Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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A Turning Point

During the different epochs of the communist years, the official policy regarding the status of Jewish religious sites was undergoing significant changes. While in the first postwar years the regime occasionally blocked attempts by local bodies to designate Jewish sites for everyday purposes, after the political events of 1956 and the de-Stalinization of the political system, government officials were more inclined to approve such requests. During those years, many synagogues were demolished and cemeteries liquidated. This trend was accompanied by a growing number of antisemitic incidents in the 1960s, that manifested also in a rise in the number of vandalization of Jewish cemeteries. Most remaining Jewish sites were left crumbling and neglected.

It was precisely the peak of the anti-Jewish policies of the authorities, however, that marked some turning point in the perception of Jewish sites and the development of Holocaust awareness in Poland. Inspired by the worsening relations between Israel and the Soviet Union following the 1967 Six-Day War and attempting to calm social unrest and student protests against the imposed censures and restrictions, the regime launched the orchestrated “Anti-Zionist” campaign, which targeted Jews in the Party and state apparatus. These events were accompanied by an outburst of antisemitism and the denunciation of Jewish citizens as a “fifth column.” In an attempt to “cleanse the ranks” and re-legitimize the regime, thousands of Jews were publicly expelled from their workplaces. Eventually around 13,000 emigrated from Poland to Israel and other countries, forced to give up their Polish citizenship. These events have further diminished the size of the Jewish population and severely impaired the communal structures and strength of the remaining Polish Jews.

While the events of 1968 were followed by a hardening of the tone concerning Jewish issues and the strengthening of nationalistic tendencies, it also gener-

ated a growing interest and preoccupation with Jewish issues, the Holocaust, and the situation of Jewish sites. The sight of yet another mass wave of Jewish emigrants leaving Poland and the public expression of antisemitism received international criticism and attracted worldwide attention to the poor situation of the Jewish community and its material vestiges in the country.

Disturbed by these events and motivated by a growing concern for the remaining Polish Jews, Jewish organizations and Jews from Western countries became preoccupied with the issue. They wrote urgent letters to Polish authorities, either directly or through Western diplomats and politicians, in which they frequently argued that the neglect of Jewish sites constituted an insult to the victims of the Holocaust. The regime, weakened by a struggling economy and ongoing social unrest, reacted to those voices very seriously. Strongly believing in the influence of Jewish organizations on Western governments and fearing the “negative effect on the political and economic interests of our country,” Polish authorities began to show some interest in the commemoration of the Holocaust and the situation of the Jewish sites. In 1976, the Ministry of Religious Affairs published a binding regulation prohibiting any use of Jewish cemeteries for anything other than their intended purpose and stressed that the state’s official policy was now to preserve those sites.

This awareness of the problematic state of Jewish sites in politics coincided with another phenomenon that was taking shape at the same time on a grassroots level. In the aftermath of the violence of the 1968 events and the growing disillusionment with the Communist Party, the opposition to the regime intensified among circles within society and was expressed, among other things, in a collective “rediscovering” of traces of Poland’s multi-religious and multi-national past. Dealing with Jewish culture, in particular, was perceived by parts of society as a political act and as an attempt to contend with the communist

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43 Quoted in Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 175.


version of national heritage and martyrology. As part of these emerging cultural sensibilities, Polish intellectuals, social activists, and ordinary citizens were becoming interested in the situation of Jewish heritage sites in the former shtetls and were trying to raise awareness of their deteriorating conditions. In 1974, while visiting Łańcut (South-East Poland) on All Saints’ Day (November 1), the journalist Barbara Nawrocka-Dońska was disturbed by the sight of the town’s Jewish necropolises and wrote a long letter of complaint to the authorities. “When Poland glows with candlelight,” she asked, “this is how we pay homage to the place of mass murder of Polish Jews in Łańcut—with a void, neglect and oblivion?” She suggested involving local high school students in cleaning up and taking care of the mass graves of Jews located in the Jewish cemetery in order to give the students a “painful example on the dangers of nationalism” and to combat antisemitic views that she herself had encountered in Łańcut.

These initiatives to reconstruct Jewish spaces were part of a larger project of social reform that became increasingly common towards the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, as the regime was continuing to lose public support. The dramatic developments in Poland, like the rise of the Solidarity movement and the development of a social and political opposition, could be seen as yet another turning point in the development of popular discourse regarding Poland’s Jewish issue. What started as occasional voices during the 1950s protesting the profanation of Jewish cemeteries gained momentum following the 1968 events. In the 1980s, they became a major social phenomenon that included both intellectuals from the city and ordinary Poles from the countryside. Raising awareness of the state of Jewish sites was perceived as part of the broader project to incorporate Jews as a unique yet cohesive part of “real” Polish history and culture, repressed under communist manipulations and censorship. An ad that appeared in 1981 in the official newspaper of the Solidarity movement Tygodnik Solidarność, called on citizens to provide information on the physical state of Jewish burial sites across the country. The initiators of the project were activists in the newly founded Warsaw-based Committee for the Care of Jewish Cemeteries and Cultural Monuments in Poland, 

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46 Steinlauf, Bondage to the Dead, 93–94.
47 In Poland, as well as in other Catholic countries, there is a strong tradition of visiting cemeteries on All Saint’s Day and placing candles on family graves.
48 State Archive in Rzeszów (Archiwum Państwowe w Rzeszowie), Urząd Wojewódzki w Rzeszowie, file 58, November 9, 1974.
49 Steinlauf, Bondage to the Dead, 97.
50 Irwin-Zarecka, Neutralizing Memory, 18.
headed by Jan Jagielski and Eleonora Bergman from the Jewish Historical Institute. The committee received around 800 letters from all over the country, which painted a grim picture of the advanced neglect and destruction of most of Poland’s Jewish cemeteries.51

Apart from providing factual information regarding the largely poor physical state of Jewish cemeteries, these letters created a collective platform for openly contemplating the fate of the Jews at a very local level, demonstrating how Jewish cemeteries had become “historical memorials” of the Shoah. Many of the letter writers were clearly motivated by a wish to commemorate the local Jewish community and recalled in detail the murder of their neighbors. The feeling of moral injustice caused by the desecration and lack of care of Jewish resting places was intensified by the stirring up of horrifying memories. Thus, the call for the preservation of Jewish sites was understood to be a symbolic act of laying to rest—that was denied to the victims. On October 17, 1981, for example, a letter was sent to the committee by a certain Halina Z., a resident of Kolno, a small town in north-eastern Poland, whose population before the war had been seventy percent Jewish. She described the situation of the neglected Jewish cemetery, which was being used by local peasants as a cattle pasture, but most of her text concerns the mass grave in the nearby forest where dozens of Jews had been buried together after being executed by the Germans during World War II.52

There is a mass grave here . . . nobody ever lights there a single candle. There are no flowers there either. When I was a little girl I used to go there and leave wildflowers on the grave. I used to be mocked very often because of that . . . . My mom told me that the people who are buried there were forced to dig the grave themselves. Many people who were still alive were covered with ground. You could hear at night moans of people trying to get out of the grave. Therefore, I think that someone should please look after this grave.53

52 The letter fails to mention the participation of the local population in the murder of the Jews. In July 1941, as part of the wave of pogroms in North-East Poland following Operation Barbarossa, around thirty Jews from Kolno were brutally killed by their neighbors after being forced to dismantle the statue of Lenin and bury it in the Jewish cemetery. See Sara Bender, “Not Only in Jedwabne: Accounts of the Annihilation of the Jewish Shtetlach in North-eastern Poland in the Summer of 1941,” Holocaust Studies 19, no. 1 (2015): 16.
Halina Z., like many of the letter-writers, grew up after the Holocaust in a town emptied of its Jews. Yet, she seems to adopt the memories of her mother and projects them onto the cemetery. Although almost forty years have passed since the events of the Shoah, the cemetery continues to serve as a “post-memorial” site, harboring the fate of the Jews, and also functioning as a repository of hostile and antagonist reactions from its locals.54 The coupling of the call for action and the evocation of the Jews’ death appears also in the next letter, written by a citizen from the town of Frampol, close to Lublin, in which he describes the dilapidated Jewish cemetery in his town.

I would like to inform you about a totally neglected Jewish cemetery in Frampol where there are mass graves of Jews murdered during the occupation. . . . I feel it is the moral obligation of the people of Frampol to take care of the resting place of their murdered co-citizens.55

The reference to the murdered Jews as “co-citizens” is significant, perhaps echoing Solidarity’s ethos of civil-society and reflecting how an inclusive and pluralist understanding of Polish history and culture, advanced by some fractions of the movement, was filtering down to the periphery. While the growing centrality of the Shoah in the international realms in the 1980s has reinforced nationalist concerns regarding the primacy of Polish-Catholic suffering, at the same time the Jewish wartime tragedy was being gradually integrated into the national canon. In the final decade of communist Poland’s existence, the phenomenon of engagement with Jewish issues and the memory of the Jewish victims widened and took on an even more oppositional character.56 For a growing segment among the Polish public, dealing with Jewish culture and history became a key trope in the project of re-imagining an alternative political and cultural vision and establishing a new sense of Polishness, as the final days of the regime seemed near.

56 In 1983, protesting the government’s attempts to use the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising for propaganda purposes, some of the leading members of Solidarity boycotted the official ceremonies and organized an underground commemoration next to Nathan Rapoport’s Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, leading to clashes with the police. See Irwin-Zarecka, Neutralizing Memory, 106–7.