew that I did not completely belong to the world in which I existed, yet, the world with which I felt closeness did not exist. Our parents could not help us build our identities, experiencing serious problems of their own. They offered us silence or scarce information, like unrelated images of some distant family events. Our parents chose to blend in; they wanted to be safe by looking like ordinary Polish citizen. My Jewish identity was formed, rather, more by anti-Semitic remarks than by anything else. As a last resort, I turned to literature, to Isaac Leib Peretz (my Jewish-school namesake), Scholem Aleichem or Scholem Asch, drawing from their stories any possible knowledge of the Jewish world. After my school was closed, in 1969, and most of my Jewish friends emigrated out of Poland, the Jewish cemeteries were almost all that remained of the Jewish world in Poland.

But even that world was not immune to deterioration. The Jewish cemeteries, the houses of the living, the houses of eternity, as they were called in Hebrew, were dying. Abandoned by their natural protectors, the descendants of the dead, they were sinking into the course of nature and occasional vandalism. Still, the larger ones, like the one in Lodz, had a

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4 There is a rivalry between the Warsaw and Lodz cemeteries for the status of the largest Jewish cemetery in Europe: the Warsaw cemetery has 33 hectares and 250,000 graves, that of Lodz has a bigger surface - 40.2 hectares - but a lower number of graves - 180,000 (Blachetta-Madajczyk 101-101).
chance of survival as visible historical monuments, but the fate of the small shtetl cemeteries was heartbreaking. The images of the numerous, abandoned and defenseless, small Jewish cemeteries in Krajewska’s album, scattered all over Poland, deeply touched my Jewish soul. I felt committed to the memory of these people forgotten by the world; I felt committed to my own heritage.

As I looked at the photos taken in 1993, I wondered what became of these sites. A lot happened in Poland during the last twenty years. The devilish political system finally fell and one of the outcomes created an opening for the Jewish culture, which resulted in a fascinating renaissance of an interest in that lost world. Would this new trend contribute to rescuing the sites in question? On the other hand, the anti-Semitic inclination has always been a part of Polish everyday-life and this unfortunate state of affairs could counterbalance the positive tendencies. Not knowing what to expect, I decided to follow in Monika Krajewska’s footsteps and revisit at least some of the Jewish cemeteriesphotographed by her.

I chose fifteen out of the fifty-four cemeteries represented in her album, mostly in Eastern Poland, limited by my three-week stay there. I focused on the cemeteries which were photographed with more panoramic views, making them easier to identify than individual tombstones. Besides the previously mentioned fifteen cemeteries I also visited one in Czestochowa. This necropolis was not documented by Krajewska, but it was on my way, in a city with which I had personal connections and I knew that the site was one of the largest and best-preserved Jewish cemeteries in Poland.
I meticulously prepared my itinerary, necessary data, maps, copies of the pictures and electronic equipment (all in double, or sometimes in triple, in case anything went wrong – a remnant of my anxiety when living in communist Poland), and, with a spirit of adventure, I was ready to experience some of Krajewska’s “labor of love pursued with zeal and utter dedication.”
Wandering through History

“So rooted is the Jewish past in every inch of Polish soil ... Here perhaps more than anywhere else, the Jewish past is so present, even in its very absence.”

Paul Fenton (Sherwin 137)

Jewish history is unique. No nation developed by venturing to so many places, nor survived in spite of the threats of assimilation from so many cultures. Since the fall of the First Temple and the exile to Babylon in the 6th century BCE, Jews began their migratory lives and led a parallel existence in multiple geographic centers. After developing a thriving Babylonian diaspora, they followed the history spirit, coexisting with the dominant power of the time. Jewish centers appeared in the Mediterranean regions, creating a Judeo-Arabic culture, then a Sephardic culture in Spain, followed by the important centers in the Ottoman Empire and somewhat parallel, and as important, Ashkenazi centers in Central and Eastern Europe. These Eastern European centers, located mostly in pre-WWII Poland, were the last, most prominent bearers of the Jewish culture before the Holocaust happened.

Jews moved toward the east in the Middle Ages not only attracted by the rising prominence of this region but primarily to flee the persecution borne out of the crusaders’ religious zeal and out of medieval plagues. It was in Poland where, according to legends, a premonition came upon the tormented people. The very name of the land – Polonia or Polonia
- appeared to them as a heavenly decree: *pol in* (*dwell here, in Hebrew*) or *po-lan-Yah* (*here dwells God*). It seems as if “on the leaves of the trees of that land were inscribed sacred names and in the branches were hidden errant souls seeking deliverance by the sacred deeds of Jews that would be performed in that land” (Sherwin 59).

And so they did. They performed sacred as well as mundane deeds, being recognized as a valuable element of society by some and as a nuisance, religious abomination, and economic rivalry by others. Their craftsmanship and skillfulness in trade and multiple other areas were used to build the state’s economy, yet they constantly had to face animosity and disdain coming from all classes of Polish society. As the middlemen, Jews were despised by peasants whose plight was incomparably harsher. They were fiercely opposed by the Church as the contenders of the spiritual truth⁵ and rivals in the money-lending business, in which the Church held the leading position (Hacohen). The nobles used Jewish services by leasing them just about everything and by borrowing money; both activities often resulted in the undesired situation of financial dependence. Jews were also an unwelcome group by the townspeople, whose economic interests often led to a furious protestation against the Jewish presence and their privileges, and resulted in vocational limitations imposed on Jews.

No matter how essential their contributions were to the development of the country, Jews were always perceived as ‘the others,’ as suspicious and distrusted strangers, often

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⁵ In Poland, Moravia and Lithuania the Church was threatened by the existence of the most radical Protestantism, opposed as much by Catholics as by Lutherans. Since the movement adopted Jewish customs and was criticized for ‘Judaizing,’ Jews were blamed for being a bad influence. Judaizing included observing Saturday instead of Sunday as a holy day, practicing circumcision and even rejecting the Holy Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Some radical reformers actually converted to Judaism (Sherwin 67).
becoming a target of persecution. Jews experienced local exiles and suffered in pogroms in the cities of Tarnow, Lublin, Rzeszow and Sosnowiec (Parciack), with the most catastrophic being the Chmielnicki massacre of 1648, called the ‘third destruction,’ which eclipsed all prior Jewish tragedies.7

Such tragic events took place in spite of Jews being under the legal protection of most of the Polish kings, beginning with Duke Boleslaw the Pious who, in the Status of Kalisz in 1264, granted Jews the first written privileges, such as autonomic jurisdiction and civil security, including safety from blood libel accusation (Balaban 329-332; vol. 2). This document was ratified by several Polish kings, with the most prominent being King Casimir the Great. On the other hand, to protect the well-known Polish nobles’ freedom and to counterbalance the kings’ imposition, a law was issued, Privilegium de non tolerandis Judaeis,8 giving each landowner the right to make their own decisions regarding Jews dwelling on their properties (Balaban 172; vol. 3).

Yet, in spite of recurrent harassment, it is attested by multiple sources that the 16th and early 17th CE Poland was ‘a haven for Jews’ offering them unprecedented economic, social and intellectual freedoms. Moses Isserles, the renowned Talmudist and the co-author of the most

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6 ... such as the one, in 1495, from Krakow, as a result of which Jews ended up in Kazimierz, presently a district of Krakow and a tourist attraction with a Jewish flavor
7 The number of victims varies but it undoubtedly amounted to tens of thousands (Efron et al. 210). It was called the ‘third destruction’ after the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. The Jewish chronicles mention 100,000 killed and 300 communities destroyed (“Chmielnicki”).
8 The privilege of non-accepting Jews issued in Medieval and early modern Poland was valid until the mid-19th CE; the consent depended on the owners (Balaban 172; vol. 3; Bialkowski 107).
9 Actually, the entire quotation says that the 16th and early 17th CE Poland was “a heaven for Jews, a paradise for noblemen and a hell for serfs” (Sherwin 56).
important code of Jewish law,\textsuperscript{10} wrote in 1550, “Had the Lord not left us this land as a refuge, the fate of Israel would have been indeed unbearable” (Sherwin 56-58).

Jewish culture thrived in Poland. It was this country that became the center of Jewish learning. A famous yeshiva\textsuperscript{11} was founded in Lublin in 1567, followed by another one in Krakow. Soon, each community proudly supported a yeshiva and, if necessary, its students. Hebrew printing presses were introduced in 1534 in Krakow, helping propagate the learning spirit (Balaban 240-1; vol. 3). Halakhic questions from all over the Jewish world were sent and disputed there, as they once were in Babylonian academies. At the same time, when the legendary mystic Isaac Luria (1534 - 1572) created his famous kabbalistic center in Safed in the 1570s, his cousin, the great Polish Talmudist and Kabbalist, Solomon Luria (1510 - 1573), transformed the Lublin school into the most celebrated Talmudic center in Europe, which operated until WWII. Most of his students later became the leaders and religious authorities propagating their knowledge for centuries to come (Balaban 245; vol. 3).

So sweet seemed the exile in Poland, that the later Hassidic tzaddikim\textsuperscript{12} developed an exilic theology which saw a mystery in exile, a mission with the purpose of gathering divine sparks from among gentiles. Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the father of the Hassidic\textsuperscript{13} movement, vehemently discouraged the migration of his pupils to the Holy Land. His follower, the famous Maggid of Mazeritch (Miedzyrzecze; died 1772), and the latter’s disciple, Elimelech

\textsuperscript{10} His authorship is \textit{ha-Mapah}, the Ashkenazic addition to the Sephardic \textit{Shulchan Aruch}, by Joseph Karo, the most important Jewish code of law (Balaban 245; vol. 3).

\textsuperscript{11} A Jewish educational institution that focused on the study of traditional religious writings

\textsuperscript{12} Plural of tzaddik; a righteous one; a spiritual master

\textsuperscript{13} From Hebrew \textit{hassid} meaning pious; a religious movement within Judaism, developed in 18 CE Eastern Europe; it promoted spirituality through the popularization of Jewish mysticism; it developed in opposition to excessive legalization and intellectualizing.
of Lizensk (Lezansk; 1717–1787), taught that divine inspiration was more attainable in the
diaspora than at any other time, including the time of the prophets. As a result, only a few
Polish Hassidim went to the Holy Land, instead dedicating their spiritual effort to finding
holiness in the reality surrounding them (Sherwin 103-4).

As their Sephardic counterparts did centuries earlier in Spain, the Jews of Poland
developed a strong Polish/Jewish self-identification, a sort of national awareness and an
attachment to the Polish nation. Despite the significant differences existing between the Polish
and Jewish cultures, one could also see interesting similarities between them:

1. Both societies valued democracy and equality. The Polish nobles, who constituted a
disproportionately large percentage of the country’s population in comparison to
any other country in Europe (over 10% of Polish society; “Heart of Europe” 334),
treasured their status of free men and their so-called Golden Freedom. It gave all
nobles in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, regardless of rank or economic
position, equal legal status, extensive legal rights and privileges which resulted in the
effective control of elected kings. Nobles had the right to participate in the election
of the king, to join the army and to use the famous liberum veto14 (“Heart of Europe”
335-337). The latter was based on the premise that all Polish noblemen were equal
and, therefore, every vote had to be passed unanimously. It gave any petty member
of that class (participating in the Parliament) the power of disrupting the creation of
a law or, later, even of dissolving an entire parliamentary proceeding.

14 In Latin, a free veto; a voting rule used in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth between the 16th and 18th CE. The rule is considered by many historians to be one of the main factors leading to the fall of Poland as a result of its three partitions (Balaban 220-224; vol. 3).
Jews on the other hand, deprived for centuries of any centralized political structure, relied heavily on the community and each other, with their scholars and rabbis as the only recognized authorities. The unique governing body, the Council of Four Lands, functioning in Poland between the 16th and the 18th CE, used a parliamentary election, therefore had a democratic character (Balaban 220-224; vol. 3). A try-out with the king-appointed office of the Chief Rabbi, established in 1503 (Sherwin 63), was ephemeral and short-lived; it was rejected by the entire community, who decisively valued scholarly authorities.

2. Both peoples endured struggles to maintain their identities, often being dominated by powerful opponents who threatened their survival and pushed them to the brink of annihilation. After losing statehood in three partitions, in 1772, 1793 and 1795, Poland’s political situation was analogous to that of the Jewish people. As often occurs in times of despair, a mystical sentiment was aroused offering tormented people emotional support and a spark of hope.

3. Mystical and, actually, messianic tendencies were especially pronounced in the Polish intellectual milieu after Napoleon’s defeat by Russia, in 1812, which buried Poland’s last hope for regaining its independence. Intellectual escapees in Paris, centered around the prominent figure of Polish poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), developed the philosophical notion of Polish Messianism ("God’s Playground" 40). This concept saw partitioned, suffering Poland as the Christ among nations. The
movement was most probably under the influence of an originally-Jewish messianic sect, the Frankists,\(^\text{15}\) with which the poet’s family had strong connections (Maurer). Jews, on the other hand, lived by the omnipresent hope of messianic redemption, which was the ultimate purpose of their existence. After bumpy adventures with two dubious, false messiahs (Sabbatai Zvi, 1626-76, and Jacob Frank, 1726-1791), Hassidism, developed in the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and 19\(^{\text{th}}\) CE, brought the messianic hope back to the masses (Efron et al. 227-9, 261). The movement offered a more personal and halakhically-acceptable form of messianic expectations.

4. Hassidism shows certain similarities to the Slavic, romantic spirit; both emphasized the importance of emotions, individualism, spontaneity, exuberant imagination and interest in folktales, all explored beyond and against established, rational, social conventions.

It seems to me as if Hassidism applied a Polish romantic approach to reformulate their own religious style in a more romanticized (emotional, folk-like and individualistic) manner. Even the Hassidic dress-code is historically recognized as developed from the Polish nobles’ garments, with only a color change, to black. One may speculate that Hassidism might not have been born if not for the nourishing surroundings of the Polish (or more generally Slavic) romantic, spiritual sensitivity. After all, the movement was never able to gain a foothold in the rational world of western Jewry.

\(^{15}\) Frankism was an 18\(^{\text{th}}\) to 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century Jewish religious movement developed by Jacob Frank and associated with Sabbatianism, both antinomian movements centered on the Messiah claimants (Efron at all 261).
It is precisely the overwhelming absorption of the Hassidic movement by Polish Jewry in the 18th and 19th CE that created the image of the typical Jew, with which Jewish culture was subsequently identified. In spite of the complexity of Jewish society and its later (late 19th and early 20th CE) secular representation comprised of intellectuals, artists, Reform Jews, Zionists and communists, all with a variety of factions within them, it is the Hassidic-like figure that still epitomizes the stereotypical image of a Jew, at least in Poland.16

The picturesque Jewish shtetls,17 with their Hassidic flair, became, for centuries, an integral and somewhat exotic part of the Polish landscape until the Holocaust. It was only WWII that drastically changed the centuries-old panorama of Polish culture. Polish Jews, a vital part of Polish culture for nearly a millennium, suddenly vanished as if under the touch of a wicked spell.

The postwar Polish poet of Jewish origin, Antoni Slonimski, lamented the loss of this world, reflecting on the closeness and the similar plights of these two distinct, yet so historically intertwined, peoples:

“Gone now are, gone are in Poland the Jewish shtetls …
Where the wind joined Biblical songs with Polish tunes and Slavic rue,
...

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16 This phenomenon can be noticed in Poland in Jewish art, from the most sublime forms such as musical concerts and theatre, to folk art such as figurines of Jews sold in Cepelia (Polish stores carrying folk art) or simply on the street. This tendency is reinforced by the frequent visits of Hassidic Jews to Poland - the most visible group of Jews present in Poland these days.
17 Shtetl was a small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe.
Gone now are those little towns, though the poetic mists,
The moons, winds, ponds, and stars above them
Have recorded in the blood of centuries the tragic tales,
The histories of the two saddest nations on earth."

(Elegy for the Jewish Shtetls, Translated by Howard Weiner)

Jeremiah would add his lamentation, “I hurt with the hurt of my people” (Jer. 8: 21).

The only remains of this once-thriving world were the abandoned Jewish buildings which, at best, were incorporated into Polish life,\(^{18}\) and a little over one-thousand Jewish cemeteries, bereaved and deserted.

Why were they deserted? First, they were deprived of the natural caretakers, the descendants of the dead, who vanished with the Holocaust. Secondly, even the 10% of the Jews who survived the war in Poland or by fleeing to Russia were not in a position to resume their normal lives, which would include caring for the cemeteries. The repatriates from Russia were directed to repopulate the so-called Recovered Territories\(^{19}\) and not Jewish shtetls. Those Jews who ventured to their pre-war habitats, the rare survivors of entire communities, put themselves in risky situations; reclaiming their pre-war possessions occasionally had fatal consequences (Irwin-Zarecka 48; Tych 71-94). Big cities seemed to be safer options. In addition,

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\(^{18}\) Only a few of the surviving synagogues in Poland still serve exclusively as houses of prayer, reopened after the fall of communism; among the lucky few are the synagogues in Warsaw, Lodz, Wroclaw (Breslau), Krakow, Lublin and Gdansk. There are a few synagogues opened only for special visits: Auschwitz, Bobowa and Nowy Sacz. A significant number of the former synagogues are used in a more or less noble manner: in Zamosc as a cultural center; in Bosnia as a bank; in Krynki as a movie theatre; in Krosnosie, Chmielnik, Ksiaz Wielki as storage facilities; in Krasow Lacki as flour mill; in Inowlodz as a store and a coffee-house (Parciack 7; Gruber 17; my visits).

\(^{19}\) The pre-war German territories assigned to Poland by the Yalta Conference as compensation for the annexation of eastern pre-war Polish territories by Russia.
so many areas of life needed to be rebuilt. Living assumed priority over the dead; cemeteries were just not so important. Cemeteries reminded the living of the many dead who were not buried in any cemetery.

On the few occasions when Jews attempted to memorialize their dead immediately after the war by erecting Holocaust memorials, their efforts were met with mixed reactions, the most extreme of which was destruction of the monuments.\(^20\) Alternatively, certain Jewish cemeteries and places of mass murder became the victims of a ‘gold rush’; locals burrowed through the soil in search of valuables such as money, jewelry or gold teeth (Parciack 76-80).

WWII and the Holocaust caused the greatest emotional and moral shock that Europe has ever experienced. The Poles were also deeply affected. Not only did Poland lose millions of lives, but its national identity was shaken by a newly-forced communism. From a multiethnic country with long-valued democratic traditions, it became a uniform, totalitarian system with new, artificial borders.

The missing Jewish piece of the Polish landscape, the guilt of witnesses and often of collaborators to the tragedy, the rivalry for victimhood, forced post-war secularization and linking Jews to communism - all these factors made the situation of Polish Jews ambiguous. Silence seemed to be the answer. The communist system imposed a general muteness regarding the Jews, as it did with a lot of other matters. It became politically incorrect to raise the ‘Jewish question.’ It almost became politically incorrect to be a Jew. Some tried to become invisible and a significant number of Jews, including some members of my family, changed their

\(^{20}\) Between 1945 and 1950 several Holocaust memorials were destroyed, sometimes more than once, for example in Kutno (Parciack 151).
names to sound more Polish. Interest in things-Jewish was an act of resistance against communism. Certainly, Jews were not encouraged to dwell on their memories and war trauma. A few hundred Yizkor books\textsuperscript{21} memorializing the vanished shtetls were all written abroad by surviving townsmen (Irwin-Zarecka 53).

The silence deepened with three consecutive waves of emigration of Jews from Poland: in 1948 (as a result of post-war pogroms\textsuperscript{22} and imposed secularization by the communist regime), in 1956 (the \textit{thaw} after Stalin’s death) and in 1969 (anti-Zionist protest following the Middle East Six-Day War). Poland was then left with practically no Jews. In 1970, there were only a few thousand Jews left in Poland, fifteen thousand at most (Iwrin-Zarecka 53).

Certain tolerance and interest toward Jews began emerging in the early 1980s. A visit by the famous American psychologist, Carl Rogers, and his therapy workshop in Warsaw, in 1979, is often credited as an important event contributing to the renaissance of Judaism in Poland. It was following this event that the so-called \textit{Warsaw Jewish Flying University} was created offering different classes on Jewish subjects and exploring the Jewish identity of its members. One of the founders, Konstanty Gebert, reported that a major challenge was to teach participants how to say “I am Jewish” without feeling shame or guilt (Irwin-Zarecka 80; Gebert).

But only the fall of communism, in 1989, and the resulting thirst for all possible freedom, utterly altered the situation. As in a typical post-traumatic reaction which needs a latent period of healing, only a new generation was able to break the silence and address the

\textsuperscript{21} From Hebrew, \textit{remember}; Yizkor is used as the name for a special memorial prayer, a mourning service and books memorializing vanished Jewish shtetls.

\textsuperscript{22} Pogroms took place in Krakow, Rzeszow, Chelm and Kielce; the last one, the most well-known, claimed 41 dead (Irwin-Zarecka 48; Gross).
issue. Suddenly, the interest in Judaism spread to all cultural areas with an explosive intensity. Books, magazines, theaters, movies, cultural events, scientific lectures, Yiddish and Hebrew classes, concerts, conferences and workshops on almost anything Jewish have mushroomed without limit. Judaism became ‘in style;’ for many it proved to be a ticket to a career.

This change in approach to things-Jewish received many interpretations. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka writes about the neutralizing effect that this fascination has brought to strained Polish/Jewish relations; it has therapeutically counterbalanced past tribulations. According to her, it had a normalizing influence on the Polish/Jewish dialogue by transforming fear into nostalgia. It also has helped Poles recapture their lost legacy and obliterated identity (Irwin Zarecka 176).

Rivka Parciack develops this concept further, writing that the reminiscence of Jews became a symbol of a glorious past, when Poland was politically and economically independent with a rich and tolerant culture, including Jewish heritage. Poles need this image to recapture their national identity. The Polish Jews, according to Parciack, play the role of Proust’s madeleine bringing back the dear images from Poland’s glorious past with which the Jews were inseparably connected. However, according to Parciack, the nostalgia for the Jews is truly the nostalgia for a glorious Polish past. She pessimistically foresees that once Poland recaptures and defines its national identity, the nostalgia for Jews may weaken and ultimately disappear (Parciack 289).

The situation of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland somewhat reflects the political changes and different stages of this development, from silence, neglect and even abuse to the
renaisance of interest and fascination. In a sense, the Jewish cemeteries became testimonies to the state of affairs.

Until 1939 there were 1100 to 1200 Jewish cemeteries in Poland (Wisniewski 18). In 2001, the Jewish Historical Institute (ZIH) documented the existence of 1020 cemeteries, which included about 350 without any gravestones, 260 cemeteries being put to other uses and 410 containing tombstones over some graves. Only 150 cemeteries (out of the 410 previously mentioned) were documented as having more than 100 matzevot\(^2\) (Krajewska 15). Some of these tombstones are of priceless historical value; there are about 130 matzevot from the 16th CE, and a thousand from the 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) CE (Wisniewski 15; Trzinski 19).

Paradoxically, Jewish cemeteries survived synagogues; they proved to be more difficult to destroy. You can’t simply burn a cemetery down as you can easily do with a synagogue. The Jewish cemeteries did suffer during the war and post-war times but they managed to survive and remain the last vestiges of Jewish life in Poland. It seems as if past generations of Polish Jewry conveyed their legacy through these enduring stones; it seems as if these stones held the secret to how to rekindle the spark of Jewish life in Poland.

When embarking on my mission I realized that it would be difficult to predict the current state of a significant number of Jewish cemeteries in Poland because their conditions were shaped by the war, post-war circumstances, their legal status and, finally, by the often extreme attitudes of the local population and administration.

\(^2\) Plural of matzevah; a memorial tombstone placed at the head of a grave traditionally facing toward the Temple Mount in Jerusalem
I consider my visits to sixteen Jewish cemeteries as a modest look into this vast field, and by no means can it serve as a basis for scientific generalization. I hope, however, that it may attract attention, incite interest, cause reflection and somehow contribute to the survival of these exquisite places.
Visiting the Past: My Quest into a Vanished World

“Countless Jewish souls inhabit Poland.” (Sherwin 112)

List of Jewish Cemeteries visited in summer 2013, in Poland:

1. Karczew & Otwock
2. Tomaszow Mazowiecki
3. Piotrkow Trybunalski
4. Radomsko
5. Starachowice
6. Ozarow
7. Szcebrzeszyn
8. Zwierzyniec
9. Lubaczow
10. Sieniawa
11. Bobowa
12. Muszyna
13. Piwniczna
14. Wieliczka
15. Checiny
16. Czestochowa (not included in Krajewska’s album)
Karczew

I often wonder, when visiting Jewish sites in Poland, whether the Jews marching toward their death during deportation were able, in their anguish, to spare a bit of mental energy to think about the fate of their just-abandoned synagogues, prayer houses and cemeteries. When surrounded by the special ambiance of these sites, I imagine the presence of Jewish souls wandering around through their past. I almost sense their presence.

It was not, however, the feeling I had when entering the very first cemetery I visited in Poland that summer of 2013. Rather, I experienced an uncontrollable association with vacation and the beach. Not without reason. The Jewish cemetery in Karczew, a small town near Warsaw, was constructed on a dune-type hill in an old riverbed.

Hills and other non-arable wilds were often used for Jewish cemeteries for several reasons. First, hills were protected from standing water and possible damage, leaving the earth intact. Second, such wastelands were less likely to be claimed in the future; it was the land from which they couldn’t be expelled; cemeteries were supposed to be for eternity. This was important because, according to the Jewish religious beliefs, in these sacred places the souls and the bodies were waiting for the End of Days, for the coming of the Messiah. Intactness of the bodies was believed a condition sine qua non for participation in the world to come (Lamm). Of course, Judaism has never been a monolithic religion and it has maintained a variety of beliefs regarding resurrection. However, a strong emphasis on the intactness of a dead body is univocally required by Jewish law.24 Regarding the land, I suspect that Jews were often forced

24 Shulchan Aruch, tractact Yoreh De'ah, 362-368
to accept the worst land possible without any other options. Having the land for a cemetery, any land, was already a privilege; several towns and villages did not enjoy such benefits and their Jewish residents had to travel long distances to bury their dead.²⁵

The choice of the plot for the 19th CE cemetery in Karczew turned out to be a disaster. This four-and-a-half acre graveyard is located on a dune, by definition, not a stable piece of land; dunes move.

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The cemetery in Karczew is presently located in the middle of a residential neighborhood. I enter the site with company. I follow two other visitors, drawn by the interesting information they exchange. A local woman reports that in the past, the sand was yellow and crumbly and not gray and compacted as it is today. She adds that until not long ago, it was common practice for children, including her, to plunge their hands into the sand and find a loose bone or two there. I learned later, that this shockingly disturbing feature of the cemetery made the international news. In 1986, National Geographic published a photo of a dog roaming the cemetery with a few human bones scattered around him (photo 1). This publication mobilized several organizations and individuals (see below) and resulted in fencing the cemetery in 2006:

- the US Commission for the Preservation of American Heritage Abroad;
- the Poland Jewish Cemeteries Restoration Project;
- the Jewish Community in Warsaw;

²⁵ I will describe such example in further parts.
• the Town of Karczew;
• the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw;
• the Norman and Hannah Weinberg Charitable Fund;
• Symcha Symchowicz, a Canadian-Jewish writer and a former townsman;
• Father Lemanski, a well-known figure, a priest, who has been ostracized by the Church and has faced unpleasant administrative consequences due to his pro-Jewish attitude (Reuters)

I learn the names of the donors from an elegant granite panel located on the right side of the locked gate. There is no information regarding how to procure the key but, fortunately, a neighbor directs me to the lowest point of a relatively unimposing fence. The easy access to the cemetery has a downside: it encourages people to dispose waste there, for example an old TV set, half-hidden by a few trees (photo 2). A little beyond this point, a desert-like landscape unfolds before my eyes. In the entire cemetery I can find just a few intact matzevot scattered in a sea of sand. Two tombstones just lie horizontally (photo 3), but the most noticeable are several protruding fragments of matzevot deeply immersed in the soil (photo 4). I can’t find the exact image of this cemetery from the photo taken twenty years ago, but the general impression remains very similar (photo 5; photo 6 – Krajewska # 23).

I gain the confidence of the closest neighbor. I ask him whether the cemetery should be preserved. He answers in the affirmative and adds that it should be better guarded so that people can’t use it as a depository for trash. His concern is mostly linked to the cost of cleaning, and probably to the look of his neighborhood, rather than to the respect due to the place. The
neighbor does not have a great opinion of Jews and expresses doubts of their solidarity with Poles.

“A Jew,” he says “would sell a Pole, but not the other way around.” This belief is of an anecdotal character since he admits that he has never had any contact with Jews, nor did his parents, before WWII. The only exception to the lack of such relations took the form of teenage pranks: the neighbor’s father, together with his teen friends, would paint the windows of Jewish houses or dump trash on their thresholds. The latter prank reminds me of the typical teenage mischief seen in my American, no-Jewish neighborhood.

Our conversation brings an additional benefit. I am informed about another Jewish cemetery located not far from Karczew. I am actually driven to the place, after multiple failed attempts to understand very complicated directions. The cemetery in Otwock is newer than that of Karczew and was established after Otwock was developed as a spa for people suffering from tuberculosis. I learned later, from the rather reliable website, kirkuty.xip.pl, that the unfortunate patients were first buried in Karczew, before increasing demand forced the opening of a new cemetery in Otwock.

This necropolis is not on my list, but I wouldn’t say “no” to a visit to any Jewish cemetery. This site, deeply settled in a pine forest, looks completely different than the one in Karczew. It is incorporated into a National Park and this status protects the cemetery against

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26 The website Kirkuty was created in 2005. It is a great collection of information on Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe. I use the information from this website with caution, carefully comparing its data with other sources, such as reports from local people or the website Jewish Shtetl. The latter is the official site of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in Warsaw. I always try to compare information coming from different sources, keeping in mind that all historical documents were created by people, therefore are not free from mistakes.
vandalism, but not against nature. The neighbor informs me that, until not long ago, there was no access to the cemetery.

The welcoming view is very scenic: a group of tall matzevot encircled by almost-as-tall, picturesque, yellow flowers, called mulleins. The matzevot are located under disturbing huge metal poles of double power lines, completely out of place in this pristine setting (photo 7). I can only imagine how the construction of these poles must have infringed on the expected peacefulness due to the cemetery.

The forest on the right side tightly covers over one thousand matzevot in different stages of disarray. Nature claims its right. Picturesque, yes, but also disturbingly sad (photo 8)!

Karczew. Photo 2 - The easy access to the cemetery has a downside: it encourages people to dispose waste.
Karczew. Photo 3 - Two tombstones lie horizontally.

Karczew. Photo 4 - Several protruding fragments of matzevot deeply immersed in the soil.
Photo 5 - View similar to Krajewska’s photo.

Photo 6 - Krajewska #23.
Otwock. Photo 7 – Matzevot surrounded by almost-as-tall, picturesque yellow flowers called mulleins.

Otwock. Photo 8 – Nature claims its right. Picturesque, yes, but also disturbingly sad.
Tomaszow Mazowiecki

It is on my way from the Warsaw district to my dear, native Lodz when I visit the Tomaszow Mazowiecki cemetery. This 19th CE necropolis, belonging to the Jewish community in Lodz, hosts more than two thousand graves located on some seven acres of efflorescent vegetation. The greenery which renders the superb beauty of this place creates an impression of complete isolation from the outside world. Unfortunately, the greenery is also the site’s enemy: it damages the surviving graves and makes most of the cemetery inaccessible. Being here is a little as if I ventured into a different world. The term *ruined garden* regrettably fits it perfectly (photo 1).

Time caused most of the matzevot to be haphazardly placed. Some seem to hold to each other, facing merciless time together. One group of matzevot appears like a family, with smaller stones clinging to both sides of a larger one (photo 2). Still others fight an intrusive tree for the right to be (photo 3). Leaning at different angles, the matzevot seem to imitate the movement of praying Jews and their characteristic swaying, called *shuckling*, from Yiddish ‘to shake’ (photo 4). The light bouncing off the leaves brings out different nuances of stony colors and beautifies the already-exquisite carvings (photo 5). The overall impression of this isolated site is breathtaking. It is one of the most beautiful necropolises that I’ve ever seen. Unfortunately, the place I am looking for, photographed by Krajewska twenty years ago, is concealed by the overwhelming foliage and weeds (photo 6 – Krajewska # 64).
The cemetery has four features characteristic of Jewish cemeteries:

1. An ohel\textsuperscript{27} of a famous local rabbi (or the ruins of one);
2. A mass grave of Jews from the town and its vicinity, murdered locally during WWII;
3. A memorial plate for the Jewish population of the town, murdered in a death camp; no graves for those victims, just a plaque;
4. A number of recovered matzevot used by the Nazis during WWII for construction purposes;

Often recovered matzevot are presented in a decorative manner: fixed onto a wall, made into a wall, as a stand-alone monument, or as an undefined construction which takes different forms, called lapidarium (from Latin, lapis, meaning stone). In Tomaszow, a few such fragments are fixed on the interior wall (photo 7); however, most of the recovered matzevot are jumbled tightly together in the vicinity of the gate, awaiting better days (photo 8).

The neighbor who trusted me with the key to the gate shares some interesting information with me: about seven years ago they (she assumes the Jewish community in Lodz, to whom the site belongs) fenced the cemetery, but it is not cared for on a regular basis. Last year, a group of youngsters spent a week cleaning the cemetery; this year another group spent just one day. In the past, the town mowed the grass in front of the site and even designated a parking lot there, but this care also stopped some time ago (photo 9).

\textsuperscript{27} In Hebrew, tent; a structure built over a Jewish grave as a sign of the prominence of the person buried within. It is understood that the cave of Machpelah bought for Sarah’s burial (Gen. 23) was an archetype for an ohel (Krajewska 22).
“It’s a shame,” she says.

She explains that the cemetery is a part of the town and people come here to visit. On Halloween, when Polish people commemorate the dead, they light candles here, as they do in all other cemeteries. The town of Tomaszow and the Jewish community in Lodz should do something about it, as she heard the latter does in Piotrkow. She adds that she would gladly undertake the guardianship and maintenance of the cemetery.

I detect sincerity and regret in her voice.

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28 Piotrkow is another city with a Jewish cemetery, which I will also visit.
Regrettably, the term “ruined garden” fits perfectly.

One group of matzevot appears like a family, with smaller stones clinging to both sides of a larger one.
Tomaszow. Photo 3 – One matzevah fights an intrusive tree for the right to be.

Tomaszow. Photo 4 – Leaning at different angles, the matzevot seem to imitate the movement of praying Jews and their characteristic swaying.
Tomaszow. Photo 5 – The light bouncing off the leaves brings out different nuances of stony colors and beautifies the already-exquisite carvings.

Tomaszow. Photo 6 – I can’t find Krajewska’s view from twenty years ago; Krajewska # 64
**Tomaszow.** Photo 7 – Fragments of matzevot are fixed on the interior wall.

**Tomaszow.** Photo 8 – Most of the recovered matzevot are jumbled tightly together in the vicinity of the gate, awaiting better days.
Tomaszow. Photo 9 – In the past, the town mowed the grass in front of the site and even designated a parking lot there, but this care stopped some time ago.
Piotrkow is another city in the Lodz vicinity which had a significant Jewish population before WWII, therefore it also has an imposing cemetery of three thousand graves; the oldest dates from the 18th CE and the newest from 2005. I spend a lot of time there because of a welcoming and talkative guardian who has lived in the house on the premises, a funeral parlor, since the end of the war. She seizes me right at the gate, suggesting a better parking spot.

It turns out that the situation of this cemetery is not much better than in Tomaszow. The responsibility for the maintenance of the cemetery has been lost somewhere between the city of Piotrkow and the Jewish community in Lodz, the owner of the site. For example, four years ago a section of the wall crumbled. The city was willing to match the investment of the Jewish community in Lodz. I later learned from the president of that community, Symcha Keller, that he tried to spark the financial interest of the visiting Hassidic Jews connected to the local tzaddik buried in the cemetery. Neither side was willing to invest and, as a result, a part of the cemetery wall was provisionally repaired with wire fencing (photo 1).

The guardian tells me that she was paid 200 zlotes per month ($66.00) for the maintenance until about three years ago. The battle with these seven acres of greenery is overwhelming. The last time that she was able to mow the vegetation in the entire cemetery was in 2006, helped by her son. Then, in 2007, she was only able to mow half of it. The guardian states with zeal that she loves the cemetery and because of her attachment to this place people suspect her of being Jewish and occasionally call her names. She comes from a family of masons. Before the war, her father worked with a Jewish mason, Horowitz, who taught him
how to carve Hebrew letters. She also knows the letters and, when asked, proves her knowledge. Finally, she admits that her family helped hide Horowitz during the war.

The cemetery, including four ohelim (the graves of the local tzaddikim), was demolished during the war and many matzevot were used for construction. The fate of the matzevot during WWII was diverse: the Nazis used them as paving stones, foundations, reinforcement of a river bed, to build pools, form steps and in general construction; the Poles, in addition to the aforementioned purposes, used the matzevot as whet stones to sharpen knives, grinders and reused them as grave stones in Catholic (ex. Topczew) and Protestant (ex. Suprasl) cemeteries.29 In 2004 the Piotrkow cemetery was fortunate to recover about one hundred stolen matzevot.

Since the cemetery enjoys the status of a national monument, the regional museum plays an important role in the restoration of the cemetery, despite drastically reduced finances for such purposes. The involvement of the museum is a great and rare blessing. A few projects have been accomplished; others are in process. The museum constructed a lapidarium, arranging the recovered matzevot on a very solid, one-and-one-half foot deep foundation (photo 2). The museum built a sidewalk leading to the lapidarium and spread a significant amount of gravel around it. Three years ago another important long-term project was undertaken, consisting of redressing the matzevot and building supports around them. The first

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29 In 2014, Lukasz Baksis released the album, Matzevot for Everyday Use, which comprises photos showing cases of using plundered matzevot as a source of free building material. Prior to that, in 2010, Baksik’s photos were displayed in Warsaw causing quite a stir in the Polish media. For more information see: http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/cms/news/3208,-matzevot-for-everyday-use-now-available-in-bookstores/?mn=4&yr=2014
row of matzevot has already been restored with the use of concrete. The second is in process with the use of a more aesthetic (or durable) material – bricks topped by sandstone (photo 3).

In addition to the museum’s involvement and the on-site guardian, the Piotrkow cemetery has another priceless asset: the former custodian of the museum. It was my fortune to meet the man during my visit and actually witness him at work. As the lady-guardian, he also seems to be emotionally connected to the cemetery. I learn from her that the former custodian of the museum is no longer paid for the work he is doing in the graveyard. One of the matters which preoccupies him to a great extent is his attempt to prevent a near-by store from acquiring a license to sell alcohol. I learn that Polish law does not allow such a store to operate less than 50 meters from a cemetery. According to the custodian, the distance between the store and the cemetery is less. Knowing Polish reality, I can easily imagine the rationale behind such a law as well as the negative consequences to the cemetery as a result of any alcohol-related activities.

The former custodian of the museum relates that twenty years ago the cemetery was in deplorable condition; walking through it was impossible. In comparison to that time, he continues, there is a significant improvement but a lot still needs to be done. And it should be done, because it is an often-visited national monument; a few times a year different Jewish groups from the USA and from Israel come here. The custodian shares some tough experiences with the American Jews who, according to him, are very anti-Pole. One of the American visitors deeply surprised him by asking, without any reason, why he, the custodian, is an anti-Semite. The custodian believes that the American Jews suffer from a guilt-issue caused by not letting
European Jews in, during WWII. He finds the Jews from Israel, free of such dilemma, much more pleasant to deal with.

I spend a long time wandering among the paths, impressed by the beauty of the place. The sense of order, coming from the regularly delineated walkways, dissipates slowly with the vegetation claiming its rights. The more distant parts of the cemetery seem to be in complete disarray. I often face the same aesthetic/moral anguish: I know that plants are detrimental to the graves and will destroy them eventually, but they adorn the stones with a unique charm, rendering the place amazingly expressive; it seems as if the tombstones and nature were unified in harmonious alliance.

There are a lot of ‘empty’ spaces - graves without matzevot, covered by weeds - and some places that stand out, with a group of matzevot that survived time and the war. These isolated islets call for my attention; I feel summoned to answer them. I respond by taking a lot of pictures as if this action could help preserve their existence (photos 4 & 5).

The cemetery tells stories. There are three ohelim built in a row, close to each other (photo 6). Looking like small houses, they cover the graves of three famous tzaddikim from the vicinity of Piotrkow: from Rozprza, Wolborz and Radoszyce, all incredibly difficult Polish names. They were all destroyed during WWII and renovated on their original foundations in 2004. A granite plate on one of the ohelim relates that between the graves, a dozen Torah scrolls were buried. Those scrolls have their own story. They were rescued from desecration, meaning from being burned in the Piotrkow synagogue, by a few Jewish youngsters who risked their lives by doing so.
There is another ohel situated a little farther from the three mentioned. This is the ohel of the tzaddik of Piotrkow, Chaim David Bernard (1782-1858), rebuilt by his American descendants, the same donors who also reconstructed the three other ohelim. This one, I learn from the guardian, is the most popular and attracts the most worshipers (photo 7). According to the website Kirkuty, Chaim David Bernard became interested in Hassidism thanks to a disciple of one of the most famous tzaddikim in Poland, the Seer of Lublin (1745-1815). Such a connection is already one badge of honor but in addition to being a tzaddik, David Bernard was also a physician. These two functions may have contributed to his fame as a miracle-worker.

The last rabbi of Piotrkow is commemorated by a plaque as well. This is the only way to memorialize his name; he does not have a grave here or anywhere else since his ashes were scattered around Treblinka. The last commemorative inscription is that regarding approximately 30,000 Jews living in Piotrkow before the war who died in Treblinka in 1942. I am surprised by a part of the inscription which calls for God’s vengeance for the murdered. I have never seen such an invocation on any other Jewish memorial plaque. It brings to mind the Katzenelson’s poem, *Song of the Murdered Jewish People*, which ends with a different message, “Do not crush and don’t destroy the wicked. Let them destroy themselves!

With about one hundred photos, I finally leave the Piotrkow cemetery and the people working there. I have no luck finding the views from twenty years ago but at least I feel some comfort and confidence in that I leave the site in well-intentioned hands.
Neither side was willing to invest and, as a result, a part of the cemetery wall was provisionally repaired with wire fencing.

The museum constructed a lapidarium, arranging the recovered matzevot on a very solid, one-and-one-half foot deep foundation.
Piotrków. Photo 3 – The first row of matzevot has already been restored with the use of concrete. The second is in process with the use of a more aesthetic (or durable) material – bricks topped by sandstone.

Piotrków. Photo 4 – There are a lot of ‘empty’ spaces - graves without matzevot, covered by weeds - and some places that stand out, with a group of matzevot that survived time and the war.
**Piotrkow.** Photo 5 – Simply beautiful.

**Piotrkow.** Photo 6 – There are three ohelim built in a row containing the graves of three famous tzaddikim from the vicinity of Piotrkow.
Piotrkow. Photo 7 – Ohel of the tzaddik Chaim David Bernard (1782-1858), rebuilt by his American descendants, the same donors who also reconstructed the three other ohelim.
Radomsko

Radomsko is the last cemetery on my itinerary that is located near Lodz and belongs to the Jewish community in that city. In general, the cemeteries located in big cities, or nearby, are owned by the Jewish communities in those cities if such communities officially exist. This is the case with Lodz, Warsaw, Lublin, Krakow, Katowice, Bielsko-Biała, Szczecin and Legnica. In the case of small towns and villages, the matter of ownership is more complex. Some of the small cemeteries belong to different Polish local administrative bodies; others are the properties of a Jewish organization, the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ), established in 2002. This is an important organization created by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland in cooperation with the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO). Its mission is to protect Jewish heritage in Poland.

By calling these different organizations, I learned that the Foundation has the ownership of 105 cemeteries, Warsaw - 74, Katowice – 40 and my hometown, Lodz, possesses 14 and waits for decisions regarding 22 others. The Krakow community refused to give me this information over the phone; an employee suggested an e-mail, to which I did not receive an answer. Two employees of the Lublin community did not know the number of cemeteries belonging to their community.

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The ownership of the 19th CE cemetery in Radomsko is declared on a plaque fixed to the gate. There is another tablet here, a sort of glossary, with the history of the cemetery and the

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30 In Polish, Fundacja Ochrony Dziedzictwa Zydowskiego (FODZ); its official web-site is: http://fodz.pl
explanation of different Jewish customs and common symbols used on the tombstones. A warning regarding the presence of a ferocious dog makes me hesitate for a moment. After a few steps inside, I am quickly joined by an energetic lady-guardian who has lived on the premises since the end of the war. Her first suspicious and displeased attitude improves slowly as I explain my research to her. She even offers some advice regarding the place on the photo I am looking for. It turns out that the view from Krajewska’s album from twenty years ago, in addition to matzevot, also features the guardian’s ‘beloved’ sheep. I offer her the photo, which melts her last resistance.

The guardian’s unhappiness is partially caused by the demands that the frequent visits put on her (my understanding is that she receives tips on these occasions) and partially by her unsatisfactory relations with the Jewish congregation in Lodz. The situation in this cemetery is similar to that in Piotrkow. The payment for the guardian’s services of 200 zlotes per month ended about three years ago. The building, a former funeral parlor, belongs to Lodz but the guardian needs to maintain it by herself. Hearing the same report from two cemeteries belonging to the Lodz congregation I infer that the financial situation of that community must have drastically changed at that time.

I later heard a rather pessimistic report from the president of the Lodz community, Symcha Keller, about their gloomy financial situation. I learned that both sources of financing the community are in jeopardy:

1. There is talk about cutting the state’s financial support for religious institutions;

2. The restitution of former communal Jewish properties is almost exhausted;
The community theoretically has 300 members but not a lot of activities. This state of affairs even brought the president to suggest that I, a well-known to him representative of the Reform movement, encourage the Lodz ‘reformers’ to join his community. Such practice takes place in the orthodox community in Warsaw, which in addition to offering orthodox services, regularly hosts a group representing the progressive movement.

There are three projects which could save the Lodz community:

1. A motion to Unesco to include the Jewish cemetery in Lodz in the world heritage;
2. Financial help from the European Union;
3. Development of tourism for the Jews from abroad which would necessitate investing in a new infrastructure;

However, at the present time, the situation is not optimistic; several social programs were cut off due to financial stress. One such program was the Senior Center, in which my father participated daily for the last several years of his life. Another is the support of the cemeteries belonging to the Lodz community. This is the reason why the Piotrkow and the Radomsko cemeteries stopped receiving the 200.00 zlotych per month a few years ago.

Fortunately, in addition to the local Jewish community, the Radomsko cemetery, as do many Jewish cemeteries in Poland, benefits from other programs. The guardian tells me that four years ago, the entire cemetery was cleaned up by students from Israel who worked there for three weeks while staying in a near-by hotel. I learned later from Virtual Shtetl,31 the official website of the Warsaw Museum of the History of Polish Jews, that cleaning in

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31 http://www.sztetl.org.pl
Radomsko began in 2002 as the result of the project *Antyschematy* (*Defying Stereotypes*; literally, *Anti-scheme*). The project has consisted of bringing together young people from Poland, Israel, Germany and other countries to clean up Jewish cemeteries in Poland.\(^\text{32}\) In Radomsko the project continued for several years. It must have yielded some results, but unfortunately, they are no longer visible. The plants seemed to take over, establishing their absolute supremacy.

I enter six acres of vegetation almost completely covering some three thousand matzevot. The only accessible path goes through the middle of the cemetery, reaches the wall and circles back toward the gate. I can only observe those matzevot which are in close proximity to the path (photo 1). I pass the man-sized, beautifully carved stones.

I do not enter the ohel of the famous local tzaddik, but I am informed by the guardian that it was built after the war. The brick fence around the cemetery survived the war but was in need of repair. Both works were financed by the Rabinowicz family from the USA, related to the dynasty of the local tzaddikim of the same name. I have seen several ohelim but this is the first that houses the graves of women. Their tombs are, however, located in a special, separate room. Another feature of this cemetery is a pile of fragments of destroyed matzevot located alongside the wall. In other cemeteries they would be made into a wall, or fixed on the wall or built into some sort of *lapidarium*; but not here. Here the fate of these mutilated, holy stones is not so glorious (photo 2).

\(^{32}\) Organization *Antyschematy* was created in 1999, as a part of *Janusz Korczak Association* (http://www.antyschematy.pl/). Each year the organization focuses on a particular cemetery, often invited by the local administration. Israeli youth joined the effort in 2000, Ukraine in 2004 and later other groups from Germany and Holland (Parciack 110).
In a corner, I notice a few post-war graves, one of which forces me to stop and read a long inscription. The cry of a man is written in this stone - a several-sentence-long lamentation of a heartbroken husband. The message is very personal and somewhat incoherent, as messages of despair can be. It describes the remorse of a broken promise, past images causing suffering, his bleeding heart, begging gesture, a confession of eternal love and inconsolable desolation. This is an unusual Jewish epitaph. Customarily, Jewish inscriptions use images and symbols rather than words; they refer to the deceased rather than to the mourners. It may be so because halakhah discourages excessive mourning which may be interpreted as a sign of doubt in the Almighty’s judgment. This one, however, demonstrates an unconventional boldness and an out-of-the-ordinary explosion of genuine suffering.

Despite my efforts I can’t find the exact view from twenty years ago from Krajewska’s album. I can only spot the place that seems to look the most similar (photo 3; photo 4 – Krajewska # 40).

I pass by a group of the matzevot that hardly show their rounded top. They stick out of the grass as if they tried to grasp their final breath before being pulled down and engulfed by the sea of weeds (photo 5). Defenseless, abandoned stones seem to be silently resigned to their fate, as the Jewish people often were during the war. This state of affairs forces me to conclude that the situation in this cemetery has not improved, but rather has worsened, in spite of the fact that in 1989 the cemetery received the status of national monument. The guardian, an older woman, seems to be neither able nor committed to bringing order to the place. She affirms that she would have taken care of the site if she had been paid. This sounds
like a reasonable request. On the other hand, she has the benefit of free rent; this is the argument of the president of the Lodz congregation, Symcha Keller, which I will hear later.

“Should the cemetery be preserved?” I ask her against my Jewish nefesh, but I decided to pose this question to everybody I speak with, who is somehow involved in Jewish cemeteries. Her answer is affirmative, but I can’t grasp her reasoning.

**Radomsko. Photo 1 - I can only observe those matzevot which are in close proximity to the path.**
Radosko. Photo 2 - A pile of fragments of destroyed matzevot is located alongside the wall. In other cemeteries they would be made into a wall or fixed on the wall or built into some sort of lapidarium, but not here. Here the fate of these mutilated, holy stones is not so glorious.

Radosko. Photo 3 - Despite my efforts I can’t find the exact view from twenty years ago, from Krajewska’s album. I can only spot the place that seems to look the most similar.
Radomsko. Photo 4 - Krajewska # 40.

Radomsko. Photo 5 - The matzevot stick out of the grass as if they tried to grasp their final breath before being pulled down and engulfed by the sea of weeds.
Starachowice

I finally had to detach from my hometown, Lodz, to venture into the deep south-east region of Poland. Most of the Jewish cemeteries I planned to visit that summer were located in that part. My choice, and actually that of Krajewska, followed the geographic locations of pre-war Jewish communities, and especially Hassidic courts, most of which were in that section of Poland. A few years ago, the Foundation (FODZ) created a tourist attraction, the Hassidic Route, which traces Jewish shtetls and tombs of the famous tzaddikim through southeastern Poland.33

I knew that it would take several days to accomplish the entire itinerary, so I invited a college friend to partake in my trip. My friend Kasia is an historian and an art connoisseur. On our past journeys, I have often benefited from her historical knowledge, artistic perspective and, sometimes, common sense.

The first city we visited was Starachowice. It was a well-known place in communist Poland due to the production of the only truck made in Poland, a pride of the state at the time. It was named Star, but that had nothing to do with the English meaning of this word; it was just an abbreviation of the city’s name and, as with everything in communist Poland, had no starry qualities. We chose a bookseller as our first contact and this turned out to be a good choice. He introduced us to this several-centuries-old city of about fifty thousand inhabitants and explained directions to the cemetery.

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33 For more information see the official website of the Foundation: http://fodz.pl/?d=5&id=32&l=en
The cemetery is located in a new quarter of the town. The look of the necropolis is rather surprising. It is a square of a few acres set in the middle of a residential neighborhood. The windows and balconies of all the houses located on all four sides of the cemetery watch over tightly-packed Jewish tombstones in clear lines (photo 1). The site is fenced and secured by a locked, steel gate without information about the key. According to Virtual Shtetl, the fence was erected in 1996 by the city of Starachowice and The Foundation for Remembrance. There is a board on the fence describing the history of the cemetery. The symbol of the European Union on the board implies the Union’s financial participation in the maintenance of the site. From the same board we learn that the necropolis received the status of national monument in 1991 and was recognized as such by the city in 2011. I don’t even try to figure out the relationship between these two legal procedures. However, it is interesting to note that an object can be recognized as a national monument by the state, and not necessarily by the town.

We enter the necropolis through an unofficial small pass hidden in one of the corners. We wouldn’t have noticed it if a helpful neighbor had not directed us to that place. The first discomfort, coming from the feeling of being exposed to the possible scrutiny of every single neighbor, fades away as we progress into the site.

The matzevot are tightly packed. Their gorgeous designs represent the usual Jewish symbols (Krajewska 25-37):

- the star of David;
- the menorah;
- the crown - a symbol of priesthood or of good name, also used as a symbol of the head of the family;
- the Tree of Life - one of the oldest Jewish symbols of cosmic significance;
- grapes - an emblem of Israel and a symbol of fertility (Isa. 5:7);
- a Cohen’s hands spread in priestly blessing (photo 2) carved on the graves of priests;
- a Levite’s pitcher and bowl (together with a Cohen’s hands they are the oldest symbols on the tombstones);
- the shofar symbolizing the hope of resurrection or a man who had blown the shofar;
- books and bookshelves for rabbis and scholars;
- candles with multiple branches, usually for women, alluding to their religious duties;
- broken candles or broken trees symbolizing early death (photo 3);
- animals indicating people’s names or tribal ancestry:
  - deer for Tzvi, Hirsh, or for the tribe of Naphtali;
  - lion for Ari, Aryeh, Judah, Leib, Loev or for the tribe of Judah;
  - bear for Dov and Ber;
  - wolf for Volf or for the tribe of Benjamin;
  - sheep for Rachelle;
  - birds, usually for women; for example, a pelican for mothers, expressing their maternal care;
Names were often a pretext for biblical quotations;

Sometimes the images on the matzevot tell stories. Monika Krajewska writes that in Christianity the gravestones celebrate death; in Judaism they are the monuments of life (Krajewska 25). For example, an image of a flock of sheep without a shepherd, or a nest of baby birds with a flying-away mother bird refers to a family orphaned by the deceased. The image of a tree cut by a knife may express a brutal death (Krajewska 34). A tree branch bearing a few fruit with some fruit on the ground describes a family situation with some children alive and others dead.

Sometimes the images are inspired by a play on words, as it is with the words ship and weeping (Hebrew homonyms), where the image of a ship represents mourning. Jews wrote the religious virtues of their dead in stone: they depicted piety and generosity in the form of an alms box, scholarship with the image of books, and the religious functions of the mohel, scribe or priest in the form of a knife, quill and blessing hands, respectively.

Certainly, it is an art to decipher the symbolic meaning of Jewish tombstones. The matter is even more complicated in the hidden messages expressed in acrostics and anagrams. The most challenging, however, are the dates, which when expressed in Hebrew letters, could be rearranged to have an additional meaning (Krajewska 38).

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34 The person who performs the circumcision
The cemetery in Starachowice actually looks fairly neat. Vegetation seems to be under control. A sense of certain order and care is detectable; someone oversees this place. We notice the numbers on the backs of the tombstones, with the highest number that I can find being 487. This is consistent with the city’s inventory which recorded about 500 matzevot. The inventory was conducted by a local volunteer, Maciej Frankiewicz, an association of former Jewish townsmen living in the US, Israel and Canada, and a group of Israeli youngsters. Together with the city, they are also responsible for the maintenance of the cemetery: uprooting bushes, removing rubbish and straightening fallen matzevot. I notice the original gate from the 19th century, with an annotation (photo 4), and the neatly stacked fragments of tombstones.

I learn from multiple sources on the Internet that Maciej Frankiewicz is a Polish artist fascinated by the Jewish culture and the Jewish history of his native Starachowice. Exhibitions of his work have been organized in Poland, Canada and Israel. His own on-line portal offers a look into his colorful paintings, mostly connected to Jewish themes. Virtual Shtetl calls him ‘a memory guardian from Starachowice.’ Not only did he contribute to the present condition of the cemetery but in 2001, supported by the city and a group of former Jewish townsmen, he opened the Memorial Chamber of Starachowice containing Jewish memorabilia he gathered. I was later able to confirm all of this information over an enjoyable phone conversation with Maciej, thanks to the number found on Virtual Shtetl. His efforts were appreciated, in 2004, by

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35 A group of young people from Israel helped in this task as a part of the project A Thousand Years of Jews in Poland. The result of their work, an inventory of the graves, is accessible in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

36 See: http://www.frankiewicz.strefa.pl/
the Israeli Ambassador to Poland. The artist received recognition presented annually to Poles for their outstanding contributions to the preservation of Jewish culture in Poland.

My good feeling about the cemetery transforms into elation. For the first time, I am able to identify the exact view from Krajewska’s album (photo 5; photo 6 - Krajewska # 46). There is no doubt – I can recognize the same images on the matzevot and even the same degree of their leaning. The photo from 20 years ago is actually quite gloomy. It brings back memories of the depressing reality of communist Polish villages. Actually, there is nothing wrong with that black and white picture and, at first, I can’t put my finger on the cause of my discomfort. There are a few ancient-looking cars in it, a power line and a few simple, not-bad looking houses, considering the era. I don’t think that my mood is affected by the Polish elements of this picture. Rather, it is the cemetery and its out-of-place look. A few hundred tombstones, all facing the same direction, don’t belong to the Polish reality of the picture. Looking hopeless and resigned, they give the impression of waiting, ready to be sent away, like the Jews herded to the deportation sites. But where would these stones be sent?

It is not a completely ridiculous idea. The ‘deportation’ of gravestones from Jewish cemeteries did happen during WWII. Tomasz Wisniewski, in his book *The Lost World of Small-Town Jewish Cemeteries; Reconstructing Atlantis*, reprints a photo from 1942 of a pile of tombstones extracted from the cemetery in Walk, Latvia, ready to be transported to an undefined destiny (Wisniewski 25). Several Jewish cemeteries shared that fate in WWII to different degrees.
But this was not the destiny of the Starachowice Jewish cemetery. Instead, the necropolis was incorporated into the city and became a part of it with some unfortunate reduction along the edges. It seems paradoxical that the same miserable-looking cemetery from twenty years ago appears much more at ease when surrounded by modern, full-of-life, houses.

We return to the bookseller who confirms that, indeed, the city participates in the maintenance of the cemetery. He adds that from time to time there are people visiting the site, but usually individuals rather than groups. I am not surprised. There is no visible ohel in the cemetery; it was completely destroyed, leaving only its foundation which was discovered some time ago. The participants of the Hassidic tours are not attracted to the graves of ordinary people, therefore they would not come here. I understand the attachment and adoration of the Hassidim toward their tzaddikim, but Hassidism is also a celebration of friendship, as Wiesel described it (Wiesel 83-85). Hassidim were experts in building bridges from the heart to God; I wonder if it would spoil “some vast eternal plan” if the bridges they built also included their fellow man. I wonder if their prayers could incorporate ordinary people. Maybe the graves of such people would benefit from the Hassidim’s plea.

Before our departure I ask ‘my question.’ The bookseller affirms that he has never heard of someone suggesting the liquidation of the cemetery. I think about Maciej Frankiewicz. For once, the cemetery has a sort-of guardian angel.

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37 An expression from the song, *If I were a rich man*, from *Fiddler on the Roof*
Starachowice. Photo 1 - The windows and balconies of all the houses located on all four sides of the cemetery watch over tightly-packed Jewish tombstones in clear lines.

Starachowice. Photo 2 - Cohen’s hands spread in priestly blessing; the crown - a symbol of priesthood or of good name, also used as a symbol of the head of the family; bookshelves symbolizing scholarship; deer for Tzvi, Hirsh, or for the tribe of Naphtali.
Starachowice. Photo 3 - Broken candles symbolizing early death.

Starachowice. Photo 4 - Original gate from the 19th century.
Starachowice. Photo 5 - For the first time, I identify the exact view from Krajewska’s album.

Starachowice. Photo 6 – Krajewska # 46.
*Starachowice*. Photo 6 – Krajewska # 46 – right side.
Starachowice. Photo 6 – Krajewska # 46 – left side.
Ozarow

By this stage of my trip I know that each Jewish cemetery has its own unique style. The one in Ozarow faces a Catholic cemetery which is located on the opposite side of the road (photo1). It actually looks pretty natural to have both necropolises in proximity. Only one is full of life (if one can say this about a cemetery) with many visitors and colorful, fresh flowers, while the other one keeps to itself.

The 17th CE Jewish cemetery in Ozarow suffered greatly during WWII and the post-war period. It was left with barely 64 gravestones out of some 300 originals. There were even plans, in the 1960s, to transform the place into a park,38 a fate that was met by many Jewish cemeteries in Poland. But the site in Ozarow had good fortune written in the stars. One man’s search to discover his roots led him to Ozarow and resulted in the restoration of its cemetery. In 2001, Norman and Hannah Weinberg, together with other descendants of former townsmen, collected enough funds to bring this necropolis to its former glory. The cemetery was fenced and cleaned up. A monument commemorating the Holocaust victims was erected on a mass grave and some 200 matzevot were retrieved from nearby villages and reinstalled there. The renovation was celebrated by 500 people, including many prominent persons from Israel, the US and Poland. The story of the restoration and the ceremony of the cemetery’s opening were documented in the movie Return to Ozarow.39

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38 Information from Virtual Shtetl and Kirkuty
39 Access to the movie trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EG441wSoQ4
The interest aroused by the Ozarow cemetery led to the creation of the *Poland Jewish Cemeteries Restoration Project, Inc. (PJCRP)*\(^40\) in May 2001, with Norman Weinberg as its executive coordinator. The mission of this non-profit organization is the restoration and preservation of Poland’s devastated Jewish cemeteries. The necropolis in Ozarow became the organization’s first project.

I was fortunate to learn about the *PJCRP* before my trip to Poland and was able to contact Norman Weinberg (who kindly sent me the movie), and his Polish representative Andrzej Omasta. I spent the first few hours, after landing in Warsaw, interviewing Mr. Omasta. It soon became obvious that he is one of those Poles who is fascinated by the Jewish culture. But he would correct such a description. According to him, it is not his passion but his way of life. After listening to him for a few hours, I understood this proclamation. Regarding Jewish matters, there are two groups of Poles: the philo-Semites, fascinated by anything Jewish, and the anti-Semites with the opposite feelings. There is almost nobody in-between; there are no indifferent people regarding the Jewish question in Poland. My interlocutor decisively belonged to the first group.

Omasta was a priceless source of knowledge. I learned from him that the *PJCRP* was registered in New York and not in Poland. The organization has a complex relationship with, the already mentioned, Poland-based *Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland* as well as with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich. The subject of who does the actual work in the cemeteries is rather tense.

\(^40\) For more information see the official website of the Project, http://www.pjcrp.org
Omasta described to me how the PJCRP works. When he embarks on a new assignment, first he visits the local priest. It is not only for his knowledge about the place or about the former Jewish community, but rather to procure his support; a priest is an important figure in Polish towns and villages. After the site is defined (often the exact borders of the cemeteries are unknown) photos are taken. The project, mainly consisting of erecting fencing and tree removal, has to be approved by the regional conservator. On average, the total cost of the work comes to about fifty thousand dollars. Once the project is accepted, local workers are employed. This is done with the hope of minimizing possible future vandalism; the rationale behind such hope is the assumption that townspeople will not destroy their own work.

The next stage takes place in schools. For the next five years the PJCRP sponsors contests for the best essay regarding the Jewish history of the town. The students who win the first three places receive, respectively, $75.00, $50.00 and $25.00. There is a plan to publish a bilingual book of their works in NY and, possibly, to make a movie.

At the end of my visit, Mr. Omasta offered to show me several cemeteries that were fenced by the PJCRP but my limited resources (time and money) were invested in my own itinerary and, regretfully, I had to decline.

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The Ozarow cemetery looks like a small, fenced grove of trees, without visible graves from the outside. We enter through an open gate. There is a path leading, first, to a mass grave of 150 people and then to a locked ohel. The information about the key to the ohel is written
only in Hebrew. That makes some sense; the most motivated people to enter the ohel are Hebrew-speaking Hassidim, but I find such a practice a bit exclusive.

From this place we can see a lot of matzevot but the greenery blocks our movements. My friend suggests a simple solution - to climb over the top of the brick wall (photo2). This allows us to move around a little but tree branches still obstruct our advances. I am, however, grateful for my friend’s idea which allows us to see, at least, part of the cemetery. The carvings on the tombstones are exquisite, of exceptional beauty. Ozarow was famous for its high-quality stone artists, according to Virtual Shtetl. The effect is intensified by the use of white sandstone which incites a feeling of pristine innocence (photo 3).

I notice one such white tombstone which completely captures my attention (photo 4). The idea of a matzevah is to symbolically represent a gateway of transition; it epitomizes a crossing between two worlds, from the material one to the eternal, which some hope lies ahead. The idea of passing being expressed in the form of an arc or a gate is ancient. It has its origin in the rainbow, which was believed to connect heaven and earth and link humans with the divine. The columns, added later, conveyed the same idea of the divine connection (Trzcinski 27-37). The biblical God manifested Himself in columns (Exod. 13: 21-22 & Exod. 33:9). A matzevah unifies both symbols: the arc and the columns, becoming a gate of separation, and at the same time, a gate of transition.

The white matzevah I am captivated by is shrouded by delicate, stony folds. It perfectly imitates a real curtain especially with sunlight flickering on it. I can almost perceive its movement and sense its invitation to venture to the other side. I nearly hear its voiceless
calling: “This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous will enter,” (Ps. 118-20). The image of the vase with a garland of flowers, symbolizing the Tree of Life (Trzcinski 64-80), intensifies the spiritual expression of this stone. It’s the world of beauty, dignity and unattainable calm.

The photo in my hand brings me back to reality. The view of the cemetery from 20 years ago bears no resemblance to what I now see. The photo presents a group of some twenty matzevot in the middle of a grassy meadow with fields in the background (photo 5 – Krajewska # 11). There is no wall in the picture nor overwhelming greenery. Today, the cemetery is protected by a wall (an improvement); on the other side, the vegetation is overwhelming and prevents people from moving around (a decline).

Outside the cemetery I exchange a few words with a passing-by local woman. She tells me that a few times a year there are groups visiting the site. She adds that the cemetery is mowed a couple times a year. How can that be, I wonder? The overwhelming greenery gives the impression of a long reign in this place. The documentary from the 2001 opening celebration shows an accessible cemetery, cleared of vegetation. But that event took place twelve years ago. The fact that the necropolis belongs to the Foundation (FODZ) does not seem to help. If a cemetery with as much history as Ozarow, with its renovation and boisterous celebration, can slip so easily into decline, is there any hope for other cemeteries? Is there any hope for the survival of Jewish cemeteries in Poland?

I leave this necropolis with morose thoughts.
Ozarow. Photo 1 - The Jewish cemetery in Ozarow faces a Catholic cemetery which is located on the opposite side of the road.

Ozarow. Photo 2 - We climb over the top of the brick wall. This allows us to move around a little but tree branches still obstruct our advances.
Ozarow. Photo 3 - Ozarow was famous for its high-quality stone artists.
Ozarow. Photo 4 – The white matzevah I am captivated by is shrouded by delicate, stony folds. It perfectly imitates a real curtain, especially with sunlight flickering on it. I can almost perceive its movement and sense its invitation to venture to the other side. A matzevah symbolizes a gate of separation and at the same time, a gate of transition. The image of the vase with a garland of flowers, symbolizing the Tree of Life, intensifies the spiritual expression of this stone. It’s the world of beauty, dignity and unattainable calm.
There is no wall in the picture nor overwhelming greenery. Today, the cemetery is protected by a wall (an improvement); on the other side, the vegetation is overwhelming and prevents people from moving around (a decline).
Szczeczeńszyn

The rest of my trip I travel by myself. The first place I visit is Szczeczeńszyn. This town is famous for ... its beetle; actually for a nursery rhyme about a beetle, written by one of the two most popular Polish poets writing for children, Jan Brzechwa (1898-1966). The trick is that the very difficult to pronounce name of the town was used as a wordplay with another difficult Polish word which means ‘beetle.’ The result of that wordplay turned into a very amusing poem about a beetle buzzing in the town of Szczeczeńszyn. The first verse of the poem became the best known Polish tongue-twister. I mention the two most popular children’s poets, whose poems are known to EVERY SINGLE Polish child (similar to Dr. Seuss in the US) because it happens that both artists were also Jewish. There is no need for better proof of the interconnection between both cultures.

I am welcomed by a sculpture of a beetle and live music in the market place. It is not, however, a welcoming committee, but a celebration of the Fifth Festival of the Jewish, Russian Orthodox and Catholic Cultures in the town. Unfortunately, I missed the first day, dedicated to Jewish culture, but I was able to enjoy the colorful dances of an Ukrainian ensemble. With curiosity, I check the program of the previous, Jewish, day. It offered a lecture on Judaism and Klezmer music played by a band from Lublin. It turns out that the lecture was given by one of the authorities on Judaism in Poland, quoted above, Andrzej Trzcinski, coincidently, a college buddy of a friend of mine who lives in Chapel Hill. Thanks to such a connection I was able, on several occasions, to receive priceless information from Mr. Trzcinski over the phone and via e-

41 Jan Brzechwa was born Jan Wictor Lesman (1898-1966). The other poet was Julian Tuwim (1894-1953).
42 The saying goes: “W Szczeczeńszynie chrzaszcz brzmi w trzcinie” which means “In the town of Szczeczeńszyn a beetle buzzes in the reeds.” I would love to hear an Anglophone trying to pronounce this Polish tongue-twister!
mail. It was unfortunate that I missed his lecture and the opportunity to meet him in person. Several of his books, accessible in the Duke and the UNC libraries, offer some consolation.

Not far from the market stands a 17th CE synagogue (photo 1). It is currently used as the town’s Cultural Center, painted pink. I learn from information boards that the synagogue was restored twice: first, in the 1960s and then, recently, in 2009. It became the property of the Foundation (FODZ) and then was sold to the town of Szczebrzeszyn.

The process of restitution of pre-war Jewish communal properties in Poland began in 1997, after a law was passed regulating relations between the Polish state and the Jewish communities (Gruber 7). It involved a complicated legal procedure but it resulted in the recovery of a number of buildings, such as synagogues, prayer houses, mikvoth43 and others. A lot of these buildings were later sold by the Jewish communities. The subsequent handling of the financial gain has undergone sharp criticism by both Polish and Jewish public opinion. A scant amount of this money was used for the maintenance of Jewish cemeteries.

In the synagogue in Szczebrzeszyn, a present Cultural Center, there is an administrative section and the former sanctuary which is often used for theater presentations. At the time of my visit, there is a curious decoration on the former bimah;44 I notice several silhouettes of traditional-looking Jews standing or sitting there. For a moment, one could think that nothing had changed here and that Jewish life goes on. Unfortunately, the silhouettes are only shadows from the past (photo 2).

43 Plural of mikvah; a ritual bath
44 Bimah – an elevated platform in the synagogue with a desk (pulpit) from which the Torah is read and occasionally the rabbi delivers his sermons.
The town’s cemetery is located on a hill, within walking distance of the synagogue. It is fenced and the gate is open. This 16th CE necropolis is one of the oldest in Poland, with tombstones dating from 1545. As such, it is protected as a historical monument.

Visitors are welcomed by an exceptionally scenic view: inside the cemetery, a fence surrounds a small area containing an old, majestic oak with opulent branches bending toward two faceless matzevot (photos 3 & 4). The branches give the impression of protecting the two tombstones from the hardships of time. However, the lack of inscriptions on both matzevot proves this protection to be insufficient. The information board explains that the tombstones are of two famous tzaddikim. Maybe the original inscriptions were written in a valuable stone, too tempting to be left alone. From there, there is a path leading to a mass grave containing about three thousand murdered people (Virtual Shtetl). In 1991, the society of the former Szcebrzeszyn Jews commemorated those victims by erecting a monument here. The path from the tzaddikim graves to the monument is the only walkable passage in the entire cemetery.

On a few acres of greenery there are about 400 matzevot, with an estimated one-thousand people buried in individual graves. Most of the matzevot are sunken into the ground and covered with vegetation (photo 5). I don’t even try to find the view from twenty years ago.

The closest neighbors tell me about a group of youngsters from Hungary, Czech Republic, Germany and the local school who tidied the cemetery up a few years ago. Whatever they did, the results are no longer visible. The out-of-control overgrowth of vegetation is caused, according to the neighbors, by a ban on using mowers in the cemetery, imposed by
the *Foundation* (*FODZ*). I know that Jewish law definitively values the tranquility of the dead, but this is the first time that I have heard such an argument. This argument was later renounced by a *FODZ* employee in a telephone conversation. It would be worth checking whether there is real miscommunication between *FODZ* and the town administration regarding this matter.

The neighbors think that the money from the sale of the synagogue should be used to maintain the cemetery; it is, after all, the property of the Jewish community. This seems to be a valid argument. Such reasoning was employed in the sale of the land of a former synagogue in Warsaw; the contract obligated the Jewish community in Warsaw to invest a part of the profit in the renovation of the Karczew cemetery. I learned this from Andrzej Omasta. He has always strongly advocated for such financial distribution in all sales of Jewish properties in Poland, which did not make him very popular in the *Foundation’s* (*FODZ*) milieu. Unfortunately, this is not a wildly accepted practice, at least not in Szczecbrzeszyn.

I ask the neighbors ‘my question.’ They strongly advocate for the continuous existence of the cemetery and its preservation. First, the site is protected as an historical monument but, what is more important, the cemetery is a part of the town’s history. Szczecbrzeszyn cultivates the traditions of three regional cultures: Polish, Jewish and Russian Orthodox. The festival I witnessed is evidence of this. Additional evidence is the presence of an active Russian Orthodox Church with regular masses. One more piece of information adds to my hope. I learn from the officials present at the festival that the local school is organizing the first visit of students from Israel. Maybe the younger generation will be able to build bridges over troubled
water and bestow care upon the Jewish cemetery. As the neighbors claim, it is, after all, the heritage of both cultures. There is hope here.

*Szczeczeńszy. Photo 1 - The 17th CE synagogue is currently used as the town’s Cultural Center.*
Szczeczeń. Photo 2 - At the time of my visit, there is a curious decoration in the sanctuary on the former bimah. For a moment, one could think that nothing had changed here and that Jewish life goes on.

Szczeczeń. Photo 3 - A majestic oak with opulent branches bends toward two faceless matzevot.
Szczecin. Photo 4 - The information board explains that the tombstones are of two famous tzaddikim. Maybe the original inscriptions were written in a valuable stone, too tempting to be left alone.

Szczecin. Photo 5 - Most of the matzevot are sunken into the ground and covered with vegetation.
Zwierzyniec

The cemetery in Zwierzyniec is very special. Of course, I realize that I say this about every single Jewish cemetery. Located far from the village, it is rather difficult to find. But once there, I almost feel embraced by a group of welcoming kin. It is a small cemetery, one of the smallest in Poland. Located near a railroad track it is enclosed by a modest, rather symbolic, wooden fence. From a distance, one could mistake it for a little grove of pines in the middle of a meadow (photo 1). A dozen matzevot make me feel as if I came to a family gathering. There is easy access to all the tombstones; I can approach all of them and have an intimate moment with each one. Or, I can just sit on the moss under a pine, have a moment of my own and feel togetherness in silent commemoration (photo 2).

The matzevot in Zwierzyniec are not very impressive. They are rather common, like an average family and, like in an average family they went through a lot. Besides the usual sorrow of such places, they witnessed the brutal murder of the local Jewish population during WWII (Virtual Shtetl). Considering the proximity of the railroad track, they must have seen people loaded into cattle cars and leaving for Belzec death camp in October, 1942. They might have heard the people’s final cries. That was also the moment when the little cemetery was abandoned and left to its own fate.

The village of Zwierzyniec is one of those places that were deprived of their own cemeteries for many years. This was the result of the already-mentioned Privilegium de non tolerandis Judaeis that forced the local Jews to be legally dependent on the Jewish community

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45 Murdering the Jewish population in the local cemeteries was a usual practice of Nazis; the cemetery in Zwierzyniec is not an exception.
in Szczeczeńszyn. Only in the 20th CE were the Jews in Zwierzyniec finally allowed to establish their own cemetery. Before that time, they had to use the Szczecieszyn burial site, located six miles away. It must have been rather inconvenient to die in Zwierzyniec, especially during the severe Polish winter.

A photo from twenty years ago depicts a completely different, unrecognizable setting. There is no fence, nor pines. A dozen matzevot stand exposed in the middle of a field, a few yards from a rather miserable-looking house. A good number of hay stacks complement the landscape (photo 3 - Krajewska # 47). In the photo, the tombstones and hay stacks mingle together, coexisting peacefully as elements of the same reality. Both being black and of the same size, they seem to blend.

Today, the house is gone, the fields are uncultivated and the matzevot are surrounded by fencing. They received their own identities, a sort of recognition; they became a cemetery. The information board proudly states, “The Jewish Cemetery in Zwierzyniec; Site Protected by Law,” signed by the Foundation for Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (photo 4). The fence obviously protects the cemetery, but at the same time it isolates the site from the landscape. It almost feels as if it was a gate to a different world.

Nevertheless, when comparing with the view from twenty years ago it is a definitive improvement and I feel for this little cemetery and its dozen matzevot.

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46 Virtual Shtetl quotes the book Zabytki Historyczne Żydów w Polsce (Judaica in Poland), by Majer Bałaban, published in 1929.
May their souls be bound up in the bond of life!\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{t'hay nafsho/ah tzurah b'tzror hachaim}

החיים בצרור זרותה/נפשה תאה

.ה.ב.צ.ג.ת.

(Photo 5)

\textit{Zwierzyniec.} Photo 1 - From a distance, one could mistake this cemetery for a little grove of pines in the middle of a meadow.

\textsuperscript{47} A traditional inscription placed on the Jewish tombstones; sometimes only the acronym is inscribed (the last line).
Zwierzyniec. Photo 2 - A dozen matzevot make me feel as if I came to a family gathering. I can approach all of them and have an intimate moment with each one. Or, I can just sit on the moss under a pine, have a moment of my own and feel togetherness in silent commemoration.
Zwierzyniec. Photo 3 - Krajewska # 47 – left side.

A photo from twenty years ago depicts a completely different, unrecognizable setting. There is no fence, nor pines. In the photo, the tombstones and hay stacks mingle together, coexisting peacefully as elements of the same reality. Both being black and of the same size, they seem to blend.
Zwierzyniec. Photo 3 - Krajewska # 47 – right side.

A dozen matzevot stand exposed in the middle of a field, a few yards from a rather miserable-looking house.
Zwierzyniec. Photo 4 - The information board proudly states:

“The Jewish Cemetery in Zwierzyniec; Site Protected by Law,” signed by the Foundation for Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland.

The matzevot received their own identities, a sort of recognition; they became a cemetery.
Zwierzyniec. Photo 5 - “May their souls be bound up in the bond of eternal life.”

החיים זכרו זרורה ה/נפש תחא
Lubaczow

Since some cemeteries are located away from human dwellings, like in Zwierzyniec, I begin my inquiry about the Lubaczow cemetery in the evening, upon my arrival to that town. On my very first attempt I am cut short by the owner of the motel, a young, new-generation, post-communist entrepreneur.

“I am not interested in it,” he simply states. I can understand that; he is a busy young man focused on making money, and there is a wedding in his establishment which demands his attention. But the next day, when I get the same answers from the passers-by in- and outside of the cemetery, it startles me.

“We know nothing about that cemetery; we have our own,” I hear the same answer from a few locals.

It sounds so strange and unusual, even a bit hostile, almost as if there was a secret from which the local population (the five people I asked) wanted to separate. A shrill memory of a recent Polish movie, Aftermath, about a Holocaust drama, implicating the Polish population of a small town, passes through my head but I quickly dismiss it.

The Jewish cemetery in Lubaczow is unusual in that it is actually a part of the Catholic cemetery (photo 1). From the street it is fenced by an impressive brick wall, with a solid brick and steel gate (photo 2). The fence was erected in 1930 by Josef Hirsch Reinfeld, a former townsman residing in the US. I learn this from Virtual Shtetl and from a plaque in Hebrew, fixed to the wall. Another plaque informs that the cemetery was restored in 1989, the year of the fall

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48 Aftermath, released in 2012, is the Holocaust-related war drama inspired by a story about the 1941 pogrom in Jedwabne in which Polish people murdered their Jewish neighbors.
of communism in Poland, by the Hertzberg family from New York. Since the gate remains
locked, I enter through the Catholic cemetery from which the Jewish part is separated by a low
wire fence.

Again, I venture into a cemetery through a quasi-official entrance. Vegetation is present,
of course, but it seems to be under control. I can move around and reach most of the graves.
The matzevot are in disarray, in different stages of falling over, with some already on the
ground (photo 3). The cemetery dates from the 18th CE and I can see the aging process on the
tombstones: some stones have weather-eroded edges and illegible inscriptions. The oldest
matzevah dates from 1726. Virtual Shtetl claims that there are 1,600 tombstones here, which is
hard to believe; I get the impression that there are significantly fewer. As always in Jewish
cemeteries, there are very picturesque views, like the one with the old linden which shelters or
devours (depending on one’s point of view) a group of matzevot (photo 4). Unfortunately, I
can’t find a charming view from twenty years ago (photo 5 - Krajewska # 85).

The most striking to me is the contrast between the two adjacent cemeteries: the
disparity between an ‘alive one’, with visitors and flowers, and a ‘dead one,’ without. Of course
there are also differences in symbolism. Crosses and the figures of a suffering Jesus visually
interpose with the matzevot, the tombstones of His people (photo 6). This is a slightly
perplexing but a fascinating image. The cemeteries are built in such a way that the matzevot
have their backs turned toward their Catholic counterparts; this seals the impression of a ‘no-
communication’ status between the two necropolises (photo 7). They exist together, yet are
completely estranged from each other.
Another strange thing: on the wall of the chapel, on the Catholic side, there are four phone numbers to call for assistance. Three of them are ‘24/7’ numbers. Why would one call the cemetery in the middle of the night? I dial one of the numbers and get my answer: sometimes there are funerals after business hours or sometimes people die after business hours and their families are eager to dispose of their bodies.

On the website Kirkuty I find interesting information about the post-war history of both cemeteries. I learn that the Jewish cemetery once occupied an area of around 1.7 acres, but in the 1970s the southern part of it was acquired by the Catholic cemetery, leaving just 0.7 acres on the Jewish side. Incorporating part of Jewish cemeteries into other uses was not a unique procedure in communist Poland; it happened very often; it happened in my hometown, Lodz, where a neighborhood was built on a part of the Lodz Jewish cemetery. I confirm the information about the re-distribution of the land between both cemeteries over the phone with the ‘24/7’ custodian. That explains a lot! Suddenly, the bizarre reactions of the townsmen appear more understandable. My questioning may have caused their discomfort and awkward emotional response. After all, taking over a big chunk of someone’s cemetery could provoke feelings of guilt, manifested as indifference or even hostility. One of the answers from my interlocutors, “We have our own cemetery,” suddenly acquires a quite illuminating meaning.

My visit ends, however, on an optimistic note. I strike up a conversation with a saleslady in a nearby store with cemetery paraphernalia. She is the first person in the town who is willing to talk with me openly about the Jewish cemetery and she does it in a pleasant and matter-of-fact way. She tells me that the jungle-looking cemetery was cleaned up 6-7 years ago. Jewish groups come to visit a few times a year, mostly in the summer; they pray close to the fence. She
adds that the people in Lubaczow respect the site which they show by lighting candles in front of the gate.

“Everyone deserves a place in this world and in the other world,” she states.

At the end of our conversation I learn that the saleslady is not a native; she moved here several years ago. I am perplexed. Should I understand that one has to be from out-of-town to be willing to talk about the Jewish cemetery in Lubaczow? Obviously, the saleslady was not contaminated by the general feeling of uneasiness caused by the ‘Jewish question’; she was not in town when the acquisition happened.

Are only non-Lubaczow people open to converse about the local Jewish cemetery? How strange!

Lubaczow. Photo 1 - The Jewish cemetery in Lubaczow is unusual in that it is actually a part of the Catholic cemetery.
Lubaczow. Photo 2 - From the street the cemetery is fenced by an impressive brick wall erected in 1930.

Lubaczow. Photo 3 - The matzevot are in disarray, in different stages of falling over, with some already on the ground.
Lubaczow. Photo 4 - The old linden shelters or devours (depending on one’s point of view) a group of matzevot
Lubaczow. Photo 5 - Krajewska # 85.
Lubaczów. Photo 6 - Crosses and the figures of a suffering Jesus visually interpose with the matzevot, the tombstones of His people.

Lubaczów. Photo 7 - The cemeteries are built in such a way that the matzevot have their backs turned toward their Catholic counterparts; this seals the impression of a ‘no-communication’ status between the two necropolises. They exist together, yet are completely estranged from each other.
Sieniawa

I find this cemetery thanks to a local woman who hops in my car and directs me through a labyrinth of little streets. The cemetery is of a good size and has the best steel wall I have seen so far. I wouldn’t be able to climb over. Fortunately, I don’t have to. There is a phone number for the man in charge of the key. I call and he arrives, on a bicycle, 15 minutes later.

There are some 700 matzevot on about two acres of land. Some of them are dated from 1686 CE. The first fence was erected in the 1970s, and later, a more solid one, in the 1990s (Virtual Shtetl). The grass in the part of the cemetery containing the ohel is mowed regularly (photo 1). That means that the groups who come here to pray in the ohel see a well-maintained section of the cemetery. Usually, nobody ventures any farther, and that farther-away part is owned by nature.

Some matzevot bear traces of polychrome (photo 2). I have never seen a fully-painted matzevah, but that used to be the standard procedure – the matzevot were colorful; they were painted bright red, blue, yellow, white, black, gold and silver most often (photo 3 & 4). Sometimes, traces of colors are still visible on the matzevot that fell face-down and remained in that position, protected from the weather. Paradoxically, we owe the pictures of the fully painted matzevot to German soldiers, from both wars, who found pleasure in posing and taking photos in Jewish cemeteries (Wisniewski 25).

The closest neighbor tells me that the cemetery was fenced three years ago, which is inconsistent with Virtual Shtetl and I am not sure which source is more credible. I begin to understand the difficulty in establishing the certainty of any historical source. The necropolis is visited often, especially in March and April. I also witness a few visitors who arrive after first
calling the custodian. I even serve as a translator over the phone. The custodian, looking like a typical Polish villager of the old generation, would not know any language other than Polish. But he somehow manages to perform his duties without such skills.

He tells me his story. He is not paid for his services other than by receiving tips. I also give him one. He is willing to do more work; for example, he would straighten the matzevot but, so far, he has not received consent for that project. I assume he means the consent from the Foundation (FODZ), to which the cemetery belongs. He lived in the house located on the premises (photo 5) from 1959 to 1980 and would like to return there but the Foundation (FODZ) has some objections. He said that he invested a lot of money in the house. He actually built the present house on the original foundation of the old one. This makes him feel entitled to request, even to demand, permission to return there. The custodian feels as if they, the Foundation, took the house from him.

I also learn from the custodian that during communist rule, there was a plan to divide the cemetery into construction lots. The plan failed, possibly due to pressure from Jews abroad. However, a lot of the tombstones were stolen. In spite of this, the cemetery remains a popular site visited by the Hassidim who come to pray at the Sieniawa ohel. A lot of Hassidic groups pilgrimage to the nearby, town of Lezansk, to pray and dance on the grave of one of the most renowned masters of Hassidism in Poland, tzaddik Elimelech. He assured his disciples of his heavenly intervention for all who would come to his grave and dance on the anniversary on his death (Kugelmass 65-66). The dancing Hassidim became a somewhat exotic, annual event in
this little Polish town. Hassidim who visit Lezansk also know about the Sieniawa ohel. They have the custodian’s phone number and arrange their visits with him.

As we talk, two Hassidim, who had called earlier, enter the cemetery and go straight to the ohel. The ohel is a product of the communist time: very rudimentary and unattractive-looking. Inside there is one matzevah which the custodian painted himself (photo 6). The Hassidim spend no more than ten minutes inside and I only hope that this is enough time for their prayers to be heard. When walking amongst the graves, they visually merge with the matzevot (photo 7); they seem to belong here; this is their world. As a woman, I do not exist for them, but I find them very scenic and spiritually picturesque.

The visits of Hassidic Jews to the graves of their tzaddikim are frequent occurrences in Poland. Together with trips to sites of martyrdom, they create the Holocaust tourist industry. But I wonder whether the Hassidic visits are sufficient for keeping Poland’s Jewish cemeteries alive. It seems to work that way in Sieniawa.

A curious idea enters my mind: I wonder what would happen if the holy remains of all the tzaddikim in Poland were moved to Israel. Halakhah allows such exhumation and there is precedence. The remains of Maimonides, the preeminent medieval Jewish philosopher, were brought from Egypt to Tiberias, in accordance with his wishes (Heschel 225). More recently, in 1946, the ashes of Zdunska Wola Jews were brought to Israel; the funeral procession was honored by silent street traffic (Parciack 230-1).

What would happen if the remains of all the tzaddikim were moved to Israel? Would it affect the state of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland?
I have my happy ending in the Sieniawa cemetery – I find the view Krajewska photographed twenty years ago (photo 8; photo 9 - Krajewska # 9). The group of matzevot depicted in it looks almost identical to today’s reality. There is just more vegetation behind the group. These matzevot are aligned with the ohel. That means that they are located along the edge of the well-maintained part of the cemetery. Behind them, where nobody is motivated to visit, nature reigns supreme. This is a no-mans-land, a land of no interest.

The Sieniawa tourist industry seems to work, but only for a part of the cemetery.
Sieniawa. Photo 2 - Some matzevot bear traces of polychrome; painting was the standard.
Paradoxically, we owe the pictures of the fully painted matzevot to German soldiers, from both wars, who found pleasure in posing and taking photos in Jewish cemeteries (Wisniewski 25).

Bright red, blue, yellow, white, black, gold and silver were used most frequently (Wisniewski).
**Sieniawa.** Photo 5 - The custodian lived in this house from 1959 to 1980 and would like to return here but the Foundation (FODZ) has some objections.

**Sieniawa.** Photo 6 - Inside the ohel there is one matzevah which the custodian painted himself.
Sieniawa. Photo 7 - When walking amongst the graves, the Hassid visually merges with the matzevot; he seems to belong here; this is his world.
Sieniawa. Photo 8 - I found the view which Krajewska photographed twenty years ago.

Sieniawa. Photo 9 - Krajewska # 9.
Bobowa

As I advance toward the south of Poland, the scenery is more and more mountainous and gorgeous. Nature formed Poland in a very symmetrical way; on both sides of Vistula, from north to south, first, there is the Baltic Sea, then, the region of lakes, followed by plains, highlands, low mountains and, finally, high mountains. Traveling farther south, I enter a beautiful mountainous landscape.

Bobowa is a lovely little town. I first arrive in the marketplace which, as in all Polish towns, is located in the center. I find the half-wooden and half-brick synagogue nearby, on an adjacent street (photo 1). It is locked, so I can only look at it from the outside. I had read extensively about the Bobowa synagogue’s renovation, which started in the late 1980s by the Nissenbaum Family Foundation. The cemetery, situated one-and-one-half miles from downtown, also benefited from the generosity of the family; it was fenced, straightened up and received an access road which was liquidated after WWII (Kirkuty; local sources).

Bobowa has been famous for the Hassidic court of the Halbersztam family. The 19th CE protoplast and one of his sons are buried in the ohel in the cemetery. The Hassidic court might not have reached its present-day fame if not for the pure randomness of the gene pool which bestowed blond hair on one of the family members. This Aryan-like trait allowed the lucky man and his son to leave the ghetto, saving their lives. The surviving descendants of the family and their supporters spread throughout the US, Canada, Israel, Holland and England.

For a moment I wonder how many similar courts and famous families vanished irretrievably because none of the members was lucky enough to receive some Aryan traits
allowing them to escape the inferno and to continue the traditions of their fathers. Most of them did not and we will never know about them.

The one-and-one-half mile-long road to the cemetery climbs up the hill and offers breathtaking views (photo 2). It leads me to the gate of the cemetery – unfortunately locked (photo 3). But here I experience a stroke of luck. Another car arrives with three Hassidim inside, a father and his two teenage sons, who unlock the gate with their own, personal key. That’s astonishing! I have never seen such a thing! In addition, they let me in without any problem. But my luck does not end there. Even more amazing is the fact that they actually talk with me, a woman! I have been perceived by them as a human being worth talking to. This is my lucky day!

I learn that the family is from London visiting their ancestors’ graves. The father tells me about an interesting event that occurred in Bobowa a few weeks prior. A Jewish wedding took place in the town with the participation of about one thousand people, including a hundred Jewish guests. It takes me a moment to realize that he speaks of the reenactment of a real, very famous wedding in the Halbersztam family which took place before WWII. He even has an impressive poster with the announcement of that event. The poster is, by itself, an object of art (photo 4).

Socializing with the Hassid is exceptionally pleasant but we both have our own duties to perform: the Hassidic family goes to the ohel to pray and I, to explore the cemetery. I try to find Krajewska’s view from twenty years ago but I am distracted by the charming, mountainous scenery. The matzevot situated in such a setting acquire an additional dimension of beauty. I try to take as many photos as possible in the hope that some of them will capture the marvel of
this place. Words fail me; they can’t do justice to this exquisite site. I have to acquiesce to the
photos (photos 5 & 6).

The cemetery is medium-sized; it occupies less than two acres. It still contains several
tombstones in marble and granite, in spite of the war and postwar mistreatment. I can’t access
all the corners of the cemetery and this may be the reason why I can’t find Krajewska’s view
from twenty years ago. I find a similar view (photo 7; photo 8 – Krajewska # 17), which makes
me believe that there have not been any drastic changes in this necropolis. Actually, the
changes that did take place, building the road and the fence, much-improved the conditions of
the site. I learn about a local man who had maintained the cemetery for several years and kept
the key; I am sure he must have contributed to its present state.

My time spent in Bobowa cemetery is limited by the schedule of the Hassidic key-
holders and I have to leave when they leave. I decide to approach the closest neighbors and
continue my Bobowa adventure in this way. It’s Sunday afternoon and I have to intrude on a
family gathering under a tree. A man of about thirty speaks with me, willingly. He says that Jews
came to Bobowa because of its mineral oil. They were attracted, as they always are, by business
opportunities and making money. I learn from him that the cemetery is visited almost every
week. He does not really like these frequent visits, particularly those involving Israeli teens with
armed bodyguards. First, they litter; second, they feel too self-confident which makes them act
arrogant; the passers-by have to make way and move to the side for them. According to him,
before the war it was the opposite, the Jews moved to the side because they were always
scared. I know that his knowledge is of an anecdotal character, since he was born long after the
war.
A good thing comes out of our meeting. The man sends me to a local teacher living downtown, who ‘knows everything’ about the Bobowa Jews and the cemetery. I find her house and, again, I feel as if I am intruding on someone’s privacy. But the woman welcomes me willingly, as she also welcomes the opportunity to share her knowledge about the Jewish past of her town.

Ms. Kowalska is the source of unlimited historical knowledge regarding her town’s history. I listen with admiration, trying to write down every single word coming from her mouth. It lasts for hours. At least it seems like that. I learn about the synagogue, the cemetery and the Bobowa tzaddik, Solomon Halbersztam, who was a man of great charisma, treated by his disciples as half-divine. I gain detailed knowledge about the family members’ lives, including the tzaddik’s blond son who escaped the ghetto. It was on account of his miraculous escape that the dynasty survived and developed so prolifically.

Of course, she speaks about the wedding. It was a recreation of the wedding of the tzaddik’s daughter, which took place in 1931. Fifteen actors from nearby Tarnow played major roles, supported by one-thousand local volunteers. This included students from local schools and old women who dressed up as they remembered the way the Jewish women were dressed before the war. A special train from Tarnow brought the important guests in. The most prominent guest was the daughter of the bride, Shoshana Stern and her husband, who presently reside in London. In addition to the train, forty horses were ridden by men dressed the way the Jews used to dress for opulent weddings in prewar times. Apparently, Jews liked to mimic Polish customs in the pre-war Poland and for wedding celebrations they dressed up as

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49 Kowalska (or Kowalski for men) is the most popular name in Poland, meaning Ms. Smith; for some reason, the job of blacksmith became the most popular surname in several languages.
different Polish historical figures. The Orthodox Jews who came for the occasion did not participate in the celebration but stayed inside the synagogue: as always, together but separate. The event took place in the courtyard of the synagogue and was televised on a big screen installed in the marketplace. The celebration was also broadcasted on local TV.

Ms. Kowalska tells me that at the real wedding, in 1931, there were actually two trains which brought guests from as far away as Vienna. A total of five-thousand people participated in the prewar event. Taking into consideration the modest population of Bobowa, consisting of a few thousand inhabitants, it was the tzaddik’s daughter’s wedding that must have put the name of Bobowa on the map of Poland.

The scale of the celebration matched the fame of the tzaddik, who was worshipped by the Jews and respected by the Poles. It was probably due to his involvement in both worlds, Jewish and Polish. For example, when the war broke out the tzaddik was engaged in collecting money for air defense.

Regarding the cemetery, Ms. Kowalska tells me that there are about 200 matzevot, out of many more that were originally installed there. She thinks that the Jewish community in Krakow, the owner of the necropolis, should take better care of the site. She would also welcome a museum dedicated to the Jewish traditions and Jewish history of the town. There is still one last original Jewish house downtown, with a special place for a sukkah. She even knows the name of the pre-war owner, Goldshmid Sznajder. It would be the ideal building for the museum. But such an enterprise would require the cooperation of the town and the Jewish

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50 A temporary hut used during the celebration of the Jewish festival of Sukkot. Sukkot is the Feast of Tabernacles, a week-long fall festival commemorating the 40-year journey of the Israelites in the wilderness; it coincides with the fall harvest.
community, and she thinks that the narrow-mindedness of Orthodox Jews would be one of the obstacles in the creation of the museum, in addition to the cost.

According to her, before the war, the Jews and the Poles lived peacefully. For example, in 1889 the town burned to the ground from a candle left burning in a sukkah but nobody reproached the Jews.

With a heavy heart I have to interrupt our conversation. I thank Ms. Kowalska, expressing my greatest admiration for her interest and knowledge, and for sharing it with me. But, unfortunately, it’s getting dark and I have to drive a mountainous road which I prefer not to do in complete darkness.

On my way out of town, I again pass through downtown where I notice a plaque honoring Bobowa’s regaining her township status in 2009. In addition to that very important fact, the plaque also commemorates the thousand-year history of the town and its well-known tolerance and rich tradition. The plaque does not specifically include ‘Jewish tradition’ or ‘tolerance for Jews,’ but nevertheless, I find the message very inclusive. I leave this charming town feeling the deepest appreciation for the people of Bobowa who promote tolerance and openness, and exalt these values by inscribing them on a plaque in the middle of their town.
Bobowa. Photo 1 - I find the half-wooden and half-brick synagogue nearby, on a street adjacent to the marketplace.

Bobowa. Photo 2 - The road to the cemetery, rebuilt in the 1980s by the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, climbs up the hill and offers breathtaking views.
Bobowa. Photo 3 - The gate of the cemetery was unlocked by a Hassid from London who arrived with his own personal key.

Bobowa. Photo 4 - The Hassid tells me about an interesting event that occurred in Bobowa a few weeks prior. A Jewish wedding took place in the town with the participation of about one thousand people.
Bobowa. Photo 5 - Words fail me; they can’t do justice to this exquisite site.

Bobowa. Photo 6 - This is a site of exquisite beauty.
Bobowa. Photo 7 - I can’t access all the corners of the cemetery and this may be the reason why I can’t find Krajewska’s view from twenty years ago. I find a similar view.

Bobowa. Photo 8 - Krajewska # 17.
Muszyna

The 19th CE cemetery of Muszyna is also located in the mountainous region but has a completely different character than that in Bobowa. The site is rather small, occupying a little over one-half of an acre, and is located on a very steep slope. It is so hilly that, in places, I have difficulty climbing up and have to support myself by holding on to whatever I can find. Based on my photos, the angle of inclination is 40 degrees (photos 1 & 2). Taking the photos is a challenge. In several places I have to hold on to tree trunks or to branches with one hand, while manipulating the camera with the other hand. It is beyond my imagination to picture a funeral procession climbing up and burying the dead on this hill. It must have been a calamity! On the other hand the physical difficulties might have absorbed people’s focus and taken the edge off of their mourning.

The cemetery, containing some 80 matzevot, is surrounded by the remaining fragments of a brick wall and a pole fence, both falling apart. Even the gate is just a shadow of what it once was, as I learn from the drawing shown to me by the closest neighbor (photos 3 & 4). The man is eager to converse. He brings a pile of documents connected to the cemetery and it quickly becomes apparent that he nurtures a deep passion for the site. He shows me a flyer of The Non-Profit Committee for the Preservation of Cemeteries and other Monuments of Jewish Culture in Poland. I read that The Committee was established in a difficult time, before the fall of communism. Not surprisingly, I find the name of Monika Krajewska among the proponents.
The neighbor shows me other documents:

- inventory of the cemetery;
- verification of the renovation and fencing, carried out in 1996;
- blueprint of the fence and the gate;
- document showing the change in ownership of the site;

The last document is very interesting. I learn from it that, until recently, the cemetery belonged to the State Forestry Department and only in 2013 did the town take ownership of the site. The neighbor welcomed this change. It has given him easier access to the people in charge, which was rather difficult previously. He has visited the administration on several occasions, soliciting different maintenance work in the cemetery. Sometimes he is unsuccessful. Other times, when using good arguments, he is able to procure the necessary work. For example, several times he tried to convince the officials to cut the trees and shrubs, and he finally prevailed when using the argument of the danger of snakes and the town’s responsibility for possible accidents. Presently, he is trying to attract the town’s attention in order to repair the road to the cemetery, damaged by heavy rain. Since the site was included on a tourist trail some time ago, having the path in good walking condition is essential.

We are soon joined by the neighbor’s wife who tells me that her husband is more interested in working in the cemetery than in any other work. He treats the cemetery as if it was his own land. He would like to mow the vegetation regularly, repair the fence, straighten the matzevot and do whatever is necessary to maintain the site. A few times, he was asked by Jewish visitors to perform repairs on matzevot, with which he complied, sometimes even
without payment. The wife often needs to stop him just to have some important housework done. But I get the impression that she shares at least some of her husband’s passion. The neighbor tells me about his dream-project, which he developed with another volunteer from the county administration. They would like to build a new fence, install lights and build a few benches for visitors. Since the tourist trail includes the site, a lot of local spa-guests come here in addition to the Jewish visitors.

I listen to the couple talking about the Muszyna cemetery and I realize that the man is the most passionate person, regarding Jewish cemeteries, I have ever met. Without speaking much, he expresses anxious enthusiasm in every gesture, every movement and every look. I can sense his watchful attitude toward the cemetery, as if he was ready to act in its defense at any time, if necessary.

I try to look at the cemetery through his eyes and I sympathize with his passion. There is a lingering calling present in this site, perceptible to sensitive souls. He just answers this calling. This is a site of spiritual splendor. Again, I withdraw my words and let the images speak (photo 5). I take a photo of a group of matzevot which look as if they were waiting impatiently for someone’s return, or at least for someone’s attention (photo 6). Another group of a few matzevot, piled one on top of the other (photo 7), evokes in me the infamous Auschwitz image of piles of naked corpses. But I want to leave this cemetery on more optimistic terms, so I return to the neighbor and thank him for his time and his passion. I think that they are lucky to have found each other: the cemetery found its guardian-angel and the man, his calling.
I think I found the view from twenty years ago (photo 8; photo 9 – Krajewska # 19). However, the Krajewska photo shows fewer details, making the comparison difficult. Since my photo is taken from a slightly different angle than that of Krajewska’s, I might have not realized the similitude at the moment of its taken. It was very hot on that day and my vision, as well as my mind, might have been obscured by the sweat of my brow.
Muszyna. Photo 1 - Based on my photos, the angle of inclination is 40 degrees.

Muszyna. Photo 2 - View from the top. The cemetery is located on a very steep slope.
Muszyna. Photo 3 - Even the gate is just a shadow of what it once was.

Muszyna. Photo 4 - The gate – blueprint.
Muszyňa. Photo 5 - Again, I withdraw my words and let the images speak.
Muszyna. Photo 6 - A group of matzevot looking as if they were impatiently waiting for someone’s return, or at least for someone’s attention.

Muszyna. Photo 7 - Another group of a few matzevot, piled one on top of the other, evokes in me the infamous Auschwitz image of piles of naked corpses.
Muszyna. Photo 8 - I found the view from twenty years ago, however, the Krajewska photo shows fewer details, making the comparison difficult.

Muszyna. Photo 9 - Krajewska # 19.
Piwniczna

I find the Jewish cemetery in Piwniczna within walking distance of downtown, descending toward the river (photo 1). The place is quite scenic. The land encompassing the necropolis is located on a plane between the river, on one side, and the train-track, on the other, surrounded by a mountainous landscape (photo 2). The only disturbing feature is the tennis court adjacent to one side of the cemetery (photo 3). So much for eternal tranquility! On the other hand, the proximity of the cemetery to human presence sometimes plays the role of a protective factor.

This is the smallest cemetery that I have ever visited. Some dozen matzevot are enclosed by a pole fence. The grass is meticulously mowed inside the fence, leaving two sides outside of the cemetery to wild vegetation (photo 4). I have the strong conviction that this vegetation may hide forgotten parts of the cemetery. Still, the meticulous caretaking of the fenced cemetery is noticeable and even surprising. Such a perfectly cut lawn is a very unusual feature in Jewish cemeteries. The tombstones, on the other hand, have visibly suffered from the elements, making the inscriptions hardly legible.

Without difficulty I find not one, but two places photographed twenty years ago. This is the only time I experience such luck! The first Krajewska photo of this cemetery shows a good-sized matzevah with a church in the background (photo 5; photo 6 - Krajewska # 38). I identify the matzevah by the specific shape of its top and the fragments of symbols on its face; they are the same, just less visible (photo 7). Unfortunately, the letters have almost completely
disappeared. If I had entertained any doubts, the same church in the background would convince me that this is the same view.

The second picture from twenty years ago shows two small matzevot, one hardly standing and the other lying down (photo 8; photo 9 - Krajewska # 39). In the background, there is a river and two peasants tending to a flock of sheep. Today’s view shows the fenced terrain without peasants or sheep. The two small matzevot are both standing, which means that someone righted them. I conclude that it is a definite improvement.

I attempt a conversation with the inhabitants of the two closest houses, but the residents possess no knowledge about the cemetery. The only fact that they can share with me is that they have never seen any special visitors. I wonder who, then, placed the little rocks on the tops of the matzevot, a sign of Jewish remembrance of the dead. Disappointed, I decide to visit the local library, which shares a building with the town’s administration. The library is in the process of moving; there are many boxes, a lot of excitement and people running around. However, the librarians stop their activities to accommodate my needs. Not only do they make time to answer my questions, but they also find and furnish all necessary information and available resources.

I learn that the cemetery belongs to the town which coordinates its maintenance. I am showered with books and brochures about the Jewish history of Piwniczna, much more than I am able to read or even to review. I browse through a few very interesting books on the Jews in Piwniczna: on their neighborhood and different Jewish places and customs, on their everyday lives, their connection to the Christian world and on the role Jews played in the development of
the town’s health industry. With some embarrassment I have to decline further reading. But I realize, with relief, that it does not hurt the librarians’ feelings. Their goal is to show me that the people of Piwniczna treasure the Jewish history of their town, that there are documents proving it, and that the documents are accessible and ready to be shown. The librarians’ eagerness to accomplish that goal touches my heart; they are the memory keepers. I leave Piwniczna thinking that the little Jewish cemetery is in good hands.
Piwniczna. Photo 1 - I find the Jewish cemetery in Piwniczna within walking distance of downtown, descending toward the river.

Piwniczna. Photo 2 - The land encompassing the necropolis is located on a plane between the river, on one side, and the train-track, on the other, surrounded by a mountainous landscape.
Piwniczna. Photo 3 - The only disturbing feature is the tennis court adjacent to one side of the cemetery. So much for eternal tranquility!

Piwniczna. Photo 4 - The grass is meticulously mowed inside the fence, leaving two sides outside of the cemetery to wild vegetation. I have the strong conviction that this vegetation may hide forgotten parts of the cemetery.
Piwniczna. Photo 5 - Without difficulty I found not one, but two places photographed twenty years ago.

Piwniczna. Photo 6 - Krajewska # 38.
Piwniczna. Photo 7 - I identify the matzevah by the specific shape of its top and the fragments of symbols on its face; they are the same, just less visible.
Piwniczna. Photo 8 - The second picture from twenty years ago shows two small matzevot, one hardly standing and the other lying down. Today, the two small matzevot are both standing, which means that someone righted them.

Piwniczna. Photo 9 - Krajewska # 39.
Wieliczka

Wieliczka is a relatively big city with a population of about twenty thousand. It is famous for its salt mine which opened in the 13th CE. I once visited the impressive mine and was awestruck by the statues, chandeliers, chapels and even an entire cathedral, all carved out of the rock salt. In addition to the obvious aesthetic marvels, the mine offers subterranean therapy for patients with respiratory problems.51

The size of the city makes my search difficult. There are so many attractions here or distractions, that not a lot of people know about the existence of the Jewish cemetery and even less about its location. GPS does not help. I cruise around for a long time before I finally find the neighborhood. Unfortunately, the area is rather secluded, located outside of the city, and there is no one to ask for further directions. I take a path through the woods, which leads me to a recreation center. But even with many suggestions from vacationers there, I am helpless. At some point, after climbing a hill for ten minutes and scrambling through some bushes, I consider giving up. But then, by some luck, I discover the path and finally reach the cemetery.

My first impression is very depressing. The necropolis is rather large, over four acres, covered by vestiges of tombstones. Actually, if I didn’t know that this was a cemetery, I would have difficulty recognizing these ruins as fragments of former graves (photo 1). In the entire cemetery, there are only about fifty matzevot remaining which are scattered all over. According to Kirkuty and Virtual Shtetl, the oldest gravestone dates from the 18th CE. I can only spot one

51 For more information see: http://www.wieliczka-saltmine.com
group of matzevot; the rest of them are mutilated loners, emerging from the ground in solitary mourning (photo 2).

The group of matzevot I notice look like the view photographed twenty years ago by Monika Krajewska (photo 3; photo 4 - Krajewska # 15). However, the identification of both pictures is not straightforward. I have to compare detail by detail, which are often unclear, damaged and altered. My main uncertainty is caused by the fact that the matzevot visible on Krajewska’s photo lost their tops. The one on the left side had a round top, which is now severely chipped; the one on the right had a chipped top, which is now cut in a straight line. The latter measure could have been preventative, protecting the top against further chipping. In spite of these alterations, I am positive that I see the same group photographed twenty years ago. The symbols are the same, as well as the triple-trunk tree which is in the background of the photo. These are the same matzevot, just reduced.

I wonder whether this is the fate of the entire cemetery. Will this necropolis slowly disintegrate and be reduced to nothingness? Do the words, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” (Gen. 3:19) also pertain to the stones? We are drawn to stone because of its durability; its mystery fascinates us but also irritates our fragile destiny. After all, stone is the most lasting element of our material existence. But here, in the cemetery in Wieliczka, stone succumbs to the merciless passing of time as does everything else. If a cemetery can die, this site is an accurate illustration of the process (photos 5 & 6).

Hope? There is a spark of it. The website Kirkuty informs us that in 2006 a group of 150 soldiers from the Officers School in Tel Aviv cleaned up this cemetery. In the same year, six
students from the School of Fine Arts in Krakow tidied the memorial for the victims of the Holocaust. But I am not sure if 156 people, working sporadically, can rescue this site from disappearance. Paradoxically, I feel much more hopeful when reading the inscription on the Holocaust victims’ memorial. “We shall never forget” is written in the name of the children of the victims, their grandchildren, great grandchildren and future generations (photo 7).

The Midrash,⁵² Shir ha-Shirim, says that God agreed to give the Torah to the Jewish people only because they offered their children, meaning the future generations, as guarantors for keeping the Torah precepts (Shir ha-Shirim Raba 1:3). I would like to believe that the future generations inscribed on this stone will also be the guarantors of memory and the guarantors of life.

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⁵² A form of rabbinic literature which interprets and expands on the biblical stories and Jewish law
Wieliczka. Photo 1 - If I didn’t know that this was a cemetery, I would have difficulty recognizing these ruins as fragments of former graves.

Wieliczka. Photo 2 - I can only spot one group of matzevot; the rest of them are mutilated loners, emerging from the ground in solitary mourning.
Wieliczka. Photo 3 - The only group of matzevot I notice looks like the view photographed twenty years ago by Monika Krajewska.

Wieliczka. Photo 4 - Krajewska # 15.
Wieliczka. Photo 5 - If a cemetery can die, this site is an accurate illustration of the process.

Wieliczka. Photo 6 - Dying cemetery.
Wieliczka. Photo 7 & 8 - Holocaust victims’ memorial. “We shall never forget” is written in the name of the children of the victims, their grandchildren, great grandchildren and future generations.
Checiny

I arrive in Checiny on the afternoon of the same day. It’s cloudy. There are no people on the streets and I have to approach the driver of a car to ask him for directions. I am sent to a secluded path, curiously called The Avenue of Love. It ends in front of a one-hundred-yard long, incredibly difficult-looking ascent of some 40 degrees of inclination. I estimate that going straight up in my regular shoes is not feasible. The only way to climb is by zigzagging and grabbing vegetation to hold on to. I make it to the top but it feels as if it was a fight for my life. However, my troubles are not over. Once at the top, I forget which way I am supposed to turn. I choose to go right and I am stopped after fifty yards by the splendid view of a medieval castle (photo 1).

Here come memories which unlock a forgotten part of my mind. I visited this castle, or rather its ruins, with my elementary-school class. Checiny was an important town in medieval Poland and its castle served as the residence for several royals, for centuries. But I have to detach from Polish history and return to reality. After a moment of admiration and reminiscence I turn left and cover about one-half of a mile on top of a picturesque ridge (photo 2). Unfortunately, I can’t find the cemetery and there is nobody to ask for help. I begin feeling uneasy; I am all alone and far from human presence. In addition, it starts drizzling and I simply can’t envision going down to fetch better directions and then climbing again. For the second time during my trip I consider giving up. I decide to attempt another 50 yards. If this yields no results, I will allow myself to return. While walking, I accidently turn my head to the left and there, five yards below the ridge level, I notice the entrance to the cemetery. If I did not turn
my head at that precise moment I would have passed by without noticing it. I consider myself lucky. I have to descend five very steep yards, but this is nothing in comparison to the difficulty of the first ascent.

The entrance looks like the enchanted opening to a different world (photo 3). I have this feeling often when entering a Jewish cemetery, but here, in this out-of-the-way, hidden-below-the-level-of-the-walking-path place, the impression greatly intensifies. It does so even more with my first few steps inside. I enter an isolated land of Jewish matzevot, surrounded by trees on all sides (photo 4). It is a well-maintained clearing, hosting some one-hundred tombstones. In the past, the cemetery was much larger; it served many communities which did not benefit from the privilege of having their own cemeteries (Virtual Shtetl; Balaban). Today, I can only access a cleared fragment of the past area. But I know that many more tombstones are here, covered by flora, resting in complete unity with nature. I can see some of them slowly being engulfed by vegetation (photo 5). But even the visible part of the necropolis is simply fascinating.

This is a very old cemetery, established in the 17th CE (Virtual Shtetl; Kirkuty). The matzevot are eroded by time. I can hardly perceive any inscriptions (photo 6). I am captivated by the very particular, triangular shape of the tops, which I see for the first time. Not all of the matzevot are formed in that way, but a lot of them are. This is the case with the matzevot in Krajewska’s photo from twenty years ago which, I am fortunate to find (photo 7; photo 8 – Krajewska # 21). They have the same shapes and are in the same positions. The only difference with today’s reality is the view of the trees growing behind the matzevot. Twenty years ago,
more of the cemetery was accessible. However, taking into consideration the difficult access to
the cemetery, I have great respect for the person who comes here with tools and mows
whatever he or she is able to mow.

I learn later, over the phone with the Visitor-Center staff, that the cemetery is the
property of the state. Four years ago, the Center initiated an annual tidying of the cemetery,
which they perform with permission from the Central Rabbinical Commission in Warsaw. They
mow the site once a year, often joined by youth from the local school. Only manual tools are
used for that work, to be in accordance with Jewish law. In a subsequent phone call to the
Central Rabbinical Commission, I am told that such a measure is not necessary; halakhah, or at
least the Commission, allows the use of mechanical tools as long as they don’t disturb the soil. I
share this knowledge with the Visitor Center via an email.

I reflect on the extreme difficulties of burial in this cemetery. Actually, I learn from the
center that there used to be another, easier access to the site, today, completely lost to nature.
But regardless of access difficulties, I am sure that the Jews in Checiny considered themselves
lucky because they did have a cemetery, which was not a privilege afforded to many Jewish
communities in Poland. The lives of my ancestors were often difficult, but here, even death was
not easy! And the hardship bestowed upon this cemetery continues. In the 1990s the Jewish
community of Katowice, to whom the district belongs, requested restitution of the town’s
synagogue. The cemetery, however, was not mentioned in the petition.\footnote{Reported by the staff of the Checiny Visitor Center over the phone} It was left to its own
devices.
I have nothing else to do in this place. My mission here is accomplished: I found the site, I took pictures and I identified the view from twenty years ago. It is drizzling and it would be wise to leave. The descent on the slippery hill will be more and more difficult with each passing minute. But I feel compelled to stay here for a moment longer. I like to sense the charm of this secluded place, where time seems to vanish. I could repeat Elie Wiesel’s statement that I feel at home among Jewish graves. This may be because Jewish cemeteries have a very personal character. The matzevot say a lot about the people who belonged to a given community. One could almost recreate the life of an entire shtetl by reading the inscriptions and symbols on the tombstones. That is why I can sense the presence of community in these necropolises more intensely than in any other place, such as surviving Polish synagogues, for example. The Jewish cemeteries satisfy my longing for community, which was cut short, leaving my generation, the second generation post-Holocaust, with emptiness. Part of me will always dwell in Jewish cemeteries and I know that there is a key to my identity among these graves. Cemeteries hold an answer.
**Checiny.** Photo 1 - Once at the top, I forget which way I am supposed to turn. I choose to go right and I am stopped after fifty yards by the splendid view of a medieval castle.

**Checiny.** Photo 2 - After a moment of admiration and reminiscence I turn left and cover about one-half of a mile on top of a picturesque ridge.
**Checiny. Photo 3** - The entrance looks like the enchanted opening to a different world. I have this feeling often when entering a Jewish cemetery, but here, in this out-of-the-way, hidden-below-the-level-of-the-walking-path place, the impression greatly intensifies.

**Checiny. Photo 4** - I enter an isolated land of Jewish matzevot, surrounded by trees on all sides.
Checiny. Photo 5 - Today, I can only access a cleared fragment of the past area. But I know that many more tombstones are here, covered by flora, resting in complete unity with nature. I can see some of them slowly being engulfed by vegetation.

Checiny. Photo 6 - The matzevot are eroded by time. I can hardly perceive any inscriptions.
Checin. Photo 7 - I am captivated by the very particular, triangular shape of the tops, which I see for the first time. This is the case with the matzevot in Krajewska’s photo from 20 years ago which, I am fortunate to find.

Checiny. Photo 8 - Krajewska # 21.
Czestochowa

I finish my trip in Czestochowa, which I pass on my way back to Lodz. Czestochowa is the religious capital of Poland, hosting annual pilgrimages to the famous Black Madonna; she is believed, by some, to bestow special protection over Polish land. The Nobel Prize winner, Henry Sienkiewicz, memorialized the Czestochowa monastery and the Black Madonna in one of his oeuvres, creating the myth of their influence in changing the course of the so-called Swedish Deluge, a very difficult war in the 17th CE. The adoration of the holy image of the Black Madonna echoes the ancient practices in Constantinople. The last part of the pilgrimage, the path leading to the monastery and the church, is often performed on ones knees (photo 1).

I have spent two carefree years in this city, working my first job at the local University. I often come here to visit my friends. But this time my agenda is different. I ask to be driven to the Jewish cemetery. Among all my friends, only the youngest representative had visited the site on one of his juvenile escapades and knows where it is. Krajewska has not included this cemetery in her album, so I don’t have a point of reference from twenty years ago.

Czestochowa is a big city of about a quarter of a million people. It had a significant Jewish population before the war, therefore it has a large Jewish cemetery with some five thousand graves. I am sure that the actual number of existing matzevot is much smaller. The history of the cemetery is well-described on an information board. It was established in 1804; a century later it was enclosed by a solid wall. Burials took place here as late as the 1970s. According to the website Kirkuty, the survival of the cemetery came to a dangerous point on several occasions. The nearby steel plant lusted for that unclaimed land. There was even a plan...
to exhume the entire necropolis, but probably due to the extent of such a job, that plan was abandoned.

Multiple initiatives took place in order to restore the Czestochowa necropolis; several inventories were taken, graves cleaned up, a Holocaust victims’ monument was erected, the wall and the gate were repaired. Especially interesting is the recent initiative of the School of Fine Art, called The Eight Gates of Jerusalem. Its goal is to symbolically bring back the old, multi-ethnic Czestochowa. I learn about this project from a very poetic and artistic board located at the gate of the cemetery (photo 2). The gate, as the board says, is a symbol of entering a world gone-by. My understanding is that in the project, the gate to the Jewish cemetery in Czestochowa became one of eight symbolic gates to Jerusalem; the other seven are located and marked by the students elsewhere around the city.

Czestochowa has a ‘guardian-angel,’ a former townsman, now a wealthy businessman living in the US, Sigmund Rolat. He has sponsored several Jewish projects in this city and, more generally, in Poland, including work in this cemetery. One of the most spectacular of his ventures is his participation in the production of the movie, The Return of the Violin, a remarkable, multilayered story. Beside Rolat’s reminiscence, this is principally the account of a very special Stradivarius violin.

The instrument was given to a Jewish prodigy by a Polish count who was seduced by the boy’s performance. Later, the child grew up to be the world famous violinist, Bronislaw Huberman (1882-1947). He eventually founded the Palestinian Philharmonic Orchestra, employing, and thereby saving the lives of a thousand Jewish musicians from Nazi Europe. The
famous violin was stolen from Huberman and retrieved long after his death. It was finally purchased by Joshua Bell, another famous contemporary violinist. The climax of the movie is a concert in Czestochowa, given by Bell on Huberman’s violin. Bell performed Brahms’ Violin Concerto in D-Major, the same piece that the nine-year-old Huberman once played in Czestochowa in the presence of the composer, bringing him to tears. The fact that the Music Hall in Czestochowa was built on the foundation of the Great Synagogue, burned down by the Nazis, expanded the spiritual aspect of the performance to its absolute high.

Today, the Czestochowa Jewish cemetery displays the different faces of the fate of Jewish vestiges in Poland; it shows as much care as neglect of the site. The necropolis is enclosed by a well-maintained wall, looking like a nice park covered with forest from the outside (photo 3). Only after several yards of walking do the matzevot begin to emerge from the greenery (photo 4). In the cemetery one can see: desolation (photo 5), enchantment (photo 6), the shining glow of the local famous tzaddik (photo 7), a strong will to survive (photo 8) and a silent cry and resignation (photo 9).

A lot was done to restore the Jewish cemetery in Czestochowa, but I am not sure if all these efforts and financial resources can save this exquisite place.

I am not sure of the fate of any Jewish cemetery in Poland.
**Czestochowa.** Photo 1 - The path to the church and the monastery, where the image of the Black Madonna is displayed, is often performed on ones knees.

**Czestochowa.** Photo 2 - The School of Fine Art in Czestochowa created a project, called The Eight Gates of Jerusalem. Its goal is to symbolically bring back the old, multi-ethnic Czestochowa. The gate to the Jewish cemetery in Czestochowa became one of eight symbolic gates to Jerusalem.
Czestochowa. Photo 3 - The necropolis is enclosed by a well-maintained wall, looking like a nice park covered with forest from the outside.

Czestochowa. Photo 4 - Only after several yards of walking do the matzevot begin to emerge from the greenery.
Częstochowa. Photo 5 – Desolation.

Częstochowa. Photo 6 – Enchantment.
Czestochowa. Photo 7 - Shining glow of the local famous tzaddik.

Czestochowa. Photo 8 - Strong will to survive.
Czestochowa. Photo 9 - Silent cry and resignation.
Human existence is bizarre. We appear on this earth for a short while and then we
vanish for eternity, leaving a handful of bones as the only trace of our presence. Various
cultures learned to respect, or even worship, these bones in different ways. The Jewish culture
emphasizes their intactness as if this state guaranteed the deceased the world to come. Over
one thousand Jewish cemeteries in Poland are challenged by this requirement.

I visited sixteen Jewish necropolises in Poland, attempting to compare their present
state with that of twenty years ago. My observations are not scientifically precise; I was limited
to one or, at most, two twenty-year-old photos of specific cemeteries. These photos restricted
my attempts to fragments of each site. However, while ceding scientific precision, my research
allowed me to make a few statements regarding the overall situation of the sixteen cemeteries
I visited during the summer of 2013.

To facilitate my analysis I assembled my findings in the table below:
Since 1993, the year in which Krajewska’s album was published, all of the sites I visited underwent some kind of renovation. With the exception of Wieliczka, in all of them a brick or steel wall was built or at least repaired (Radomsko), and two cemeteries, in Piwniczna and Zwierzyniec, were enhanced by pole fences. In seven cemeteries monuments for Holocaust victims were erected (Tomaszow, Piotrkow, Ozarow, Szczebrzyniec, Bobowa, Wieliczka and Czestochowa). Several cemeteries recovered a number of matzevot which had been

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54 The ownership of this site is not yet regulated. Legally, it belongs to the Jewish community in Czestochowa, however, such entity does not exist. Presently, the Jewish community of Katowice is in the process of gaining ownership of this cemetery. I received this information from the city’s administration officer in May, 2014.
appropriated and misused by the Nazis during the war and by Poles, after the war. The most successful recovery took place in Ozarow; two hundred tombstones were retrieved, possibly due to the well-publicized celebration of the necropolis’ renovation. But other cemeteries benefited from matzevot recoveries as well, including Piotrkow and Tomaszow.

All of the cemeteries were cleaned up regarding vegetation and rubbish at least once; some more regularly. Paradoxically, having a guardian on-site does not necessarily contribute to sufficient care as witnessed in Radomsko. Often, the presence of an ohel imposes regular maintenance, at least in the part of the cemetery where the ohel is located (Sieniawa, Ozarow, Bobowa, Radomsko, Piotrkow).

The most well-maintained cemetery I found in Piwniczna. This is also the smallest cemetery I visited, and its size is probably an important factor in its success. On the other hand, the cemetery is under the supervision of the town which is interested and engaged in preserving its Jewish heritage. This interest is expressed in the regular maintenance of the cemetery.

Another paradox is connected to the status of ownership. It appears that the fact of belonging to the Jewish community or a Jewish organization, such as the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, does not guarantee the site’s proper maintenance (Radomsko, Lubaczow). Sometimes the communication between the town or the individual caretaker on one side, and the Foundation or the Jewish community on the other side, is slow and inaccurate. Such circumstances result in delays in the cemetery’s maintenance (Sieniawa, Szczebrzeszyn).
It seems that neither the Jewish communities nor the Foundation is overly active in maintaining the cemeteries they possess. Neither of these organizations elaborated a satisfying system of accountability which would demonstrate what is actually happening to the Jewish necropolises. This state of affairs occurs even in the cemeteries with an on-site Guardian, in which case one could expect some kind of working, accountable relationship between the two sides. Gaining ownership of Jewish cemeteries by mentioned organizations, unfortunately, does not necessarily result in amelioration of the sites’ conditions. Once recovered, the graveyards are often left to their own fate.

It seems that the best guarantors for Jewish cemeteries’ survival are passionate volunteers (Strachowice, Muszyna, Piotrkow) or engaged town administrations (Piwniczna or Bobowa) or the town’s former Jewish citizens (Starachowice, Bobowa, Ozarow, Czestochowa).

Several Jewish cemeteries, containing mass graves from WWII, are eligible for the status of ‘war monument.’ The cemetery in Bobowa has a section with the graves of Jewish soldiers, therefore qualifies as a ‘war monument’ as well. Polish law protects ‘war monuments’ and ‘national monuments’ (Piotrkow, Radomsko, Starachowice, Szczebrzeszyn) and these sites qualify for the state’s subvention. However, without the active engagement of the town or volunteers, or anybody else, such protection is not reinforced and subventions are not granted.

The president of the Lodz Jewish community, Symcha Keller, is convinced that Jewish cemeteries have the best chance for survival in places with ‘good Poles.’ By ‘good Poles,’ he means an engaged administration of the town, passionate volunteers or active youth. He mentioned the example of the relatively well-maintained cemetery in Piotrkow, which owes its
state to the care provided by the town’s museum. He quoted another example, Poddebiec, where a Polish company found, restored and brought several matzevot to the town’s Jewish necropolis. More examples are in Zdunska Wola and Pabijanice, where the Jewish cemeteries are under the regular care of local youth. But, according to Symcha Keller, there is a downside to the tidying of the cemeteries – it makes the stones more visible, therefore more vulnerable to theft and vandalism.

The renovation of Jewish cemeteries by different Polish groups or passionate individuals is a widely-spread and magnanimous phenomenon. I met several such individuals during my trips to Poland and heard about or read of a multitude of others. One such organization is The Unofficial Group of Masons, called Magurycz (Magurycz). Since 1986, it has restored a great number of Russian-Orthodox, as well as Jewish cemeteries. Another group, mentioned earlier, is the project Antyschematy, created in 1999 as a part of Janusz Korczak Association. These groups often cooperate with youth from abroad, most frequently from Germany and Israel. The websites Kirkuty and Virtual Shtetl describe many, many more such groups and individuals.55

I was intrigued by the initiative of the Szczebrzeszyn High School which, in the summer of 2013, invited a group of students from Israel to visit. I hoped that some of their time would be spent on tidying up the local cemetery. I called the town in May 2014 and asked about the outcome. I was informed that the visit was very successful, full of interesting activities and friendships. However, the Jewish cemetery was visited once, and only for a short while. If the program becomes an annual event, maybe the cemetery will gain more attention.

55 http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl/zalecenia.html
Of course, the important financial support regarding Jewish cemeteries comes from Jewish organizations and individuals abroad. There are many such initiatives including, among others: the Association Ohalei Tzadikim, The Nissenbaum Family Foundation, the Rabbi Mendel Reichberg project, and, mentioned earlier, the Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project (Virtual Shtetl, Kirkuty). The financial support coming from these entities is mostly used for fencing the cemeteries, rebuilding the ohelim, structural work and sometimes for tidying the land.

With so many resources and passion invested in the matter, one could at least expect encouraging results. However, the reality of Jewish cemeteries in Poland, a small part of which I described, does not look excessively optimistic. Part of the problem consists of the extent of the phenomenon; there are over one thousand Jewish cemeteries, possibly 1,200, scattered all over Poland, often far from big cities. What is more important, the cemeteries are virtually living organisms, created in nature and evolving with nature. Therefore, erecting a wall and occasional, even annual, weeding do not solve the problem of the cemeteries’ maintenance. The walls protect the sites from vandalism, but the main threat to not-regularly-visited Jewish cemeteries seems to be nature.

I have often witnessed weeding efforts undertaken annually in my hometown cemetery, in Lodz, which always appeared to me to be a Sisyphean task, requiring endless repetition without resolution. The cemetery in Warsaw, on the other hand, adopted a more long-term strategy: The Foundation Gesia, established in 1992, paved 2,000 square meters of side paths

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56 This is the number given by FODZ; in 2002 the Foundation submitted to the Polish government 1200 requests for the return of 1200 Jewish cemeteries (Gruber 9).
(one third of an American football field) during the few years of its existence (Blachetta-
Madajczyk 101). While visiting Warsaw’s cemetery a few years ago, I saw a number of such
paved paths with the names of donors carved in them; they effectively resisted nature’s
invasion. I was impressed by this simple idea and its outcome.

Of course, such an enterprise requires a serious financial investment and the
cooperation with Jewish communities, and here we enter into a murky subject connected to
the Jewish leaders in Poland. What started as single-voiced allusions to corruption, the lack of
transparency and the mishandling of money by Jewish leaders, exploded in the article, Kaddish
for a Million Bucks, which appeared in the September 2013 edition of Forbes magazine.\(^5^7\) The
article opened a Pandora’s Box, shaking Polish and Jewish public opinion in Poland and abroad,
as well as targeted leaders, including Ronald Lauder, the chairman of the World Jewish
Restitution Organization (WJRO) and the president of the World Jewish Congress.\(^5^8\)

The movement of Progressive Judaism, reemerging in Poland in the last twenty years,
added its critical voice to the debate, accusing the religious leaders of corruption and of
financial and religious despotism; the latter being similar to that in Israel.

This violent criticism was primarily directed at FODZ, the previously mentioned
Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland. The heads of this organization
were accused of embezzling money received from the restitution of Jewish communal pre-war
properties, instead of investing it for social purposes, including the restoration of Jewish

\(^5^7\) http://www.forbes.pl/kaddish-for-a-million-bucks,artykuly,161052,1,1.html
\(^5^8\) For the response of R. Lauder to the accusations in Forbes’ Magazine, see: http://fodz.pl/?d=2&id=1822&l=en
and for the response of the leaders of FODZ, see: http://fodz.pl/?d=2&id=1843&l=en
cemeteries. Since then, many Jewish leaders in Poland have been subject to similar criticism, or at least were questioned about the distribution of the money recovered from the Polish government for the former Jewish properties. Registered as religious organizations in Poland, the leaders of Jewish communities don’t have to account for any money they receive.

In his recent documentary, Menachem Daun, an Orthodox Jewish filmmaker, directed the problem to the chief rabbi in Poland, Michael Shudrich. When asked why the Jewish community is not taking care of the cemeteries, the rabbi answered, “I fought, I tried, I failed,” suggesting that the matter was beyond his authority.

The person deciding on the matter, Piotr Kadlick, the chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland, explained that when forced to make a choice between the living and the dead, his choice is for the living.

Menachem Daun was not satisfied with such an answer. According to him, simple math suggests that with so few Jews living in Poland, some portion of the many millions being recovered should be available to care for the resting places of the dead. After all, they were the ones whose donations, generosity and hard work paid for the properties now being recovered and sold. After meeting with dozens of Polish volunteers passionately working to rescue Jewish cemeteries, without any financial support from the Jewish community, Daun ends his movie with a bitter statement: “It is clear to me that today’s biggest threat to Jewish cemeteries in Poland comes not from Poles, but rather from Jews.”

For the movie access see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXVgGWiWXLI
I can’t completely accept this harsh criticism. There are many factors that may contribute to the survival of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland, some more essential than others. Both the Jewish and Polish participations are necessary for success. Maybe this is the missing piece, the cooperation between these two peoples. I mean a real, durable cooperation rather than a few momentary encounters during different ceremonies, or the exchange of letters regarding halakhic advice, or the mute escort provided to the keep-to-themselves Hassidim.

I witnessed a spark of such cooperation in Starachowice between the former Jewish townsmen and the passionate local volunteer. But this is only a spark that may die with the departure of that generation. Another spark kindles in Bobowa, where some ties still persist between the Poles and the descendants of the town’s Jews. The *Poland Jewish Cemetery Restoration Project* tries to create relations between the towns with Jewish cemeteries and their own Jewish history rediscovered by the youth. However, proposed school projects are of a limited, five-year duration. Finally, the example of Szczecbrzeszyn, consisting of inviting Israeli youth to Poland, may develop into a more in-depth relationship between young Poles and Jews, from which local Jewish cemeteries may benefit.

Jan Jozef Lipski (1926-1991), a Polish historian and politician, wrote in 1981, in his remarks regarding xenophobia, that Poles and Jews living so closely had so little in common. He called it “the tragedy of the lost chance” which he believed could be repaired (Irwin-Zarecka 149). This paradox of a ‘distant closeness’ and ephemeral encounters has always been a feature of an only apparent coexistence of these two cultures.
I’ve come to the conclusion that the unsatisfactory situation of Jewish cemeteries testifies to this rather sad state of affairs.

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In the absence of a perfect world and perfect Jewish/Polish relationships, I would like to highlight the circumstances that I found, or envision, to be the most beneficial to the state of the Jewish cemeteries in Poland:

1. Engagement of the local town’s administration, of passionate people and youth who are proud of their town’s Jewish heritage and want to preserve it;
2. Obtaining the status of ‘national monument’ or ‘war monument’ which would actively engage the supervision of the local museum and permit benefitting from state grants;
3. Inclusion of the site in a tourist program, in cooperation with tourist centers;
4. Presence of an organization of former Jewish townsmen (if it exists), operating in close ties with locals;
5. On-site guardian paid and accounted for his/her duties;
6. Hassidic visits open to more than a ten-minute prayer in the ohel (as important as this prayer may be); using the Hassidic spirit of friendship to pray for all fellow Jews and to care for their graves;
7. Regular student exchange visits which would include the care for the cemeteries;
8. Investing in long-term strategies to control vegetation, such as paving, in addition to weeding;
9. Jewish communities investing part of their restitution money in the maintenance of the cemeteries;

10. Jewish communities being the leaders in the renovation work, able to establish a plan and account for its accomplishment;

11. Most importantly, the realization by all engaged sides that the Jewish cemeteries in Poland are historical and spiritual treasures of both cultures, which we can’t afford to lose;
Final Thoughts

“For everything there is a season ... a time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones”

Eccles. 3:1, 3:5

I often heard the questions:

“Why restore the Jewish cemeteries in Poland?”

“Why are we doing things about the dead?”

There are several answers to these questions: this is a religious obligation; this is the greatest mitzvah\(^{60}\) (since it is not paid back) that we, the living, owe to our forefathers. But we also do this for ourselves: this is about life and living, about reconnecting the present to the past, about reclaiming our ancestry and preserving our roots. This is about gathering stones scattered brutally by dark forces; this is about restoring peace to these stones, to this ‘Tribe of Stones.’

Pierre Nora writes that certain sites constitute Jewish identity, giving a sense of permanence through discontinuity (Nora xii). I think that Jewish cemeteries became such sites; they offer a sense of continuity which expands the meaning of our lives. As Wiesel put it, “To be Jews is to take up the burden of the past and include it in our present.” Memory has always

\(^{60}\) A Hebrew commandment; it refers to 613 precepts, believed to be given in the Torah by God, and deriving from them moral law; popularly refers to moral deeds.
been our land; we do not exist without it. But memory also means to live in more than one
world; it makes us more than we are, gives us connection to a bigger whole. Memory has a
mystical power (Wiesel 44, 150, 195).

Memory finds its expression in nostalgia, which is a very noticeable phenomenon
regarding things-Jewish in today’s Poland. Judaism, with its exotic customs, ancient rites and
mysterious beliefs, is suitable for nostalgic sentiments. Sherwin calls it an idealization of a
frozen past (Sherwin 6) but I think that it rather expresses people’s authentic need for the lost
part of their world. Nostalgia is a positive feeling; it helps us recover a lost link between our
past and our present selves; it helps us confirm our self-identities.

Poles succumb to nostalgic remembrance for things-Jewish because there is no Polish
history without the presence of Jews, even if that presence was abruptly interrupted. The
Polish fascination about Jewishness is the expression of the same desire for continuity and self-
identification.

Byron Sherwin wrote, “While the Jews no longer dwell in Poland, Poland still dwells in
Jews” (Sherwin 5). I concur with this poetic statement, but I would add that while the Jews no
longer dwell in Poland, they still dwell in Polish minds, in the Polish collective consciousness.

Jewishness was violently extracted from the Polish land and Polish culture and the only
form in which it may bourgeon there again is through the Polish perception of things-Jewish.
Jews always built their immaterial sanctuary in the realm of spirit; they existed in prayer, in the
words of their scriptures and in unending discourses. Perpetuating their existence in the Polish
collective consciousness does not seem to be so different. These two cultures continue to be inextricably intertwined.

As I come to the end of my quest, I revisit, in my mind, the cemeteries I saw in the summer of 2013. They became my dear acquaintances. They are all different, each with its own special character. But they are all sites of exquisite beauty which persists in spite of steady deterioration. It’s the spirituality of the stones and their mysterious symbols with hidden meanings that oppose the destruction of time. I hope for their survival, so that they can perpetuate the legacy of Polish Jewry. Our presence would be incomplete and wounded without these sites of the past.

Krajewska writes about a Jewish belief that a prayer at the grave helps the soul of the deceased to achieve perfection (Krajewska 19). The dead in the Jewish cemeteries in post-war Poland were scarcely offered such support but I think that, somehow, they attained their perfection. Maybe the symbols carved on their stones: symbols of learning (books), generosity (alms box), religiosity (candles) and of good name (crown) plead on their behalf. I imagine that, against the psalmist’s claim, the dead in the Jewish cemeteries in Poland - or at least their stones with their faces turned toward Jerusalem - I imagine that they do sing the Lord’s praise.

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61 “The dead do not sing the Lord’s praise,” (Ps. 115:17).
Glossary:

**Bimah** - a pulpit from which the Torah or other scriptures are read; usually a rectangular wooden platform approached by steps

**Gaon** - the head of the two major academies at Pumbedita and Sura, and later in Baghdad, during the period 589-1040

**Gaonim** - plural of gaon

**Halakhah** - Jewish Law; literally, *the path that one walks*. It is a set of rules and practices based on the Torah, rules instituted by the rabbis and based on long-standing customs

**Hassidism** - from Hebrew *hassid* meaning *pious*. A religious movement, within Judaism, developed in the 18 CE Eastern Europe; it promoted spirituality through the popularization of Jewish mysticism; it developed in opposition to excessive legalization and intellectualization

**Kaddish** - Hebrew and Aramaic prayer recited by mourners

**Kirkut** - Polish name for the Jewish cemetery; from German *Kirchhof*, the church courtyard where the dead were buried

**Kirkuty** - plural from *kirkut*; website presenting information regarding Jewish cemeteries in Eastern Europe; www.kirkuty.xip.pl

**Levites** - members of the Hebrew tribe of Levi, performing musical and maintenance duties in the Temple

**Maggid** - a spiritual preacher, a healer and a miracle-worker

**Matzevah** - a memorial tombstone placed at the head of a grave traditionally facing toward the Temple Mount in Jerusalem

**Matzevot** - plural of *matzevah*

**Midrash** - a form of rabbinic literature which interprets and expands the biblical stories and Jewish law

**Mitzvah** - in Hebrew, *commandment*; it refers to 613 precepts given in the Torah by God and deriving from them moral law; popularly refers to moral deeds

**Mohel** - the person who performs the circumcision
Mykvah - a ritual bath

Nefesh - in Hebrew, spirit

Ohel - in Hebrew, a tent; the burial structure of a prominent Jew

Ohelim - plural of ohel

Schlepping - In Yiddish and German, to drag

Shtetl - a small Jewish town or village in Eastern Europe

Sukkah - a temporary hut used during the celebration of the Jewish festival of Sukkot

Sukkot - the Feast of Tabernacles, a week-long fall festival commemorating the 40-year journey of the Israelites in the wilderness; it coincides with the fall harvest

Talmud - the central text of Rabbinic Judaism; a collection of Jewish laws and other oral traditions

Tzaddik - a righteous one; a spiritual master

Tzaddikim - plural of tzaddik


Yeshiva - a Jewish educational institution that focuses on the study of traditional religious writings

Yizkor - in Hebrew, remember; it is the name of a special memorial prayer recited during a mourning service for the departed, held in the synagogue four times a year; Yizkor books memorialize vanished Jewish shtetls
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