Any discussion of symbols, tombstone symbols in particular, can be slightly frustrating, as there is no way to put everything in plain words. The Jewish cemetery in Częstochowa is no exception here. Dominated by vertical tombstones, characteristic of Ashkenazi culture, it attracts also our attention to some unique forms. Anyone reading signs engraved on the tombs has to be aware how closely were they related to the deceased person’s religious life and function, if any, in the Jewish community. It is also essential to understand the notion of death in Judaism. Rabbi Simon Philip de Vries provides an illuminating explanation here, stressing that death is perceived by mainstream Judaism in a very painful perspective. Death means the end of the previous form of existence. Human soul took on a bodily shape for a short time, and then its earthly journey was finished. The body was put into a grave and has been waiting for the Day of Judgment ever since. Human being will never come back to the previous form of life. Relatives or friends of the deceased do not have to refrain from grieving their loss until the body is buried. Funeral ceremony was very plain. Burial should come as soon as possible after the death. The bereavement was expressed by inscriptions and epitaphs on tombstones. At the Częstochowa cemetery it is the motif of a severed oak tree top.

(†ot. J. Piwowarski plik dąb_zlam)

Severed oak tree top, a symbol of sudden death

The Tomb of Rabbi Nachum Asz

The tombstone of Chief Rabbi Nachum Asz is a major one in the upper part of the cemetery. The sarcophagus corners are marked with sculpted eagles. Their interpretation is not easy, due to the variety of possible metaphorical meanings. According to Władysław Kopaliński, the eagle “was in various epochs and countries used as a symbol of the powers of body and mind. The Roman golden eagles in true to life, not stylized, form were the military emblem of the legions.” Babylonian influences might be useful in the reading of the tomb eagles message. And thus in ancient Babylon an eagle was set free during burial to snatch the soul of the deceased and carry it into heaven. At miniature caskets eagles are replaced with padlocks, which symbolize blocking the soul’s way back into the world of the living. The tradition was obviously a folk custom, unrelated to any religious commandment. Eagles at Rabbi’s Asz grave might as well be symbolic guardians of his soul’s peaceful rest. At the same time they indicate these personal qualities which made Rabbi Asz act as moderator in the dissension between assimilationists and traditional Jews. In Częstochowa the assimilationist tendencies emerged in Jewish education in the mid-19th c., but encountered strong opposition. The Orthodox segment of the Jewish community feared that accepting Polish would result in gradual religious decline and make the young generation forsake their Jewish identity. In Częstochowa the bitter debate was voiced in Jewish press before 1914. The conflict was resolved by Rabbi Asz who backed up religious upbringing, yet indicated the need to abandon isolationist attitude.

“And thou shall dwell in tents”

Jewish communities, resistant to outer influence, were also changing, but, as Gershom Scholem put it, invariably having tradition as the central point of reference in both their ritual and everyday life. Any novelty would have to be well-grounded. A good example is the grave in a form of tent in the north section of the cemetery. It is a rarity in Poland, and a very impressive one to that. Its shape is a direct reference to Sukkoth, originating from the ancient movable harvest festival. After Babylonian exile Sukkoth acquired additional, historical significance, related to the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and forty years of wandering in the wilderness and living in tents. Its date was set on 15th through 21st of Tishri, at the turn of September and October. Ever since at that time provisional shelters (a sukka, plural sukhot, hence the name) have been built to pray in it, have meals and entertain guests, or even get sleep. In Central-Eastern Europe the custom of spending entire festival in a sukka was given up, as it would be too cold in autumn. In the center of heavily urbanized Częstochowa it were some rooms, galleries, or verandas that were adapted to serve as symbolic tents. At the back of houses on Garibaldiiego Street and NMP Alley there are some strange wooden porches. Having hardly any other architectural function, these balconies must have used by Jews during Sukkot. Just several years ago, in 1996 the tent tombstone was yet decorated with a stone book, which must have recently been destroyed. The combination of two meaningful elements produced a powerful message: here is the ending of our earthly voyage and here is our hope in the holy book.

Most of the designs on Jewish tombstones fit the connotation pattern. Fingers putting a coin into a box may indicate that the deceased held the post of a community treasurer. Such a coin can go with an inscribed information that the deceased was a generous man.

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3 According to A. Trzciński, „Będziecie mieszkać w szałasach przez siedem dni”, *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 1989, nr 1–2, p. 89.

4 Such Sukkot-related innovations were found in other towns, too. The social status of a family also determined the shape of the shelter. In Tyczyn by Rzeszow an interesting permanent sukka structure has been preserved. At an attic of a tenement house at Market Square 23 solid walls were plastered. A part of the roof which was to cover a symbolic shelter, could be held ajar. The room was originally designed as a sukka and used as such during Sukkot. A. Trzciński, op. cit, p. 89.

A bowl and a jug would stand for ritual functions performed during synagogal ceremonies.

It is not a coincidence that along the main cemetery alley many tombstones are engraved with spread-out hands, whose thumbs are touching and the two minor fingers held apart. This is the gesture of priestly blessing given to the congregation at a synagogue during some prayers and signifying the deceased was a descendant of an ancient priestly family. The symbol was often placed by the picture of a bookshelf to show that the deceased was also an author of scholarly treatises. No strict rule is at work here. In small towns the hands would have simply represented a Jewish tombstone.

A very significant symbol at the Częstochowa cemetery is a crown, engraved at tombstones of pious and scholarly men. The crown with an inscription keter kehuna combined with the hands in priestly blessing was also carved on the tombstones of cohens, who blessed the congregation at a synagogue.

(fot. J. Piwowarski (plik_korona)
(Fot. J. Piwowarski (plik_rece)
_Crown and hands in priestly blessing were placed at the tombstones of devout and wise men._

Birds and extinguished candles characterize women’s matzevahs, since women have been lighting candles symbolizing the beginning of a Shabbat. Swans might have been depicted in some reference to the mythological phoenix. This legendary creature from Ethiopia has been known in European culture for centuries and identified with the Egyptian Benu, a holy bird of the sun, portrayed as a heron, eagle with golden and scarlet feathers, sometimes a peacock. Phoenix was supposed to live for several hundred years, then perish in a self-fire and be reborn young and lively from the ashes. It seems more plausible that the swan symbolized motherly care. Local flavor is detectable in depictions of birds, which resemble familiar swans, partridges, and pheasants. Even the eagles are more like common hawks.

(fot. J. Piwowarski (plik_swiecznik)
_Candle holder beside birds, marking a woman’s tomb._
(Fot. J. Dędek
Symbol of a deer adorned the graves of strong-minded, brave men, sometimes also soldiers, a cast-iron matzevah, Krzepice

In Jewish tradition a cemetery is a holy ground to the end of the days. Graves cannot be moved, with two exceptions: when profanation is threatening the remains, or an opportunity arises to exhumate them and bury in the Holy Land. Once the grave is filled with soil, a wooden board should be put on it with the name and surname of the deceased.

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6 Upon returning from a cemetery one has to wash his hands. Members of priestly families should not go far into a cemetery at all, therefore priests were buried in the first rows. J. Jagielski, „Stan zachowania cmentarzy żydowskich w południowo-wschodniej Polsce”, _Płaj, zeszyt krajoznawczy Towarzystwa Karpackiego_, nr 5, p. 36.
7 W. Kopaliński, op. cit., p. 278.
No tombstone can be put before the first anniversary of death. The custom has it that the grave should be remembered and looked after, but there is nothing wrong with leaving it to the course of time. All matzevahs at the Częstochowa cemetery were carved in stone. In nearby Krzepice the matzevahs were made of cast-iron, though without disturbing their traditional shape and symbolics.

Bibliography:


