Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

Published by Central European University Press

Stach, Stephan, et al.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94691.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3197392
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

---

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).
of Jews exhumed from mass graves in forests and roadsides were often reburied in designated sections inside Jewish cemeteries. Thus, the sites that prior to the war had reflected the continuity and rootedness of the community were now marked with mass murder and became contaminated, in the most tangible sense of the word.

Already during the war and especially after, abandoned Jewish cemeteries all over Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe were being regularly plundered and damaged by local non-Jewish residents, who were stealing matzevot, digging up the graves in search of gold, and using the sites as garbage dumps or pasture places for livestock. The widespread extent of this phenomenon instigated protests from Jews and was officially condemned by the temporary communist-led government, which constantly urged mayors to secure Jewish cemeteries against what were considered acts of “profanation.” Nevertheless, most of the local authorities were reluctant to do so and even took an active part in the exploitation of the cemeteries for municipal needs. The ability and commitment of state officials to supervise the protection of Jewish burial sites were limited and could not have challenged the gradual effacement of the Jewish burial sites in the long run.

The fate of the thousands of synagogues in Poland also reflected the rupture of Jewish life in the country. Many of them were severely damaged already during the war and converted by the Nazi German occupiers into warehouses, stables, and other facilities. The Germans also deliberately demolished or burned down other synagogues, including all the hundreds of ancient wooden syna-

---


8 For example, in May 1948, following reports of the widespread desecration and plundering of Jewish cemeteries in many towns in the Kraków province by the local populace, the governor’s office circulated a letter to all the districts under its jurisdiction requiring that they ensure action was taken to prevent such “barbaric profanation” by fencing off the cemeteries and/or placing a guard at the gate, warning that failure to comply would be punished. State Archive in Katowice (Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach), starostwo powiatowe w Olkuszu, file 1/121, Kraków voivodeship to all districts, May 31, 1948.

9 In a few large cities and towns Jewish congregations resumed their normal activities after the war and continued to use Jewish cemeteries for burial. Although the task of preserving the cemeteries was difficult, congregations did receive some funding for their maintenance from the authorities and Jewish organizations such as the Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee) from time to time.
gogues in Poland. After the war, very few synagogues were reused for communal purposes by returning Jews. The majority of the remaining synagogues were soon converted by local authorities and organizations, in many cases without approval from the state, into stores, firefighting stations, and even swimming pools. The repurposing of synagogues, their general neglect, and the inability of the Jewish organizations to take care of them led to their gradual dilapidation and destruction. In several cases, local authorities took action to demolish partly ruined and crumbling synagogues in order to clear space for new construction. Only a few synagogues were officially recognized as historical monuments and thus were preserved by the state. They were usually designated as libraries, archives, museums, and cultural centers and kept some of their original Jewish features.10

For Jews returning to their hometowns immediately after the war, the sight of the desecrated cemetery or the ruined synagogue often concretized the feeling of loss and crystallized their understanding that the basic notion of “home” had become shattered.11 Returning in December 1944 to his hometown Sokółka, close to Białystok, Nissan Tikochinski was struck to see the synagogue where he used to pray, now devastated and used as a grain warehouse. After visiting the destroyed cemetery and locating the broken matzevot of his relatives, he wrote: “The ground is burning beneath my feet. I cannot go on anymore, I must get out of here as soon as possible.”12

New Legal Framework

The new legal reality regarding Jewish property, shaped since the beginning of 1945 by the communist-led Polish provisional government, also contributed to the gradual obliteration of Jewish sites. According to a series of decrees and regulations, culminating in a law from March 8, 1946, all Jewish property, private and communal, came under the category of “abandoned property” (mienie opuszczone). Although postwar legislation never specified Jewish assets as a distinct

