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THE BIAŁYSTOK GHETTO CEMETERY AS A SETTING OF HISTORICAL-POLITICAL DISPUTES

by Luca Thoma

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Photo credit: Every year on August 16, flower wreaths are laid in front of the obelisk in Mordechaj Tenenbaum Square in honor of the Białystok Ghetto Uprising. Luca Thoma / Luca Thoma, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

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The history of the necropolis in eastern Poland acts like a burning glass, a focal point of the upheavals of the 20th century and Polish-Jewish relations after the Shoa. Today, remembrance of this historically significant site alternates between disinterest, urban image cultivation, and a ritualized sense of duty.

If you leave the city center of the eastern Polish metropolis of Białystok today and cross the busy Piłsudski Avenue, you will come across a small, rather unspectacular-looking green area on Żabia Street, wedged between massive, prefabricated buildings and parking lots. A few aging benches stand under large chestnut trees among carelessly trimmed lawns. On an ordinary weekday, you might find a few senior citizens here, taking a break with their shopping bags or feeding the city pigeons with old bread scraps. Otherwise, the place is deserted. There's a pervading sense of cultivated boredom.

However, the history of this place is anything but boring: anyone who peels back the layers of time beneath the leafy surface of Mordechaj-Tenenbaum Square, popularly known in Białystok to this day as the "Żabia Cemetery," will discover a hidden treasury of stories and meanings. It served as a cemetery, a memorial, became a pawn in a political power struggle, and today functions not only as a recreational space but also as a vehicle for international diplomacy. The history of this place is symptomatic of the upheavals of the 20th century in East-Central Europe, but at the same time it is also a kind of prism, which allows us to see the ambivalence around the issue of Jewish heritage in Poland today and how historically and politically charged this topic continues to be.

A cemetery inside the ghetto walls

The ghetto was dismantled, a process that lasted until September 8, 1943, and the cemetery on Żabia Street was destroyed as part of it. From the moment the Wehrmacht marched into Białystok on June 27, 1941, as part of Operation Barbarossa

Operation Barbarossa

Codename for the German Wehrmacht's war of aggression against the Soviet Union, initiated on June 22, 1941.

, the German occupiers began murdering and harassing the Jewish population of the city. On the very first day of the occupation, 'Black Friday' as it has come to be known, several hundred Jews were locked up in the main synagogue by a police battalion and burned alive along with the prayer house.[1] Just one month later, the military administration erected a ghetto in the middle of the industrial quarter of the city, where the occupiers imprisoned

about 50,000 Jews from Białystok and the surrounding area.[2] In the course of the reconstruction work, an approximately one-hectare wasteland in the northwest of the ghetto territory was turned into a cemetery. During the Second World War, the Żabia cemetery was one of the few cemeteries to be built within the walls of a ghetto. The confined Jewish population converted a fallow area into an improvised burial ground and formed a burial society (Chewra Kadisha), whose members buried those who died in the ghetto and managed the cemetery for about two years. According to historian Tomasz Wiśniewski, about 3,500 people were buried at the necropolis

necropolis

The term first appears in Strabon's Geographies (Strabon, 17,1,10; 14). There the term necropolis describes an extensive cemetery in Alexandria with gardens, graves and embalming facilities.

until 1943. Most of the mazewot

Jewish gravestone

also: mazewot

Mazewa (Plural: Mazewot) is a Jewish gravestone, usually marked with a Hebrew inscription.

were small, improvised and, with a few exceptions, made of wood.[3] As conditions in the ghetto worsened and the number of victims increased, people were buried in mass graves.[4] When the deportations to Auschwitz and Treblinka began in February 1943, members of the Zionist and Bundist

The Bund

also: General Jewish Workers' League in Lithuania, Poland and Russia

The "General Jewish Workers' League in Lithuania, Poland and Russia" was founded in 1897 in Vilnius and united numerous socialists of Jewish origin. The Bundists opposed the desire for a Jewish state, as propagated by Zionism, and advocated expanded Jewish autonomy rights in the Diaspora. During World War II, the Polish branch of the Bund continued to operate underground and participated, among other things, in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

underground in the ghetto decided to take action and planned an uprising, which began on August 16 of that year under the leadership of 27-year-old commander Mordechaj Tenenbaum.[5] The resistance was fierce and succeeded in halting the deportations to the death camps for four days, but ultimately it stood no chance. The ghetto was dismantled, a process that lasted until September 8, 1943, and the cemetery on Żabia Street was destroyed as part of it.[6] What remained was little more than a patch of scorched earth, as eyewitness Szymon Datner would later report:

> *Weeds and wild grass, as well as garbage and manure, covered the Zabia cemetery. Goats had grazed on this holy ground, destroying most of the gravestones*
>
> *Datner, Szymon: The Sacred Zabia Cemetery, in: Scmulewitz, Izaak; Rybal, Izaak (Hg.): The Bialystoker Memorial Book, New York 1982, S. 127–128.*

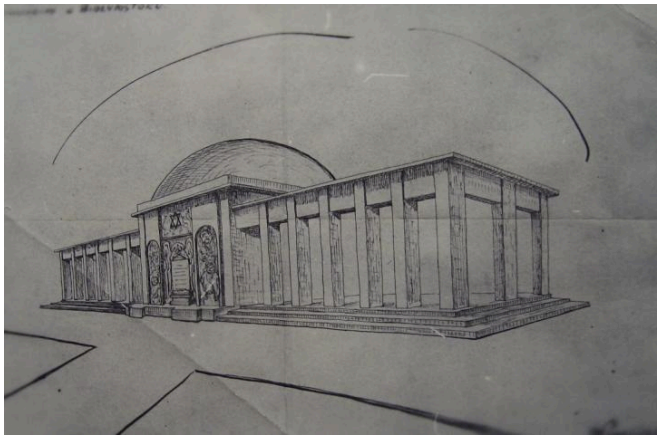
Commemorative march in 1949 to mark the sixth anniversary of the Białystok Ghetto Uprising. Sammlung Tomasz Wiśniewski / Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Post-war reconstruction

Already in 1945, Datner, a survivor of the ghetto uprising, eminent historian, and later director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, together with other survivors, began work to rebuild the Jewish community in Białystok and reinstate the ghetto cemetery: They weeded the remaining graves, built a brick wall around the necropolis, and hired guards to prevent nighttime acts of vandalism.[7] These measures were made possible by aid payments from the United States, presumably through the American-Jewish aid organization American Joint Distribution Committee.[8] The goal of the Białystok Jews was not only to continue using the ghetto cemetery as a necropolis, but also to make the symbolically valuable site a memorial

to Jewish resistance to Nazi atrocities. Already in August 1945, to mark the second anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising, a four-meter high obelisk crowned with a Star of David was unveiled, followed by another obelisk in 1947, and in 1948 the monument ensemble was completed with the addition a large stone mausoleum, a so-called "Ohel", dedicated to the ghetto resistance fighters and the Jewish partisans of the "Forojs" unit, who fought in the Podlaskie region during World War II.[9] From 1945, Białystok Jews regularly organized events commemorating the anniversary of the ghetto uprising at the Żabia Cemetery, attended by representatives of municipal, military, and civil organizations.[10]

The mausoleum erected in memory of the resistance fighters and partisans, date unknown. Sammlung Tomasz Wiśniewski / Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



Sketch of the mausoleum for the resistance fighters and partisans. Sammlung Tomasz Wiśniewski / Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

But the Jewish community in Białystok increasingly lost social influence and political weight in the following years. While around 2,000 survivors remained in the city immediately after the war, building up a community with a school and library and trying to come to terms with the socialist rulers, the situation for Jews in Poland became increasingly unpleasant: many left the country out of fear following the Kielce pogrom

Kielce pogrom

In the southeastern Polish city, more than 40 Polish Jews, including survivors of the Shoah, fell victim to a brutal hunt on July 4, 1946. The trigger was the spread of a rumor about the alleged kidnapping of a Christian boy by Jews.

of 1946 and due to frustration at the increasing Stalinization

Stalinization

Collective term for the political and social upheavals that took place as a result of the subjugation of the East-Central European states to the rule of Joseph Stalin and the USSR. Part of these campaigns consisted of greater centralization and control of associations and the municipal systems by the socialist rulers.

of public life. As a result of this continuous exodus, by the early 1960s, the Jewish community had shrunk to around 230 people.[11]

Conversion and closure

In 1964, following a decision by the Ministry of Municipal Management, the Żabia Cemetery was closed and the land was transferred to the city.[12] This ruling marked the end of a protracted power struggle between the Jewish community and the municipal authorities. As early as 1953, the Office for House and Settlement Construction had made plans to demolish the cemetery as part of a redevelopment of the area.[13] Vehement protests by Białystok Jews and an intervention on the part of the Jewish Historical Institute eventually caused the authorities to back down. In the years that followed, however, the necropolis became increasingly neglected as the dwindling community lacked financial resources. The Jewish community eventually broke up completely as a result of the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968

The anti-Semitic campaign of 1968

also: 1968 Polish political crisis

In response to nationwide student demonstrations, the leadership of the Polish People's Republic under Władysław Gomułka initiated an orchestrated "anti-Zionist" media campaign that blamed a "Zionist Fifth Column" for the unrest in Poland. This was accompanied by surveillance of numerous Jews by the secret service and a "purge" campaign in which prominent Jewish party members were forced to resign.

, when the secret service shadowed a number of Jewish Białystokers, “exposing” several doctors and dignitaries as “Zionists” and removing them from office. This harassment drove a large number of the remaining Jews to leave the country.[14]

An unidentified group stands in front of the cemetery wall in 1963. Behind it, the mausoleum is easily recognizable. Sammlung Tomasz Wiśniewski / Społeczne Muzeum Żydów Białegostoku i regionu, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

In 1971 the decision was finally made to demolish the cemetery – despite further letters of protest from Szymon Datner and objections from the remaining Białystok Jews. The mazevot, monuments and the cemetery wall had to make way for the construction of a settlement prosaically named "North II" ("Północ II"). The remains of the victims of the ghetto and the Jewish Białystokers who had been buried here after the war were exhumed and reinterred in a single mass grave. Architect Wanda Pietrasz redesigned a part of the former necropolis as a park area. A small fragment of the wall was preserved, and next to it the "Monument to the Victims of the Ghetto" ("Pomnik ofiar getta"), which still exists today, was built over the mass grave.[15] According to Yechiel Weizman, it was a common phenomenon in the Polish People's Republic of the 1960s and 1970s for Jewish cemeteries to be converted, built on, or otherwise misappropriated; the increasing exodus of Jewish survivors led to the desacralization of their necropolises, which manifested itself in many places physically through vandalism and destruction, but also, more generally, in the public consciousness in the form of forgetting and ignorance.[16]

The “Monument for the Victims of the Ghetto” was erected in 1971 when the cemetery was demolished and is still standing today at Mordechaj-Tenenbaum Square.. Luca Thoma / Luca Thoma, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

But even after the site of the former cemetery was built on, it served as a stage for annual memorial ceremonies in honor of the ghetto uprising, organized by the Jewish Historical Institute in cooperation with the city administration. From then on, the maintenance of the new memorial was taken care of by the staff of a local fleece factory, as the Jewish community had all but disappeared as a result of the events of 1968.

Rediscovery

After 1989, the Third Polish Republic increasingly oriented itself toward the EU and the United States, economically but also in terms of ideas. Thousands of tourists from Israel, the USA and Canada flocked to the country to visit the sites of the Shoah and the architectural testimonies to Jewish life. According to historian and contemporary witness Tomasz Wiśniewski, the first democratically elected government led by Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki also exerted pressure on people in regional centers to address the country’s marginalized Jewish history more actively.[17] This new interest in Białystok's Jewish past motivated decision-makers, scholars and activists to install new plaques and monuments, but also focused attention on the former Żabia cemetery – and the question of where the post-war monuments had gone.

The whereabouts of the mausoleum and the monument from 1945 are still unclear today, but the obelisk built in 1947 was rediscovered in 1993. Where exactly is disputed: according to historian Joanna Sadowska, it was buried in the grounds of a nearby kindergarten, while, Tomasz Wiśniewski maintains it was kept for years in the warehouse of a military barracks.[18] On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the ghetto uprising, the rediscovered obelisk was restored on the initiative of ghetto survivor Szymon Bartnowski, erected in the center of the square and solemnly inaugurated on August 16, 1993 by city president Lech Rutkowski and the Israeli ambassador.[19] Since then, successive city governments of Białystok have taken other symbolic steps to commemorate the Jewish heritage of this place and the city in general. Under the independent long-term city president Tadeusz Truskolaski, who took office in 2006 and still holds it today, the nameless park above the ghetto cemeterywas renamed "Mordechaj Tenenbaum Square" in 2008[20] in honor of the uprising commander, and in 2010 a twinning agreement was founded with the Israeli community of Yehud, where a particularly large number of Białystok Jews settled after World War II.[21] To this day, local dignitaries as well as representatives of Jewish associations and the Warsaw community gather every year on August 16 at Mordechaj Tenenbaum Square to lay floral wreaths in commemoration of the victims of the ghetto and to pray. Since Truskolaski has been in office, representatives of the German and Israeli embassies also regularly take part in the celebrations and give speeches, which has lent the event an international dimension.

The ambivalence of commemorations

Nevertheless, some members of Białystok's academic community and civil society are critical of how the city's Jewish history has been dealt with at the official level. Sociology professor Katarzyna Sztop-Rutkowska, for example, complains that the monuments and memorials commemorating Jewish Białystok are not found in prominent locations, but only in residential neighborhoods and out-of-the-way, empty lots.[22] As a result, many people today do not even know that Białystok once had a Jewish population – even though Jews at times were in the majority and significantly shaped the city's industrialization and cultural life.

According to Sztop-Rutkowska, a more important initiative for fostering historical awareness than these monuments would be a Jewish museum – or at least a "good museum of urban history with a Jewish section."[23] But in recent years, various attempts to establish such a museum have failed. The city government displayed an attitude that can be described as generally benevolent, but in this specific case as passive and extremely hesitant. It has been very careful not to make any financial commitments. According to historian and activist Tomasz Wiśniewski, who has been involved in Jewish remembrance in Białystok since the 1980s and has already had to shelve several museum projects, political considerations are decisive for the executive's hesitant attitude; since the Jedwabne debate

Jedwabne debate

The publication in 2000 of the book "Neighbors" ("Sąsiedzi") by Polish-American historian Jan Tomasz Gross stimulated a broad academic and social debate on the complicity of non-Jewish Poles in the Shoa and collaboration with the German occupiers.

at the turn of the millennium, commemorating Poland's Jewish history has been a controversial topic in which there is little to gain politically, but much to lose.[24] Those who are eager to win elections are therefore better off focusing on less controversial, but all the more vague buzzwords such as "multiculturalism" or "tolerance".

The official memorial ceremony is obscured from the view of spectators and residents by security personnel and barriers. Luca Thoma / Luca Thoma, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

This ambivalent attitude toward Jewish history is also reflected in the organization of the annual Day of Remembrance for the Ghetto Uprising, which I observed firsthand in 2021. Important representatives from political and religious life regularly gather on Mordechaj-Tenebaum Square – in 2022, for example, the internationally known Auschwitz survivor and chairman of the Jewish Historical Institute Marian Turski was present. However, the memorial ceremony was obscured from the rest of the park by a number of security personnel and large barriers. From outside this “VIP area” the speeches and prayers were barely audible, so only a few onlookers tend to gather. The event seems exclusive, the political representatives

sometimes nervous and almost a little ashamed. As soon as the last wreath has been laid, the representatives from local and regional politics hurry back to their air-conditioned official cars. In a way, this rigid procedure is symptomatic of the commemoration of Jewish Poland, which in many places is an elite phenomenon and is only carried out in ritualized procedures, while more ambitious civil society initiatives enjoy little political support.

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. Ewa Rogalewska et al. Assume that there were 600 to 800 Jewish victims. Rogalewska, Ewa; Pyżewska, Anna; Kuklo, Cezary: Kto ratuje jedno życie, ratuje cały świat… Pomoc ludnośći żydowskiej pod okupacją niemiecką w województwie białostockim, Białystok 2003, p. 61. ↥
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4. Wiśniewski, Tomasz: Interview, 11.08.2021. ↥
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9. Wiśniewski: Cmentarze żydowskie w Białymstoku, 1989, S. 390; Urząd Miejski w Białymstoku; Archiwum Państwowe w Białystoku: Katalog białostockich pomników, tablic pamiątkowych i miejsc pamięci narodowej, Białystok 2015, S. 217. ↥
10. Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 78. ↥
11. Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 78. ↥
12. Datner: The Sacred Zabia Cemetery, 1982, S. 127–128. ↥
13. Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 84–85. ↥
14. Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 90-91. ↥
15. Urząd Miejski w Białymstoku; Archiwum Państwowe w Białystoku: Katalog białostockich pomników, tablic pamiątkowych i miejsc pamięci narodowej, 2015, S. 217. ↥
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17. Wiśniewski: Interview, 2021. ↥
18. Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 55; Wiśniewski: Interview, 2021. ↥

19. Urząd Miejski w Białymstoku; Archiwum Państwowe w Białystoku: Katalog białostockich pomników, tablic pamiątkowych i miejsc pamięci narodowej, 2015, S. 217; Sadowska: Epilog historii białostockich Żydów – okres powojenny, 2013, S. 55. ↥
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23. Sztop-Rutkowska, Katarzyna: Interview, 13.08.2021. ↥
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