The plunder of Jewish cemeteries by the local population and the attempts by local authorities and firms to use them for various purposes occasionally provoked moral condemnations from non-Jewish Polish citizens. In October 1946, a local physician from Chmielnik, a town close to Kielce where Jews constituted the majority until their deportation, wrote to the Central Committee of Polish Jews in Warsaw (Centralny Komitet Żydów Polskich, CKŻP\textsuperscript{17}), informing them about the destruction of the Jewish cemetery. He reported that local peasants were removing headstones and dismantling the wall of the cemetery in order to use the materials for their private purposes. What bothered him the most, however, was the damage to the mass grave of Jews murdered by the Germans: “At this cemetery, among others, there are three common graves of those murdered during the deportation of Jews from Chmielnik in October 1942.”\textsuperscript{18}

Explicit recollection of the fate of the local Jewish community appears also in a letter by a group of residents from the nearby village of Iwaniska, who in 1951 addressed the Jewish congregation in Łódź. During the war, the entire Jewish community—more than half of the village—had been murdered by the Germans. The letter wished to alert the Łódź Jewish community of the “shameful and barbaric desecration of the Jewish cemetery” by local residents (“Hyenas” according to the writers), who were plundering the graves and pilfering the matzevot: “the cemetery has existed for hundreds of years and it has been in use until the deportation (\textit{wysiedlenie}) of the Jews.”\textsuperscript{19} The petitioners mentioned the names of the people responsible for these acts and urged the Jews to take actions against them. “We call upon the Jewish congregation to take legal action in order to punish these people. . . We cannot tolerate such damage to the sanctity of the dead.” Apart from the rarity of this moral outcry and attempt to defend a Jewish resting place, the letter is also unique for its reference to the fate of the village’s Jews during the war with the term \textit{wysiedlenie}. While \textit{wysiedlenie} (which could also be translated literally as “resettlement”) does not wholly encapsulate the horrors of the Jews’ final journey, the mere mentioning of the Jew-

\textsuperscript{17} The central committee was the official political and social representative of the Jews in the country between 1944–1950 and was active in rehabilitating Jewish private and communal life after the Holocaust.

\textsuperscript{18} Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute, hereafter AZIH), CKŻP XVI, file 130, October 22, 1948.

\textsuperscript{19} Archiwum akt nowych, Urząd do Spraw Wyznań (Archive of Modern Records, Ministry of Religious Affairs, hereafter AAN, UdW), file 9/357, August 20, 1951.
ish tragedy is noteworthy and appears to underpin the moral injustice of vandalizing the resting place of the dead.

Although rare, such overt references to the fate of local Jews periodically appeared in similar protest letters, like those accompanying reports of local, failing Jewish cemeteries, which in the course of several years after the war continued to deteriorate and were systematically obliterated and losing their original characteristics.

Such was the fate of the Jewish cemetery in Parczew, in eastern Poland. Until the outbreak of World War II, fifty percent of the population of Parczew were Jews. Most of them were killed at the extermination site Treblinka, and around 500 were shot to death by the Germans and buried inside the Jewish cemetery. Some 200 Jews returned to Parczew after the war, but almost all of them soon left after the pogrom of February 5, 1946, when Polish partisans from the anti-communist underground, the “Organization for Freedom and Independence” (Zrzeszenie Wolność i Niezawisłość, WiN) murdered three Jews in the town.20 A few years later, at the beginning of the 1950s, the partly destroyed cemetery was used by local peasants as a pasture place for cows and horses while the municipality installed public toilets on the site of the cemetery. After complaints by Jewish representatives from Lublin, the town was ordered to dismantle the toilets and to keep the animals from pasturing inside, but the place continued to be used for other purposes.21 On April 26, 1955, Stanislaw Dowidziuk, a peasant from a village close to Parczew wrote a letter to the popular radio program *Fala 49*, in which he protested against the recent installment of a marketplace on the site of the cemetery:

I would like to bring to your attention, that here in Parczew—they built a marketplace on the Jewish cemetery in a very shameful way... there in the cemetery, many Jews were killed by the Germans, maybe even thousands, and today people place wagons there. Everybody is saying that they shouldn’t do it. It doesn’t matter if someone is Jewish or not, he is still a human being... I apologize for my spelling mistakes. I’m a peasant from the village.22

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21 State Archive in Lublin (Archiwum Państwowe w Lublinie), Presidium of the Voivodeship National Council (Prezydium Wojewódzkiej Rady Narodowej w Lublinie), file 43, voivodeship to district, May 14, 1953.
The identification of the cemetery as a murder site appears also in another letter addressed to the national radio station a year earlier by a group of anonymous citizens from Warta, a town not far from Łódź, whose Jewish community was half of what it used to be before the war. Unlike the previous letter, which was written in very simple language, this one was written in a much more sophisticated Polish. It also expressed concern regarding “disrespect towards the Jewish cemetery.”

The fence was dismantled almost completely by several citizens who should be brought to justice for doing that. And even worse than that: cows, horses, goats, and pigs are taken to graze there. Such profanation is unacceptable. . . . In this cemetery lay Jews who were hanged during the Nazi occupation. . . . Those citizens have no compassion to let them rest in peace.23

The writers of these letters were not just directing their anger against the violation of the universal taboo of harming the place of the dead. Rather, it was the damage done to the resting place of Jewish victims and the memory of their murder that triggered their emotional reaction. The imprinting of the cemetery with the concrete events of the Shoah strengthened the moral imperative felt by the writers about its desecration and turned the destruction of the cemetery as tantamount to the obliteration of the memory of the murdered Jews.

Poles from every region, social class, and age group addressed these letters to Polish authorities, media organs, and Jewish organizations.24 As openly discussing such issues was considered sensitive, some letters were penned anonymously, though most writers were unafraid to identify themselves by name. It should be noted that, statistically speaking, these texts cannot be seen as examples of a wider phenomenon. Nevertheless, while these few letters did not represent a broad reaction in Polish society, they had a deep significance. Such individual voices function as “indictors of meaning which can potentially assume general dimensions,” according to the Italian historian Edoardo Grendi.25 As Carlo Ginzburg, another Italian historian, writes, “Even a limited case can be representative.” According to Ginzburg, a limited case “permits us to

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23 AAN, UdW, file 19/482, August 17, 1954.
24 On the phenomenon of citizens’ letters protesting the misuse of Jewish cemeteries, see also Bielawski, Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich, 177–88.
define the latent possibilities” of a larger phenomenon and to disclose its historical potentiality.26

The significance of recalling the murder of the local Jews in the above letters is noteworthy given the level of political and psycho-social censorship and the silencing mechanisms that did not encourage any unsupervised public discourse on the Shoah.27 “After the war,” writes Jan Tomasz Gross, “a quiet social agreement was achieved—of course, it was never manifested explicitly, but it was affirmed by experience, daily practices, language of simple people and representative of the authorities and pejorative common views regarding Jews . . . to put aside the whole ‘Jewish issue’ in the very general sense.”28 Openly discussing the fate of the Jews was understood to be undesired and dangerous.29 It had the potential to open up debate over the behavior and morality of Poles towards their Jewish neighbors during the war, to emphasize their material gains from seizing Jewish property, and to undermine the supremacy of Polish suffering—a central myth in the country’s national narrative. While the Shoah was not completely absent from public discussions in communist Poland, it was almost never dealt with outside of certain cultural and intellectual circles, and especially not in those small provincial towns where Jews had previously often formed more than half of the local population.30 Given this context, the above letters, however scarce, provided a unique and alternative channel to engage with the silenced wartime past, revealing how people recognized the history of the Shoah in the physical traces Jews had left behind.

While local initiatives to commemorate the Shoah were rare until the 1980s, the few grassroots memorialization projects undertaken by Polish communities usually centered on Jewish cemeteries, being both the most tangible traces of

Jews and often former killing sites. In 1958 in Kolbuszowa, a small town in southeast Poland where Jews had made up forty percent of the population before the war, townspeople erected a monument inside the Jewish cemetery on the place where more than a thousand Jews had been shot to death and buried in mass graves by the Germans between 1942 and 1943. The monument clearly states what the fate of the Jewish townsfolk was, while at the same time integrating the Jews into Polish martyrology. The inscription on the monument honors the “Polish citizens of Jewish nationality, victims of the fascist terror of 1943, 1958, the people of Kolbuszowa” (see figure 6.2). Similarly in 1967, local inhabitants in Bielsk-Podlaski (close to Białystok) erected a memorial inside the Jewish cemetery, honoring the “Polish citizens of Jewish nationality” who were shot to death and buried in unmarked graves by the Germans. In the same year, local authorities in Szydłowiec—once a predominantly Jewish town close to Radom—built a large monument decorated with a Star of David in the Jewish cemetery on top of the mass grave of hundreds of Jews murdered by the Germans. The writing on the monument read:

On the 42nd anniversary of the mass murder of 150 Jews, the townspeople of Szydłowiec and the county pay tribute to around 16,000 Polish citizens of Jewish origin from Szydłowiec and its area executed in the extermination camps and murdered by the Nazi criminals, between the years 1939–1943. Szydłowiec, March 21, 1967.

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31 I became aware of this memorial thanks to a local drunken man who guided me to the cemetery during my visit to Kolbuszowa in 2017.
32 A year after the establishment of the memorial in Szydłowiec, it was smashed to pieces by unknown perpetrators, and later rebuilt in 1969.
These exceptional local initiatives stood in contrast to the common commemorative language of those years that blurred the specificity of the Jewish fate. These memorials also challenged the prevailing nationalistic discourse in 1960s Poland that tended to polonize the Holocaust and emphasize the sacrifice and victimhood of the Polish nation. While exceeding the normative perceptions of the war at the time, these acts perhaps more than anything reflected the limitations of any official commemorative policy to dictate a unified mnemonic narrative and to control the ways in which local communities remembered their past.

Open Door to the Abyss

The ravages of time and nature, a general lack of interest by the authorities, and the inability of the dwindling Jewish communities to protect their cemeteries and synagogues all led to the disappearance of the material remnants of the Jews from the Polish landscape. While many of them were demolished and erased by the authorities or due to plunder, others were slowly encircled by thickets of trees and bushes, turning into wild urban enclaves (see figure 6.3). The reduction of Jewish space to the physical and symbolic periphery of society in many ways reflected the remote presence of the memory of the Holocaust and the former Jewish communities in the local consciousness. It was “a sort of Hole, an illegible stain on the towns’ map,” wrote Adam Bartosz from Tarnów, describing the symbolic status of the local Jewish cemetery.33 Many Poles who grew up in former “Jewish towns” after the war were simply unaware that the majority of the town’s inhabitants had recently been exterminated. Often they were only aware of their former Jewish neighbors and their tragic end to the extent that they encountered their few physical traces, mainly cemeteries. Piotr T. Kwiatkowski, born in Biłgoraj in eastern Poland in the late 1950s described this relationship:

The Jewish cemetery remained abandoned, nobody’s—in other words unnecessary. . . . As children we rode there several times a year on our bicycles to experience an unusual, slightly thrilling feeling. . . . We stood at the border of the cemetery looking down into that melancholy, rubble-strewn ground. Each of us felt the tension: the antechamber of a mystery stood open

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33 Adam Bartosz, “This was the Tarnów Shtetl,” in Reclaiming Memory: Urban Regeneration in the Historic Jewish Quarters of Central European Cities, ed. Monika Murzyn-Kapisz and Jacek Purchla (Krakow: International Cultural Centre, 2009), 553–54.