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Doubly Foreign: Jewish Cemeteries in the Formerly German Space in Poland

The western voivodeships of present-day Poland, which were part of Germany until 1945, remain on the geographical periphery of the Jewish histories of both Germany and Poland. In the wake of World War II and its aftermath, the populations of what are today the Lebus and West Pomerania voivodeships were almost entirely displaced through both forced and voluntary migration. This chapter, through the lens of a Jewish cemetery documentation project, seeks to assess the current status of German Jewish heritage in contemporary Poland. It highlights the groups for whom these burial sites and their heritage are significant and attempts to explore these meanings beyond local and national contexts in order to address broader international questions of authenticity and the virtuality of memory.

The question is whether looking at this peripherality in relation to centers such as Warsaw or Krakow, and its location on the Polish-German border, can bring new ideas to the discussion of authenticity and virtuality in the sense proposed by Ruth Ellen Gruber,¹ or to the debate about democracy and Jewish spaces in Europe in the sense proposed by Diana Pinto;² or whether these two approaches are worth applying in the context of borderlands and peripheries.

Jewish Cemeteries as Authentic Spaces

A cemetery is a physical space with defined boundaries that can be located on a map; it has its owner, rules, and regulations. Beneath the ground lie human remains and above the ground information about them. In the case of many of the Jewish cemeteries in the middle part of western Poland, which are the subject of this chapter, this information can still be found engraved on tombstones, on cemetery walls, or on fragments of these.

¹ Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Ruth Ellen Gruber, "Beyond Virtually Jewish: New Authenticities and Real Imaginary Spaces in Europe", *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99/4 (2009): 487–504.

² Diana Pinto, "Jewish Spaces and Their Future", in *Jewish Space in Contemporary Poland*, ed. Erica Lehrer and Michael Meng (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), pp. 280–5.

The human remains and surviving commemorative stones imbue the cemetery with authenticity as a physical space, serving as a burial site for real people. Where gravestones are no longer preserved, the cemetery may take on the character of an archaeological or forensic space, both of which are also about exploring authentic realms.³ Reading the names and brief details of those commemorated on the gravestones creates a bridge between the place and the biographical histories of individuals. In the following pages, I will outline the various groups interested in connecting these individual and collective pasts with the present.

In her observations on the contemporary practice of Jewish culture in Europe, Ruth Ellen Gruber focuses on two aspects of authenticity. First, she relates it to Jewish traditions cultivated by Jews and points to the artificiality and virtuality of the practice of using elements of Jewish culture by non-Jews in post-Holocaust Europe. On the other hand, she writes about the so-called “new authenticity”, pointing out that the current interest in Jewish culture among non-Jews also has the value of a new and living tradition, which she describes using the example of Krakow: “The Jewish Krakow scene in itself is real, an authentic, living phenomenon, even though it may not be ‘authentically Jewish’ according to traditional definitions of ‘Jews’, ‘Jewish’, or ‘Judaism’”.⁴

The authenticity we are dealing with in the case of Jewish cemeteries is linked to another understanding of authenticity: as a real place. At the same time – in the field of the culture of memory – we can observe different practices related to cemeteries and reflect on their authenticity in Gruber’s sense.

Jewish cemeteries are often the last authentic sites bearing witness to a Jewish presence in a given town or region. This is particularly true in areas where the percentage of Jewish inhabitants was relatively low and where no synagogue or other religious building survived that could be openly identified with Jewish history. A middle part of western Poland, which belonged until 1945 to the province of Brandenburg, is one such region: until 1945 it was the eastern part of Germany where the Jewish population oscillated at around 1% to 2%. It is also an area that saw an almost complete population exchange after 1945, when Germans had to move westwards to reach their country’s redrawn border; and when Poles from different parts of Poland and territories of historical Poland resettled there.

Given such a fundamentally transformed region, Jewish cultural heritage fell between the cracks of German oblivion (the oppressors were no longer present in the region), Polish disinterest, and the absence of Jewish descendants who had

³ On the discussion of historical authenticity see, e.g., Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (eds.), *Historische Authentizität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016).

⁴ Gruber, “Beyond Virtually Jewish”, p. 492.

either emigrated abroad or who had perished in the Holocaust. For Poles, the cemetery heritage of mostly German Jews seemed foreign and not worth preserving for many decades. It is only since the 1980s that interest in the region's Jewish past has grown more broadly. This is evidenced, for example, by the photographic documentation of cemeteries, their systematic registration and by their legal protection as monuments by provincial offices for the protection of monuments.

From Brandenburg as the Eastern Part of the Prussian State to the Division of the Region as a Result of the Treaty of Potsdam (1945)

Jews had settled in the area of historical Brandenburg since the Middle Ages, but were repeatedly expelled from the Brandenburg March. Some of them found refuge in the royal towns of neighboring Poland, such as Skwierzyna or Międzyrzecz, which became part of Prussia in 1793 and also belonged to Germany after the First World War. A new period in the history of Jews in Brandenburg began in 1671 when the Elector Frederick William arranged for 50 Jewish families expelled from Vienna to settle in Brandenburg. From this settlement, but also from other migration movements in Central and Eastern Europe, Jewish communities emerged and continued to exist until the time of National Socialism.⁵

The most important feature of the history of this area in the 20th century is the almost complete replacement of the population after the shifting of the border in 1945.⁶ Germans were forced to leave the region in the last phase of the Second World War and during the early post-war years. By this time their Jewish neighbors were no longer in the region. From 1933 they had been forced to emigrate (many moved to Berlin in the 1930s) or had been murdered during the Holocaust. Some of their cemeteries were desecrated but most survived the Second World War. However, there was no one who regarded them as something of their own and cared for them.

The expulsion of the German population after the Second World War and the arrival of new inhabitants from the Polish eastern borderlands and other parts of Poland have shaped the culture of remembrance in the region to this day. New

5 Irene Diekmann (ed.), *Jüdisches Brandenburg. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: Verlag für Berlin-Brandenburg, 2010).

6 Beata Halicka, *The Polish Wild West: Forced Migration and Cultural Appropriation in the Polish-German Borderlands, 1945–1948* (London: Routledge, 2020).

settlers from different parts of Poland arrived in these areas and the period of Polonization of these formerly German areas began. Efforts were made to erase all traces of the earlier German culture. Today there is no significant centre of Jewish life in the area.

The region was and is still characterized by its rural character and the existence of small towns. This is of historical significance: the area has no major urban, industrial, or academic centers, which has resulted in limited opportunities for professional and economic development for the Jews living here. Today, the area is characterized by a relatively low level of civil society development, which translates into a poor culture of remembrance.

Jewish Cemeteries as “Doubly Foreign” Heritage

When it comes to the treatment of cemeteries in the new territories of Poland – both German and Jewish – after 1945, several phases can be distinguished. After the war, the cemeteries were initially left to their own devices. Local residents in many cases re-used the building materials, mainly bricks. The gravestones were used by stonemasons to make new tombstones. In 1959, the Law on Cemeteries and Burial of the Dead came into force.⁷ This law said that a cemetery could be closed 40 years after the last burial. However, a cemetery could be liquidated sooner if the area were to serve a public utility, the defense of the state, or the implementation of national economic plans. In the 1960s and 1970s, using the provisions of the law, Jewish cemeteries were deliberately and legally liquidated, a process sometimes referred to as “cleaning”.⁸ On the other hand, there are differences when it comes to the survival of Jewish or German cemeteries in these areas, as described by Yechiel Weizman:

Polish authorities lacked a clear policy toward German Jewish religious traces. Cemeteries and synagogues that had belonged to the German Jews were usually discussed together with

⁷ Ustawa z dnia 31 stycznia 1959 r. o cmentarzach i chowaniu zmarłych. Dz.U. 1959 nr 11 poz. 62 [Law of January 31, 1959, on cemeteries and the burial of the dead. Journal of Laws 1959, no. 11, item 62], accessed June 16, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19590110062>.

⁸ This was the case, for example, with the 14th-century cemetery in Słubice (formerly Frankfurt [Oder]) and the cemetery in Rzepin (formerly Reppen), both of which were destroyed as a result of the same administrative decision. See Eckard Reiß and Magdalena Abraham-Diefenbach (ed.), *Makom tov – der gute Ort. Jüdischer Friedhof Frankfurt (Oder)/Słubice* (Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag, 2012).

other Polish Jewish sites, but occasionally they were treated differently, perceived more as part of the material German Christian heritage rather than a solely Jewish one. Many German Jewish cemeteries resembled German ones in their artistic and architectural form; both in the style and form of the headstones and the German inscription, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between them.⁹

Weizman writes about “The Other Jewish Heritage”¹⁰ in the post-German territories. By this he means a heritage different from the heritage of Polish Jews in historical Poland. I would say that from the perspective of the new inhabitants of the new territories of Poland, we are dealing with a heritage that is doubly foreign: it belongs to the German heritage¹¹ left behind and at the same time stands out within it as a Jewish heritage. And these were not “our Jews”, but mainly German Jews.

Since the 1980s, and especially since the period after the 1989 transition, there has been a new treatment of Jewish cemeteries and Jewish heritage in Poland. Jewish cemeteries are no longer being deliberately and consciously liquidated: there is a beginning to their documentation, marking,¹² and care¹³ instead. At the same time, there has been a process of natural deterioration of the stone and obliteration of inscriptions.

9 Yechiel Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage. Living next to Poland's material Jewish traces after the Holocaust* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), p. 45.

10 Weizmann, *Unsettled Heritage*, p. 43.

11 There is a vast literature on German heritage in post-war Poland. See, e.g., Gregor Thum, *Up-rooted: How Breslau Became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

12 Magdalena Abraham-Diefenbach, Die Kennzeichnung jüdischer Friedhöfe in Polen. Zentralgesteuerte und lokale Praktiken der Sichtbarmachung, in: *Zwischen Gefährdung, Gedenken und Vermittlungsarbeit – Jüdische Friedhöfe nach der Shoah*, ed. by Helge-Fabien Hertz und Katrin Keßler (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2025).

13 In Skwierzyna in 2002, students from the local high school together with German students from the Mauritius Gymnasium in Büren near Paderborn carried out cleaning work at the local Jewish cemetery. The teacher in charge from Poland was Andrzej Kirmiel. See Andrzej Kirmiel, “Żydowskie ślady na Środkowym Nadodrzu”, *Nadwarciański Rocznik Historyczno-Archiwalny* 14 (2007): 139–42 (at p. 141), https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Nadwarcianski_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny/Nadwarcianski_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2007-t-n14/Nadwarcianski_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2007-t-n14-s139-142/Nadwarcianski_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2007-t-n14-s139-142.pdf.

A German-Polish Project for the Documentation of Jewish Cemeteries in the Historical Part of Brandenburg

In a research project which the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) conducted between 2019 and 2021 in cooperation with Potsdam University and Jagiellonian University in Krakow, we compiled a (not yet complete) documentation of Jewish cemeteries in the eastern part of the province of Brandenburg. As part of the administrative reform of 1938, the districts of Arnswalde and Friedeberg were transferred to the province of Pomerania. The districts of Schwerin (Fig. 1), Meseritz, and parts of the district of Bomst from the dissolved province of Grenzmark Posen-West Prussia, were incorporated into the province of Mark Brandenburg. The area of historical “East Brandenburg” (Ostbrandenburg), which became part of Poland in 1945, is understood to include the districts of Schwerin, Meseritz, and parts of the district of Bomst, as well as Arnswalde and Friedeberg.¹⁴ It should be remembered that the districts annexed in 1938, until 1793, were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and part of the centuries-old German-Polish borderland where both German and Polish Jews settled.¹⁵

The preserved cemeteries and individual tombstones are for us a unique source for research into the social history of the region. They provide information on the religious currents of the community, on the extent of assimilation, and on the occupational structure and social affiliations of the dead.¹⁶

On the eastern periphery of Brandenburg, where there were only a few slightly larger urban centers (Fig. 2 and 3)¹⁷ with a variety of Jewish institutions, relatively few written documents were created and survived. Cemeteries are often the only way to access the forgotten history of this community. In addition, while written

14 Definitions of regional names are described in the following article: Beata Halicka and Matthias Diefenbach, “Neumark/Ostbrandenburg/Ziemia Lubuska”, *Online-Lexikon zur Kultur und Geschichte der Deutschen im östlichen Europa* (2018), last modified May 20, 2021, <https://ome-lexikon.uni-oldenburg.de/p38427>.

15 Andrzej Kirmiel, *Żydzi w Międzyrzeczu* (Międzyrzecz: Muzeum Ziemi Międzyrzeckiej, 2021).

16 Some examples from the region include Leszek Hońdo, *Hebrajska epigrafika nagrobkowa w Polsce* (Krakow: Universitas, 2014).

17 Above all, Landsberg an der Warthe (Gorzów Wielkopolski). Unfortunately, we have no study of the history of the Jewish community in this town. The Jewish cemetery is largely destroyed and only partly documented. There is no initiative to take care of it. See “Verzeichnis der auf dem jüdischen Friedhof in Landsberg/Warthe noch lesbaren deutschen Inschriften” [List of German inscriptions still legible on the Jewish cemetery in Landsberg/Warthe], LBI-Archives, LBI Manuscript Collection, <http://archive.org/details/verzeichnisderau1440unse/mode/1up?view=theater>.



Fig. 1: Gil Hüttenmeister reads a Hebrew inscription in the Jewish cemetery in Skwierzyna/former Schwerin an der Warthe (Lubuskie Voivodeship), 2021. Photo: Justyna Hrabka.

sources are professionally preserved in archives, the surviving material relics of Jewish cemeteries are under significant threat from environmental influences and vandalism and are becoming fewer and less legible with each passing year. There is a danger that they will all be irretrievably lost in the coming years.

As a first step, we compiled a list of Jewish cemeteries regardless of their degree of preservation. Some of them had already fallen out of use long before the National Socialist period, due to the migrations of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In total, we managed to identify 46 Jewish cemeteries. We have now completed the documentation of 23 cemeteries with a total of 680 gravestones or fragments of gravestones. These records are included in the database of the University of Potsdam and are freely accessible to the public.¹⁸ In some of them we are dealing with a few fragments, in others with hundreds of legible *matzevot*.

Taking into account all the 46 cemeteries which we identified, the situation in terms of their degree of preservation is as follows:

I – in 26 of them there are still tombstones, fragments, and traces of cemetery walls (Tab. 1);

¹⁸ See “Jüdische Friedhöfe in Polen auf den Gebieten der ehemaligen Provinz Brandenburg” [Jewish cemeteries in Poland on the territories of the former province of Brandenburg], last modified May 2024, <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/juedische-friedhoe-fe-pl/index>.

II – 8 are empty;

III – 9 are built over in various ways and no gravestones or other material traces have survived;

IV – 3 are built over, but the remains of surviving gravestones are collected in some other place in some form of cemetery commemoration.

If one were to combine categories III and IV, there would be 12 cemeteries which have been built over.



Fig. 2: Fragment of a wall with graffiti-covered gravestones, Jewish cemetery in Gorzów Wielkopolski/former Landsberg an der Warthe (Lubuskie Voivodeship), 2021. Photo: Maryla Wojtyszyn.

Thus, in 56% of the cemeteries there are still visible traces, even if very small, indicating that the area was used as a cemetery. In the case of 7% of the cemeteries, even if they have been built over, the local community is aware of its existence through the existence of tombstones shown elsewhere in the locality. Thus, in 63% of the localities, material traces of Jewish presence or memory materialized in the form of a monument have survived.

Of the 46 cemeteries, 18 are marked in various ways, including those that are now completely empty or built over. This represents approximately 39% of all the cemeteries. Thus, to simplify somewhat, we could say that the degree of commemoration of Jewish cemeteries is lower than the degree of preservation of material remains.

In the case of the 26 cemeteries where material remains have been preserved, in none of them are all the *matzevot* standing in their original places. This means that absolutely all the Jewish cemeteries surveyed have been damaged in

Tab. 1: Degree of destruction of Jewish cemeteries in western Poland, on the territory of historical Brandenburg.

Category I	Number of Cemeteries	Percentage
a – all gravestones in situ	0	0%
b – mixed, mostly preserved	6	24%
c – mixed, mostly destroyed	12	46%
d – moving headstones	3	11%
e – only moving fragments	3	11%
f – no gravestones, only borders and pedestals	2	8%
Total	26	100%

some way. Only 6 cemeteries have survived in which most of the *matzevot* and tombstones are still standing in their places. In 12, most are in another location, but some are still in place. In the remaining cemeteries, there are only fragments of tombstones or only grave frames.



Fig. 3: Aedicule by the fence wall, Jewish cemetery in Gorzów Wielkopolski/former Landsberg an der Warthe (Lubuskie Voivodeship), 2022. Photo: Wojciech Derwich.

An important aspect of this work is to restore the memory of individual real persons. Of the 680 documented tombstones or their fragments, we were able to deci-

pher the full name of the person in question in 416 of them. Systematic documentation and translation of inscriptions from Hebrew allow us to identify names which would otherwise be obliterated by time, plants, and moss. This work is even more important because of the inability of most of the inhabitants of these areas to read the Hebrew names, so that without it, these memorials of the local community would remain completely inaccessible.

Meanings Given to Jewish Cemeteries by Different Groups

On the one hand, the Jewish cemeteries described are largely abandoned and forgotten places. On the other hand, it is possible to distinguish different groups for whom these places have different meanings and who carry out different commemorative practices or other individual, private, or public manifestations in connection with them. I would also like to examine how different contemporary groups view the role of Jewish cemeteries. I have identified eight groups which I think are pertinent:

(1) The first group comprises the Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors who came to the Western Territories after 1945 and their descendants living in western Poland today. After the flight and expulsion of the German population, Lower Silesia and Pomerania in particular became an area of settlement for Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust.¹⁹ Some 90,000 Jews settled in Silesia²⁰ and 22,000 in Pomerania.²¹ By the 1970s, however, they were – in several waves – forced to emi-

¹⁹ Markus Nesselrodt, *Dem Holocaust entkommen. Polnische Juden in der Sowjetunion, 1939–1946* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021); Markus Nesselrodt, “Who, When, and Why? Escaping German Occupation in 1939 versus 1941”, in *Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1939–1959). History and Memory of Deportation, Exile and Survival*, ed. Katharina Friedla and Markus Nesselrodt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), pp. 2–29; Lidia Zessin-Jurek, “A Matzeva Amid Crosses: Jewish Exiles in the Polish Memory of Siberia”, in *Polish Jews in the Soviet Union (1939–1959)*, ed. by Katharina Friedla and Markus Nesselrodt (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), pp. 236–260; and Helga Hirsch, *Gehen oder bleiben? Deutsche und polnische Juden in Schlesien und Pommern 1945–1957* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2011).

²⁰ Ewa Waszkiewicz, *Kongregacja Wyznania Mojżeszowego na Dolnym Śląsku na tle polityki wyznaniowej Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej 1945–1968* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1999).

²¹ Achim Wörn, *Der jischuw an der Oder. Juden in Stettin, 1945–1950* (Marburg: Herder-Institut Verlag, 2021); Eryk Krasucki, *Historia kręci drejdem. Z dziejów (nie tylko) szczecińskich Żydów* (Łódź: Księży Młyn Dom Wydawniczy, 2018).

grate. Very few Polish Jews settled between Lower Silesia and Szczecin. Only the Jewish community in Żary still exists as a part of the community in Wrocław.²²

In the case of this group, we are dealing with Polish Jews who find themselves in an area full of traces of German Jews, largely assimilated, with whom they had usually had no contact before. The graves in these cemeteries are not those of their loved ones – they are merely Jewish. From a non-Jewish perspective, we can see them as those who might be affected by these cemeteries, because, after all, they are Jewish. However, they are separated by their origin from different parts of Europe, by the degree of their assimilation, by the language used (also on tombstones) and ultimately by their fate – they survived the Holocaust.

We know that in Silesia they buried their dead in existing Jewish cemeteries. In the area I am describing, we do not have such an example. In Żary, the Jewish cemetery was partly destroyed by Wehrmacht soldiers in the 1940s, and then completely in the post-war years. In 1946, a new Jewish cemetery was established on the site of the liquidated municipal German cemetery. Today, there are perhaps a dozen or so Jews living in Żary and the surrounding area. Their representative and activist, Alicja Skowrońska, appeared until about 2020 at events commemorating the history of Jews in the region. However, this is such a small community of elderly people that it is difficult to speak of them as having an active attitude towards the Jewish heritage of the region.

(2) Jews from the former Soviet republics who immigrated to Germany in the 1990s²³ also live in towns on Germany's border with Poland. The Jewish cemetery in Słubice was the cemetery of the Jewish community in Frankfurt (Oder), as it was one city from its foundation in the 14th century until 1945.²⁴ The cemetery, first mentioned in a document from 1399, served as a burial ground continuously until the 1940s. In 1999 the cities of Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice commemorated the cemetery on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of its first mention. At that time, a new Jewish community was being formed in Frankfurt, made up of people from the Ukraine and Russia. In 2010 the community was given a plot of land for a new Jewish cemetery in Frankfurt (Oder), which it still uses today. Although the community tries to relate to the history of German Jews in Frankfurt, it has no connection to the cemetery in Słubice.

22 Tomasz Jaworski and Tamara Włodarczyk (eds.), *Żydzi żarscy a specyfika pogranicza polsko-niemieckiego* [The Jews of Żary and the peculiarities of the German-Polish border region] (Żary/Żagań: Muzeum Pogranicza Śląsko-Lużyckiego, 2017).

23 Nadine Fügner, *Jüdische Zuwanderung im Land Brandenburg* (Potsdam: RAA Brandenburg, 2005).

24 Reiß and Abraham-Diefenbach, *Makom tov*.

(3) A much greater presence relating to and providing care for this place is shown by Orthodox Jews from Israel and America, who make a pilgrimage every year in May to the grave of Rabbi Joseph ben Meir Theomim (1727–92) in Ślubice, formerly part of Frankfurt (Oder). On this occasion they have the grass mowed and the place prepared for prayers. In 2008, a particularly important ceremony took place. On the 216th anniversary of the birth of Rabbi Theomim, over 40 Orthodox rabbis from all over the world came to Ślubice.²⁵ The day began for them with a ritual bath in Frankfurt's Lake Helenesee and morning prayer at the headquarters of the new Jewish community in Frankfurt (Oder). That year, for the first time, they were able to pray at the newly established rabbi's grave, the location of which had been identified during the search and clean-up of the cemetery in 2007–8.

(4) Apart from a few isolated examples of Jewish descendants of the dead in cemeteries, I have no knowledge of anyone from this group. Very rarely did we see signs of someone's presence at a grave. And if there were such signs, it was unknown to us who had left them there.

(5) The German expellees after 1945 mainly cherished the memory of the loss of their own homeland, without usually paying attention to the history of the Jews who had also lived there until 1933–45 and were neighbors of them. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that memorial articles about their Jewish neighbors began to appear in their newspapers. In 1989, a poem by Wilfried Reinicke²⁶ appeared in one such newspaper:

When I was born in thirty-six,
My mother was not helped by our Dr Schlesinger.
Whether he managed to escape with his life,
A German like the rest of us?
[. . .]
You have sometimes thought about them,
did you miss them?
Who tended their graves?
Where the cemetery was, I remember.²⁷

25 Dietrich Schröder, "Gebet für einen großen Rabbiner", *Märkische Oderzeitung*, May 16, 2008, accessed June 16, 2024, <http://www.alemannia-judaica.de/images/Images%20157/MOZ%2016052008.pdf>.

26 Felix Ackermann, "Das Institut erinnert an Wilfried C. Reinicke", last modified June 16, 2024, <http://www.institut.net/das-institut-erinnert-an-wilfried-c-reinicke/>.

27 Wilfried Reinicke, "Moje żydowskie wspomnienia" [My Jewish Memories], trans. P. Schulz, cited in Beata Halicka, *Krosno Odrzańskie. Wspólne dziedzictwo kultury/Crossen an der Oder. Das gemeinsame Kulturerbe* (Skórzyn: Wydawnictwo Instytutowe, 2005), p. 66.

The Germans who are still alive today and who were displaced from the areas that fell to Poland in 1945, are still struggling with problems of guilt and oblivion. Their memoirs are today an important source concerning the history of Jews in small towns on the eastern border of Brandenburg.²⁸ It is also apparent nowadays that dealing with Jewish history is a political manifestation and is intended to send a message: i.e., we are open to pluralistic, European values, do not continue to associate us with right-wing, parochial conservatism, with which the expellees are often associated.

(6) When documenting Jewish cemeteries in former German territories, we still come across Germans. In the course of our research we met with a group of six pensioners from the vicinity of Berlin and Frankfurt (Oder), who regularly go to clean-up Jewish cemeteries in western Poland. They were informally linked to the organization called Action Reconciliation Service for Peace. Founded in 1958 in West Germany, it has organized workcamps in Jewish cemeteries in the GDR and in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1980s.²⁹

In addition, Germans from the generation of children born at the end or after the end of the Second World War, whose parents may have played an active role in the Second World War, are particularly committed.

Two people have played a special role in this group: the artist, Eckehard Ruthenberg (1943–2011), and the epigraphist, Gil Hüttenmeister (born 1938). The former spoke openly about the need to redeem his guilt and the unclear history of his father, who may have taken part in the Holocaust during the Second World War.³⁰ The second, an acknowledged expert in the reading of Hebrew inscriptions in Germany,³¹ has for decades been committed to German-Israeli dialogue and is

28 The short study of the history of the Jewish community in Sulechów (formerly Züllichau) is based largely on documents of this kind available in the archives of the Brandenburg Foundation in Fürstenwalde (near Berlin) run by the organization of former German expellees: Martin Jeske, "Geschichte der Jüdischen Gemeinde in Züllichau (Sulechów)", <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/juedische-friedhofe-pl/friedhof-sulechow/geschichte-der-gemeinde>.

29 See "Aktion Sühnezeichen. Friedendienste", accessed July 4, 2024, <https://asf-ev.de/>.

30 Eckehart Ruthenberg and Robert Ryss, "Dużych cmentarzy nie kocham. Rozmowa z Eckehartem Ruthenbergiem – berlińskim artystą-plastykiem, badaczem historii cmentarzy żydowskich w byłej NRD i w zachodniej Polsce", *Rocznik Chojński* 2 (2010): 252–68, accessed June 16, 2024, https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Rocznik_Chojenski/Rocznik_Chojenski-r2010-t2/Rocznik_Chojenski-r2010-t2-s252-268/Rocznik_Chojenski-r2010-t2-s252-268.pdf.

31 Frowald Gil Hüttenmeister, *Abkürzungsverzeichnis hebräischer Grabinschriften* [Index of Abbreviations Used in Hebrew Tombstone-Inscriptions], 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

currently working on the documentation of the largest Jewish cemetery in the region with its approximately 700 inscriptions, in Skwierzyna.³²

(7) Finally, what was and is the attitude of Polish inhabitants since 1945 to the existing Jewish heritage? Poles, newcomers to this region after 1945, were mostly neighbors of Jews and during the Second World War were witnesses of the Holocaust in the eastern part of Poland. It must therefore be assumed that they were able to recognize Jewish cemeteries with their Hebrew inscriptions and specific symbolism. Whether this resulted in a different treatment of these sites compared to Protestant cemeteries remains to be investigated.

The Poles are certainly responsible for the destruction of cemeteries after 1945.³³ Until the 1980s, it was a time of more or less organized destruction. However, one should bear in mind the specificity of this context. Until the 1970s, Poles did not feel at home here: they explored the area, unsure whether the border would remain on the Oder and Neisse. On the other hand, the documentation drawn up by the offices for the protection of monuments in the 1980s deserves mention, especially the documentation in Gorzów Wielkopolski which was far more detailed than the official guidelines required.³⁴

(8) It is only at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of this century that we start to deal with projects of commemoration, cleaning cemeteries, and the writing of the history of Jewish communities. Against this background, Andrzej Kirmiel, a Jagiellonian University history graduate, founder of the Lubuskie Judaica Foundation³⁵ and currently director of the regional museum in Międzyrzecz,³⁶

³² Information about the cemetery in Skwierzyna (Schwerin an der Warthe) and a plan of the gravestones have been published in the database: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/juedische-friedhoe-fe-pl/friedhof-skwierzyna>, last modified June 16, 2024.

³³ Kazimierz Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi i domy modlitwy w Polsce w latach 1944–1966 (wybór materiałów)* (Kraków: Nomos, 2006); Krzysztof Bielawski, *The Destruction of Jewish Cemeteries in Poland* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2024).

³⁴ For example, a digitized “cemetery card” (karta cmentarza) of the Jewish cemetery in Gorzów Wielkopolski, dated December 30, 1983, can be found on the following website: <https://zabytek.pl/en/obiekty/gorzow-wielkopolski-cmentarz-zydowski>. Parallel and in addition to this required documentation, another documentation which includes photographs of individual gravestones has been compiled and is available in the archive of the monument protection office in Gorzów Wielkopolski. Such detailed documentation exists for Bledzew, Brójce, Cybinka, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Międzyrzecz, Skwierzyna, Sulęcín, Świętojańsko, Trzciel, Trzemeszno Lubuskie, Witnica.

³⁵ The Lubuska Judaica Foundation was established in 2006 in Zielona Góra. It initiated the organization of Jewish Culture Days in this city. In 2008, it organized the placing of a commemorative stone at the site of the former synagogue: <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/node/20055>, accessed July 4, 2024.

³⁶ See <https://muzeum.miedzyrzecz.pl/>, accessed July 4, 2024.

stands out, alongside several other activists, such Zbigniew Czarnuch³⁷ (1930–2024), and a group of local activists which in 1997 worked on the cemetery in Boleszkowice.³⁸ Andrzej Kirmiel remains the most consistent in his activities, continuing to write books³⁹ and to initiate new projects. He is currently in charge of creating a new museum dedicated to the regional history of the Jews in the building of the former synagogue in Międzyrzecz.⁴⁰

In describing these groups of people interested in Jewish cemeteries, it is worth considering that at least three groups will soon cease to exist: the Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust, the Germans driven by motives of atonement, and the German expellees. These are the three groups that belong to the generation of people born either at the end of the war or after it, who still feel a direct connection with the history of the Holocaust.

Two other groups are of marginal importance for the region: Jews from the Soviet Union and the former Soviet republics will increasingly identify with their own new history within Germany: they cannot be expected to deal with the complicated history of the shifting of borders and the history of German Jews in Poland. The interest of Orthodox Jews has its own logic and for the local community it is a kind of curiosity connected with the person of certain rabbis buried in the Słubice cemetery.

37 Zbigniew Czarnuch, “Żydzi w Witnicy”, *Nadwarciański Rocznik Historyczno-Archiwalny* 15 (2008): 93–115, https://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Nadwarciański_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny/Nadwarciański_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2008-t-n15/Nadwarciański_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2008-t-n15-s93-115/Nadwarciański_Rocznik_Historyczno_Archiwalny-r2008-t-n15-s93-115.pdf, accessed July 4, 2024.

38 For documentation of the Jewish cemetery in Boleszkowice: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/juedische-friedhoefe-pl/friedhof-boleszkowice>. The plaque, erected in 1997, informs that on the initiative of the municipal authorities, the Association of Friends of Chwarszczany, Gudzisz, Ręczyce, the Provincial Monument Conservator in Gorzów Wielkopolski, the Dębno Forest District, and the Eternal Remembrance Foundation, cleaning work was carried out: https://juedische-friedhoefe.uni-potsdam.de/jf/grabstein_pl.php?lfd=2783, accessed July 4, 2024.

39 Andrzej Kirmiel, *Żydzi w Skwierzynie* [The Jews in Schwerin/Warthe] (Gorzów Wielkopolski: Skwierzyńskie Stowarzyszenie Rozwoju Gospodarczego, 2002); Andrzej Kirmiel, *Trzemiesznińscy Żydzi* [The Jews from Schermeisel] (Sulęcín: Urząd Miejski w Sulęcín, 2010); Andrzej Kirmiel, *Żydzi w Pszczewie* [The Jews in Betsche] (Wejherowo: Havran Wydawnictwo Domowe, 2017); Maciej Borkowski, Andrzej Kirmiel, and Tamara Włodarczyk (eds.), *Śladami Żydów. Dolny Śląsk, Opolszczyzna, Ziemia Lubuska* [On Jewish traces. Lower Silesia, Opole Land, Lubuskie Land] (Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, 2008).

40 Magdalena Abraham-Diefenbach, “Die ‘chinesische’ Synagoge von Międzyrzecz und das jüdische Erbe in den ehemals deutschen Gebieten Polens”, *Value of the Past*, last modified September 12, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.58079/12aek>.

In my list, I did not mention scientists and tourists. Scholarly research has its own dynamics, and Jewish cemeteries will certainly continue to be the subject of research by scholars of various disciplines. However, this is a topic that should be considered separately from the perspective of the international dynamics of research into Jewish history. As far as tourists are concerned, I have so far found no evidence of their presence or interest in the region I am discussing. In the future, however, it cannot be ruled out that Jewish cemeteries will become a tourist attraction in some places.

In the context of research and commemoration projects, working on and around the theme of the Jewish cemetery is an opportunity to bring together people who can give this work different meanings: expiation, expression of political convictions, and enabling contact with the history of one's own place of residence. The results of these activities, in the form of lasting products, are on the one hand carriers of the memory of the projects themselves and of the places documented, and on the other hand stimuli for further activities and practices, and thus an attempt to keep the sphere of memory in motion – part of that vibrating, fragile world that includes Jewish festivals, the menu of a pub in Kazimierz, or a programme of guided tours of cemeteries and synagogues in other major European cities.

Jewish Cemeteries in Virtual Documentation Projects

The main form that documentation projects for Jewish cemeteries take on today is virtual. Internet databases contain names, photographs, fragments of maps and informative texts. What are the implications of this? What does it mean to add a virtual dimension to the real space of cemeteries?

Sometimes there is a virtual reconstruction of authentic places and an attempt to create a substitute for authenticity in virtual space. Given the environmental factors and the irrevocable weathering of stones, this is also an attempt to preserve these traces for the long term. In the case of Jewish heritage, we are much more likely to see digital reconstructions of synagogues than cemeteries. In the case of cemeteries, various databases are being created which do not aim to give us a virtual walk through a Jewish cemetery as a substitute for an authentic

experience. Their value lies in documentation rather than in enabling us to look at some destroyed or distorted place in its pre-destruction state.⁴¹

Virtual databases containing personal information are becoming part of a global network of genealogical research which increasingly relies on digital databases. As current genealogical research is often global in nature, the significance of the data collected therein transcends linguistic, national, or ethnic boundaries.⁴² In the case of the database created as part of our project, although we do not keep track of its use, on average we are confronted with direct queries on genealogical issues twice a year.⁴³

Commemoration

It is not only research and documentation but also the culture of remembrance that is increasingly moving cemeteries into the virtual realm. Due to the definite loss of genealogical continuity in the region, any treatment of the cemetery space becomes, in fact, a movement through virtual space. This is due, firstly, to environmental factors, the erasure and distortion of the inscriptions on the grave-stones; secondly, the history of their destruction by humans and by administrative decisions; thirdly and finally, the fact that since the war they have not fulfilled their function of commemorating loved ones and visiting graves, i.e. the emotional function. Recently this has also been influenced by the passage of time, and no longer only by political and historical factors.

Actions to remedy the destruction and disappearance of the aforementioned documentation, to commemorate the dead, to clean the cemetery area, to repair *matzevot*, to produce photographic or artistic documentation, to mark with information boards, and to produce popular book or Internet documentation, are undertaken by local memory actors as well as from outside. The space is thus opened up for action by people with multiple interests.

41 In the case of the synagogues, such work is being carried out by, e.g., scientists and students of the Darmstadt University of Technology: https://www.dg.architektur.tu-darmstadt.de/forschung_ddu/digitale_rekonstruktion_ddu/synagogen/index.de.jsp, accessed July 4, 2024.

42 Izabella Parowicz, "Rediscovering the Roots that Remained Abroad: Challenges and Methods in Teaching Transborder Genealogy", in *Yearbook of Transnational History (Volume 6)*, ed. Thomas Adam (Vancouver: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2023), pp. 167–94.

43 It is possible to contact Anke Geißler-Grünberg, who is coordinating the project of documentation: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/de/hi-neuere-deutsch-juedische-geschichte/anke-geissler-gruenberg-ma>, accessed July 4, 2024.

Today, the discovery of the Jewish history of towns and villages in this part of Poland may be part of a national or European trend concerning Jewish themes. On the other hand, in my opinion, it is an integral part of the movement to discover the history of these places before 1945. It is the discovery of German history, the history of people who had to leave their homeland because of the Allied treaties and as a result of the Second World War unleashed by Germany. The history of the Jews is, as it were, another stage in the taming of the history of the place.

In Poland, there is a need to face the history of one's own local space. This is where participating in a project to document Jewish cemeteries can help, which in turn can lead to encounters with Germans and Jews who are also attracted to these places – each in a different way – and create an opportunity for personal engagement.

Jewish Cemeteries as Authentic and Virtual Spaces

Jewish cemeteries in western Poland are tangible remnants of historical Jewish spaces that are now devoid of Jewish communities. Due to this absence and the disconnection from the living (authentic) Jewish presence, these cemeteries have recently become intertwined with virtual spaces, in the bid to preserve memory and foster historical reflection on themes of violence, survival, and loss of heritage.

When we visit Jewish cemeteries in person, we engage with the material remnants of history: gravestones, inscriptions, and human remains. These are the authentic testimonies of lives lived, often the only surviving traces of the rich cultural life of pre-war Jewish communities in this part of Europe. In this sense, cemeteries provide a unique space for personal reflection, as well as for educational initiatives that engage with both the local and more universal tropes of Jewish history and consequences of persecution. But the scope of such educational dynamics is often limited to the local realm: with occasional projects focused on preservation, cleaning, and others forms of social engagement. Over time, Jewish cemeteries are vulnerable to further erosion, vandalism, or neglect. In these cases, virtual documentation can help to fill the gaps left by physical deterioration.

Virtual spaces also offer a complementary mode of engagement. What is unknown or unsaid in the physical cemetery can be reconstructed, added to, or interpreted in new ways. Through digital archives, online projects, and virtual tours, we can expand and enrich the history of these sites, of their subsequent

guardians as well as the people who neglected them, creating another record of the meaning and contested place of Jewish heritage. And going beyond the question of historical responsibility and accounting, virtual spaces may support greater dialogue and networking, fostering connections between geographically dispersed communities and individuals who might otherwise have limited access to these sites.

While this virtual realm can expand our understanding, it also comes with a trade-off: the loss of physical authenticity. The emotional and historical weight of standing in a cemetery, facing an individual gravestone, cannot be fully replicated online. Moreover, virtual spaces are themselves subject to some limitations too, including technological ones – such as the impermanence of digital platforms, the shifting dynamics of algorithms, and the potential obsolescence of databases over time. Users of virtual spaces have limited control over the development of these platforms or the long-term maintenance of their content. This raises important questions about the durability and sustainability of virtual memory projects.

Given the transience of both physical and virtual spaces, the interplay between them highlights the need for a balanced approach, one that preserves the authenticity of physical sites while also embracing the potential of digital technologies to connect, document, and educate across time and space.

Research Perspectives

Neglected Jewish cemeteries – sometimes just a few stones in the woods – even decades after the Holocaust and the abandonment of the area by witnesses and perpetrators, arouse emotions and are the subject of social action and academic research. Doubly foreign, they are tamed as authentic burial sites within the local topography of memory and incorporated into the virtual global topography of memory of murdered Jewish communities.

Although we can outline certain trends, such as the waves of cemetery closures in the 1970s, the renewed interest in Jewish cemeteries in the 1980s, and the projects carried out after 1989, it is important, in my opinion, to focus on individual sites and projects and to illuminate them in their complexity. The documentation of Jewish cemeteries attempts to outline a regional topography and can be a starting point for further research. The area in question is still a field of research for scholars both of Jewish history in the German-Polish borderland and of commemorative practices in an area where there was an almost complete population exchange after the Holocaust.

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