Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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In 1952, Maria Kozaczkowa, a local poet from the town of Dąbrowa Tarnowska in southern Poland, composed a poem, titled: *Stara bożnica* (The old synagogue):

In a small town across from the cemetery
An old synagogue stands desolate:
The mere sight of it strikes one with grief and dismay,
…………………………
It still remembers the insane cry of mothers
Who carried their children to their death,
And the scream that returned in a multi-mouthed echo
From the empty houses of the ruined ghetto,
And it cries now with its blind windows
Gazing at the cemetery of those murdered.

W małym miasteczku naprzeciw cmentarza
Stara bóżnica stoi spustoszała:
Już sam jej widok smuci i przeraża,
…………………………
Ona pamięta dotąd płacz obłędny
Matek, co na śmierć niosły swoje dzieci,
I krzyk, co echem powracał stugębnym
Z pustych już domów, w zrujnowanym Getcie,
I teraz płacze ślepymi oknami
Wpatrzona w cmentarz tych—pomordowanych.¹

Published only in 1980, the poem personifies the old synagogue as an intimate witness to the suffering of its resident Jews as it cries, gazes, and remembers. Kozaczkowa also depicted the synagogue as a victim, its body wounded and mutilated, with blind windows. The building’s ruined state only emphasizes its melancholic ambiance and buttresses the place’s capacity to bear witness to the murder of its Jews. More than merely a “site of memory” (Lieu de Mémoire) according to the well-known definition of the historian Pierre Nora, the old synagogue of Kozaczkowa’s poem seems to function as one of the theorist Françoise Choay’s “historic monuments,” which unlike planned, intentional memorials are witnesses to the past accidentally, by virtue of their existence.

This landmark functions not only as a symbolic representation of the past, but also concretely registers the past by recording through an act of projection by the poet, the murder of Dąbrowa Tarnowska’s Jews (more than sixty percent of the local population) in the abutting Jewish cemetery. The synagogue functions as a daily reminder of Jewish fate, in which the nearby local communities were

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intimately implicated. It becomes what Dylan Trigg defines as “a place of trauma,” a space that “gathers the nightmare of trauma through its own materiality.”

Drawing on rare personal accounts, this article elucidates the ways in which the material Jewish remnants, mainly deserted cemeteries and ruined synagogues, harbored concrete recollections of the Jews’ murder and acquired a unique social function in mediating and negotiating the perception of the Holocaust in communist Poland. Whereas the events of the Shoah were scarcely discussed publicly by local Polish communities, the daily interaction of Poles with abandoned Jewish cemeteries and crumbling synagogues, and the discussions of these sites’ future, revealed the endurance of the unsettling aftermath of the violent disappearance of the Jews. Focusing on small provincial towns—where Jews often constituted around half or even more of the local population until 1939—the sources analyzed herein demonstrate the extent to which Jewish sites became strongly identified with memories of the extermination of the local Jews, becoming evocative metonyms of their fate for their former neighbors. Through their mere presence, these forsaken spaces were daily and vivid (often unwanted) reminders of what had happened to the absent Jewish community, and their gradual neglect and obliteration facilitated the intrusion of the wartime past into the present.

“The Ground is Burning Beneath My Feet”

From the early days of the war, Jewish religious sites became bound with violent connotations. Jewish cemeteries were not only targeted and desecrated by the German occupation forces, who frequently used matzevot (Jewish headstones) for construction, but also became preferred places for extermination. In numerous towns, Jews were shot to death in the cemetery and buried there in mass graves, together with those who died in the ghettos. Right after the war, bodies

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4 Jan Grabowski describes the murder of Dąbrowa Tarnowska’s Jews, showing the substantial involvement of the local Polish population from the nearby villages in the murder and tracking down of Jews who survived the liquidation of the ghetto and sought shelter in the countryside. See Jan Grabowski, Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
6 For an extensive analysis of the social function, perception, and symbolic status of Jewish cemeteries and synagogues in communist Poland, see Yechiel Weizman, Unsettled Heritage: Living Next to Poland’s Material Jewish Traces after the Holocaust (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).