Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Published by Central European University Press

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The changing political and cultural circumstances of late communism seemed also to motivate individual activists from the periphery to adopt the reconstruction of Jewish spaces as a personal mission. While already in the early postwar years Polish citizens were trying to preserve Jewish heritage spaces, some as voluntary cemetery caretakers, by the late 1980s their numbers had increased substantially and, unlike earlier activists who personally remembered their Jewish neighbors and witnessed their deportation, for the most part, this new generation grew up after the war and had little to no direct memory of their towns’ Jews. Many of them worked alone, but they nevertheless reflected a growing recognition in Poland, for some moral and for others political, that “something must be done” in order to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust—an effort in which the physical and symbolic preservation of Jewish cemeteries and other sites was a key part.

One of those individuals was Ireneusz Ślipek from Warta, who moved to the town as a young child right after the war. In the mid-1980s he started, on his own, to look after the Jewish cemetery that until then was used as a garbage dump and a grazing site (see figure 6.4). He became the unofficial custodian of

Figure 6.4. Warta, the Jewish Cemetery, 1986. Photo by Ireneusz Ślipek. Courtesy of the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum archive, Israel.
Yechiel Weizman

the site and literally dedicated his entire life to its protection and reconstruction. In 1986 he was active in foiling the town’s attempts to clear the cemetery and to build a symbolic monument instead. One of his protest letters to the mayor reflects how the Shoah functioned as the main impetus of his lifelong project and was embedded in his perception of the cemetery.

After the horrible massacre of the Jews in the Second World War, the cemetery became a unique memorial that must be protected at any price. Although it was heavily destroyed, it is nevertheless the only testimony to the madness of the occupiers. It is a place of national memory, because here lay the ashes of the victims of the Hitlerite terror. The cemetery, in its current borders, will be a symbolic grave for all of Warta’s Jews, around 2,000, who were murdered in Chelmno death camp and in other places. As corpus delicti [body of the crime] of a crime against innocent people and their culture, it should never be destroyed, but cherished.57

Finally, with the help of Jewish organizations, the office of religious affairs prevented the mayor from advancing his plans and the cemetery remained intact. Ślipek, however, was often mocked due to his actions and was considered a controversial and problematic person in town.58 His neighbors harassed him and placed dead rats next to his door.59 Ślipek was not the only activist to be isolated because of his involvement in the commemoration of the Jews and the Holocaust. The growing engagement with the Jewish past and the increasing centrality of the Holocaust in the public sphere in the late 1980s seemed to arouse antagonism and tensions at the local and national level. The screening of Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah in 1985 and the publication of Jan Blonski’s ground-breaking essay “The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto” in 1987 brought forward the question of responsibility of Poles for the fate of the Jews during the war, and aroused both a collective soul-searching but also defensive and hostile reactions.60

59 Ada Holtzman, The Jewish Cemetery of Warta (Tel-Aviv: Cemeteries’ Documentation Press, 2006), 18, 58.
60 Steinlauf, Bondage to the Dead, 110–16; Blonski’s essay, which was printed in the weekly Catholic magazine Tygodnik Powszechny, is an interpretation of the poem “Poor Christians look at the Ghetto” written in 1943 by the Polish poet Czesław Milosz. For an English translation of the essay, see Jan Blonski, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” in “My Brother’s Keeper?” Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust, ed. Antony Polonski (London: Routledge, 1990), 34–52.
Against this backdrop of heated discussions and democratization at the end of communist rule, local attempts to protect Jewish spaces threatened to evoke issues that were still considered unthinkable at the time, such as the direct participation of Poles in the murder of their neighbors. On September 21, 1986, Halina Masztalerz wrote a long and emotional letter addressed to the Jewish theater in Warsaw, trying to inform the Jewish community of the poor situation of a mass grave of Jews in a forest near Rajgród, a village in the north-eastern corner of the country.\footnote{The woman apologized for addressing the letter to the theater, saying that this was the only Jewish institute she knew.} The grave, she wrote, was systematically and constantly being trashed and devastated by local firms and citizens, who were using the site as a garbage dump. The significance of this exceptional letter, however, lies in its recollection of the Jews’ murder, in the summer of 1941.\footnote{On the pogrom in Rajgród, see Bender, “Not Only in Jedwabne,” 22.}

The crime was committed by Germans, but in a cooperation with criminals from Rajgród—Poles. It is hard for me to write it, but unfortunately this is how it was. I was eleven years old at that time and I saw one group of men
being led to their death. Later, I heard from the elderly people how they died. Their heads had been chopped with spades. I saw the holes in which they were buried. When the criminals returned to the village after the execution, they came to us... and they warned my mother that if she would tell who murdered the Jews they would do the same to all of us. ... My mother was always frightened to say anything about it. ... But I always tried to defend that place. I am constantly thinking about the monument that would rise there one day. This forest is a living history page that ought to be passed to the next generations, so a brother will never kill his own brother again. ... No garbage dump should be there.65

Following the letter, the matter was brought to the attention of the Main Commission for the Persecution of Nazi Crimes, but a full-scale investigation was never opened and the story of the Polish pogrom in Rajgród remained unknown for the time. Only much later, after communism, did the issue of the direct participation of Poles in the killing of Jews become a matter of public discussion.64 The above letter was, in many ways, ahead of its time, but it did expose the explosive potential of the material Jewish remnants and burial spaces to reveal well-known but unspoken haunting local episodes.65 In the years to come, with the disclosure of more cases of involvement of Poles in the Shoah, the dual function of Jewish sites would only become more polarized—as manifestations of a

64 In recent years, Polish scholars have revealed many incidents during the war in which the local Polish population was involved in the murder, persecution, and robbery of Jews. Their research has shown that a substantial number of these incidents occurred in small peripheral towns where the killers often knew their victims beforehand. See Jan Grabowski, Na posterunku: Udziel polskiej policyi granatowej i kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów [On the post: The participation of the Polish blue and criminal police in the Holocaust] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2020); Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski [Night without end: The fate of Jews in selected counties of occupied Poland] (Warsaw: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018); Jan T. Gross, Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Barbara Engelking-Boni, “Murdering and Denouncing Jews in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945,” East European Politics and Societies 25, no. 3 (2011): 433–56; Barbara Engelking-Boni and Jan Grabowski, eds., Zarzys krajobrazu: Wieś polska wobec zagłady Żydów, 1942–1945 [Outline of the landscape: The Polish countryside and the Holocaust, 1942–1945] (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011); Jan Grabowski, Hunt for the Jews.
65 In September 2014, a memorial stone was erected in the site of the Jewish cemetery in Rajgród by the descendants of Rajgród’s Jews and Jewish organizations in Poland. Only two months later it was defaced by unknown perpetrators. After it was renovated, it was again vandalized on several occasions in 2015–16. See “Pomnik upamiętniający Żydów w Rajgrodzie zdewastowany: Znowu [A monument commemorating the Jews in Rajgród was devastated],” Gazeta Wyborcza Białystok, May 27, 2016, http://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/1,35241,20143961,pomnik-upamietniajacy-zydow-w-rajgrodzcz-zdewastowany-znowu.html.
pressing ethical imperative in the present on the one hand, and on the other, as repositories of a dissonant heritage and deeply disturbing past.

The sudden and violent disappearance of Jews from towns where they had once been an integral part of the landscape, the different reactions of Poles to the persecution of their neighbors, and the question of Jewish property after the war aroused a “profound moral disturbance” and did not encourage open discussions on the Shoah.66 Jewish material remnants, however, in some sense preserved the ambivalent memory of the Shoah at the local level, their dilapidated state reminding of the extreme circumstances by which the Jews had disappeared. The encounter with these neglected relics evoked a sense of antagonism and denial but also, as the above examples showed, triggered rare recollections of the fate of the local Jewish community. Into the late communist years, Jewish ruins continued increasingly to generate and mediate this alternative commemorative discourse on a local level, the beginnings of a much broader and more public and contested reckoning with the Shoah that would take place in the decades since the end of the communist regime.

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