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. 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 unneeded... 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), 353–54.
before us. From that place, everything led to the unknown. . . . We entered it solemnly, with gravity and with something like fear. . . . The Jewish cemetery was like an open door to the abyss.34

The description of the cemetery is absorbed with an enchanting and haunting ambience. The encounter of the children with this intimidating and exotic lost world in the middle of the forest seems to evoke a sensation of an untold somber secret. Already before the war, the perception of Jewish cemeteries by their non-Jewish neighbors in the provinces was often a combination of fear and respect, fascination and awe, but with the absence of the Jews, this ambivalent perception seemed to be all the more charged and mysterious.35 The encounters with the cemetery led Kwiatkowski and his friends to dig out scarce fragmentary memories from their families about the extermination of sixty percent of the town’s citizens. Their fate appeared to them as “some unfamiliar catastrophe” and as a “hasty death that passed into total oblivion.”36

36 Kwiatkowski, “The Jewish Cemetery,” 255.