

# **'The Grave [...] Has Been Planted Over With Potatoes.'<sup>1</sup> Exhumations and the Creation of Holocaust Monuments in Pre-1968 Poland**

„Grób [...] został obsadzony ziemniakami”<sup>1</sup>. Ekshumacje i tworzenie pomników Zagłady w Polsce przed 1968 r.

1 Archives of Voivodeship Office in Kraków (Urząd Wojewódzki w Krakowie; UWK), Wydział Rewaloryzacji Zabytków Krakowa i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, file documentation.

### **Abstract**

Assuming the salience of 1968 for Polish-Jewish history in general, this paper highlights its importance for the history of memory in Poland. Tracing two waves of Holocaust commemorations, in the late 1940s and the early 1960s, it sheds light on the work of Jewish community activists operating in the country before the 'anti-Zionist' campaign (March '68). It characterises these Jewish activists, some of whom represented the international diaspora, and identifies the obstacles such activists faced. Noting the ubiquity of exhumations, the paper concludes by observing that the primary drive for Jewish memory work before 1968 was the need to bury and protect the bodies of Nazism's victims in accordance with Jewish tradition. In the process, a chain of memorials was created, which narrated wartime history as one of specifically Jewish suffering, and set what we today call the Holocaust in stone.

### **Keywords**

Poland, 1968, memory work, Holocaust, exhumations, cemeteries, monuments

### **Abstrakt**

Zakładając wagę wydarzeń z 1968 r. dla historii polsko-żydowskich relacji, w artykule podkreślam ich znaczenie także dla historii pamięci w Polsce. Analizując dwie fale upamiętniania Holocaustu, pod koniec lat 40. i na początku 60. XX w., zwracam uwagę na aktywność żydowskich działaczy przed antysemicką nagonką Marca '68. W artykule charakteryzuję żydowskich aktywistów, także tych z międzynarodowej diaspory, oraz identyfikuję przeszkody, z jakimi się zmagali podczas pracy na rzecz upamiętnienia Zagłady w Polsce. Zwracając uwagę na wszechobecność ekshumacji, kończę artykuł spostrzeżeniem, że głównym motorem żydowskiej pracy nad pamięcią przed 1968 r. była potrzeba pochowania i ochrony ciał ofiar nazizmu zgodnie z żydowską tradycją. W ten sposób powstała sieć miejsc pamięci, które opowiadały o wojennej historii jako o szczególnie żydowskim cierpieniu i utrwaliły to, co dziś nazywamy Holocaustem.

### **Słowa kluczowe**

Polska, 1968, praca nad pamięcią, Holocaust, ekshumacje, cmentarze, pomniki

On the grounds of the former KL Plaszow, there exists a striking, if small-scale, memorial. A simple stone monument stands on a small platform, at Dołek; the southernmost of camp's three main killing sites. It might seem overshadowed by the much grander monument erected just a couple of meters away, '[i]n the honour of the martyrs murdered by the Hitlerite perpetrators of genocide in 1943-45.' However, this small stone offers a far more detailed vision the KL Plaszow's history. Its plaques (one in Polish and one in Hebrew) read:

Here, in this place, in the years 1943-45, several dozen thousand Jews brought from Poland and Hungary were tortured, murdered and incinerated. We do not know their names. Let us replace them with one name: the Jews. Here, in this place, one of the most severe crimes was committed. Human language knows no words to describe its atrocity, its unspeakable bestiality, ruthlessness, cruelty. Let us replace them with one word: Hitlerism. The Jews who survived the fascist pogrom pay homage to the memory of those murdered, whose final scream of despair is the silence of this Płaszów cemetery.<sup>2</sup>

Originally erected in 1947, this monument has borne the inscription explicitly commemorating Jews-as-Jews from at least 1964.<sup>3</sup> It is also probably the best known of the pre-1968 Jewish memorials, but it is far from the only one.

In two consecutive waves, first in the earliest postwar years and then in the early 1960s, dozens of such memorials were created by Jewish Poles. They all share common features. Just like the Plaszow monument, they openly talk about Jewish suffering, which is typically narrated in both Polish and Hebrew. They are usually adorned with symbols such as a Star of David or a menorah. Unlike in Plaszow, almost all of them mark mass graves outside the former camps. Sometimes the graves were exhumed and the human remains were moved to new locations. Thus, while today these memorials can be seen as an expression of a very particular Jewish-Polish memory of the Holocaust, the original impulses behind their creation included the need to bury and protect the corpses of Nazism's victims appropriately, in accordance with Jewish tradition (Fig. 1).

This paper focuses on Jewish memory work in south-eastern Poland, roughly the Małopolskie and Podkarpackie voivodships, or what in the 1960s amounted to the Krakowskie and Rzeszowskie voivodeships. The two commemorative waves that swept across the region were strong enough to alter the Polish memoryscape and prevent the Holocaust from

2 Translation by Michał Szymonik, all other translations mine.

3 K. Kocik, *KL Płaszów – pomiędzy historią a polityką pamięci*, "Krzysztofory. Zeszyty Naukowe Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa" 2020, t. 38, s. 233 and Archive of Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), inv. G55-64/4/50/16/PL.226, Memorandum from Maciej Jakubowicz to Jewish Relief Committee, December 16, 1964.

Fig. 1  
Two memorials at the former  
KL Płaszów,  
picture by H. Hermanowicz,  
© Kraków Museum



being forgotten, but the monuments were not numerous.<sup>4</sup> Rivka Parciack, who researched a sample of seventy localities across the whole country, found eighteen monuments erected in the years 1945–50.<sup>5</sup> This number is too low. In my ongoing research on the 1940s, I have found sixteen sites in Krakowskie and Rzeszowskie only while my complete survey of the 1960s identifies fifteen further sites there.

By focusing on pre-1968 monuments, this paper offers an alternative, parallel history of the memorial culture in Poland. Where Audrey Kichelewski rightly talks about the 'de-judging' of the genocide by communist authorities, I want to spotlight Jewish activists who, before 1968, enshrined the memory of the Holocaust and marked the suffering of Jews-as-Jews.<sup>6</sup> Where Roma Sendyka sees 'abandoned, unmarked sites of violence' and 'spaces [...] avoided, unnamed, unmarked, un-built, unsown', I want to underscore efforts made to (re)bury the victims and to mark, protect and preserve their memory.<sup>7</sup>

4 On the reception of the monuments see J. Gryta, *How to Create a Bystander? The 1965 Polish Scouts' Reconnaissance and Vernacular Memory of the Holocaust*, "Holocaust Studies", forthcoming.

5 R. Parciack, *Tutaj i tam, obecnie i kiedyś: cmentarze żydowskie oraz pomniki w Polsce i w Izraelu jako odzwierciedlenie Zagłady*, Warszawa 2012, p. 150.

6 A. Kichelewski, *Ocalali. Żydzi w Polsce po Zagładzie*, transl. K. Marczewska and N. Krasicka, Warszawa 2021, p. 159.

7 R. Sendyka, *Poza Obozem. Nie-Miejsca Pamięci – Próba Rozpoznania*, Warszawa 2021, p. 45, 47.

## The 1940s

The first wave of the memory work with which this paper is concerned took place in the earliest postwar years, roughly 1945–50. During that time, survivors coming back to their towns and villages tried to bury the bodies of *their* dead: family members, friends and neighbours. This was not an easy task, not only due to the emotional trauma it entailed but also because of the chaotic nature of the killings. *Aktion Reinhardt*, the series of 'systematic' killings that swept through the region in the summer of 1942, was in fact a chaotic operation.

The town of Gorlice is a good example of the challenges faced by early memory activists. A ghetto for Jewish Poles from the nearby towns and villages existed there. Some of its denizens were murdered in the years and months before *Aktion Reinhardt*, while others were killed during the *Aktion* in August 1942 in the nearby village of Stróżówki. Jews not killed in Stróżówki but selected for transport to Bełżec were kept in a shoe factory for three days, and some of these people were murdered in or around the site before the transport set off. Moreover, Jews from a ghetto in Bobowa, themselves from several smaller villages, were also murdered in Stróżówki on the same site as the Gorlice Jews.<sup>8</sup>

Jakub Peller (or Peler, as some of the primary sources would have it), a survivor and a member of the Gorlice Jewish Committee, took it upon himself to find a way to protect the bodies of the victims of all these crimes. He decided to exhume these bodies, gathering them into three, newly created mass graves: one in Stróżówki and two in Gorlice cemetery. While exhumation is taboo in Judaism, it is not explicitly forbidden.<sup>9</sup> In Poland, exhumation was commonly practised in the 1940s, 1950s and even 1960s. At times, this was due to situations like that in Gorlice, where murders took place in different, scattered locations. Peller had no choice but to exhume victims of Nazism and move them to the mass graves at the cemetery.<sup>10</sup> At times, exhumation was required to resolve land ownership issues. In Stróżówki, for example, the farmer who owned the land demanded that the mass grave be moved away from his house, closer to the pre-existing World War One cemetery.<sup>11</sup>

The three graves that Peller created were nearly identical in design, consisting of a concrete frame delineating the mass grave, a stone

8 M. Kalisz and E. Rączy, *Dzieje społeczności żydowskiej powiatu gorlickiego podczas okupacji niemieckiej 1939–1945*, Rzeszów 2020, p. 45–51..

9 See R. Parciack, *Tutaj i tam...*, p. 49; S. Garibova, *To Protect and Preserve: Echoes of Traditional Jewish Burial Culture in the Exhumation of Holocaust Mass Graves in Postwar Belarus and Ukraine*, "AJS Review" 2020, vol. 44, iss. 1, p. 76.

10 Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej; IPN), inv. GK/XIII/3, *Alerty ZHP*, 1965, p. 58.

11 Interpretation established during a workshop 'Holocaust Mass Graves 2024', part of a project run by Professor Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska (German Historical Institute, University of Łódź); cf. Archives of Jewish Historical Institute (Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego; ŻIH), inv. 303/XVI/150–3, Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce. Wydział Prawny, 1945–1950, p. 33.

adorned with a Star of David, and similar inscriptions. The plaque in Stróżówki reads: 'In this mass grave lie the remains of around 700 Jews from Gorlice and Bobowa the victims of the Hitlerite slaughter bestially murdered on 14 August 1942.' In Gorlice, aside from a different number of victims, the only other change is that Peller also noted that exhumation had taken place there.

Peller is a good example of a local memory activist working in the immediate postwar period, before and during the first big wave of migration made by Jewish Poles. Like numerous other survivors, he focused on the area where he, his family, his friends, and neighbours lived. He was driven by the need to honour the bodies of those murdered by the Nazis by burying them in an appropriate way and protecting their resting places for the future. In the process, he marked the landscape of south-eastern Poland with memorials that identified the genocide victims as Jews. As we will see, such an interpretation was at odds with the vision propagated by the Communist state.

### The 1960s

During the darkest and most repressive period of Communist rule in Poland (that is, under the tenure of Bolesław Bierut), Jewish memory work in the region was almost completely frozen. Only some, very rare exhumations of mass graves took place in the early 1950s.<sup>12</sup> The situation changed diametrically during the post-Bierut Thaw.

First, the state embarked on its own programme to commemorate places of fighting and suffering. The Council for the Protection of Monuments of Fight and Martyrdom (Rada Ochrony Pomników Walk i Męczeństwa; ROPWiM), the State memorial agency, was tasked with delivering this memory work. Soon, it adorned all the former death – and most of the concentration – camps in Poland with monuments that were not dissimilar to the 'Martyrs' Plaszow memorial described above. These were grand and evocative concrete structures, commemorating... no-one in particular. In Plaszow, the word 'martyrs' was used not because of the complex history of the camp but because this category does not denote any concrete group. It can include ethnic Poles, but it could also incorporate (for example) Red Army soldiers. If we choose to see it that way, it could encompass Jewish Poles. This universality and malleability, and ultimately also the obscuring of the specificity of Jewish suffering, were key features of the State memorial policy of the period.

Second, the Thaw opened the possibility for Jewish Poles to emigrate. Many did, thus depleting the existing Jewish communities and relegating memory work to a smaller number of activists who had to operate within much larger territories. Unlike Peller, who worked to bury his neighbours, Kraków-based activists saw themselves as responsible for what was, in the 1960s, Krakowskie and Rzeszowskie voivodships.

12 Voivodeship Office in Kraków (Urząd Wojewódzki w Krakowie; UWK), inv. SO. II.5010/132, TSKŻ, Krakow branch (Odział w Krakowie), 1951–1967, p. 41.

Third, in late 1957 the Communist authorities allowed the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to restart its operation in Poland. Nominally, its mission was to provide welfare to Jewish Poles.<sup>13</sup> However, the organisation also enabled systematic efforts to further protect and commemorate the bodies of Jewish victims of Nazism. First, JDC paid for some of the new memorials; second, and probably even more importantly, it forced quarrelling Jewish groups to work together, helping them devise a coherent approach to memory work.<sup>14</sup> JDC demanded that its money be spent by Central and regional Jewish Relief Committees (Komisja Pomocy Społecznej; KPS), all operating on a parity model with an equal number of representatives of Jews from religious Congregations, and the communist and areligious Jews from the Social-Cultural Association of Polish Jews (Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne Żydów; TSKŻ). In Kraków, this meant that Maciej Jakubowicz, the head of the local Congregation and the representatives of the Kraków TSKŻ, Masymilan Fiszgrund and Stefan Neuger, worked with one another harmoniously enough to successfully implement their own program of memory work.

Part of this programme used JDC funds to renovate the monuments created in the 1940s and the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> This was the case in Plaszow, where new plaques, with inscriptions focusing on Jewish suffering, were installed. In Biecz (Fig. 2), a lapidarium commemorating the genocide was renovated and an area of the Nazi-devasted cemetery was planted with even rows of trees. The Stróżówka monument was transformed as well. Peller originally erected a low, kerb-like wall that delineated the grave. The KPS decided to encase the tomb in concrete to better protect the bodies.

A number of new commemorations followed. In Myślenice, a memorial was created from the broken matzevot, reading, '[i]n homage to the victims of Hitlerism and the dead from Myślenice, Sułków, Harbutów, Dobczyce and other localities in the county whose graves were profaned by Hitler's vandals'. In Chodówki, on the execution site, a boulder with a plaque was erected, which read, '[t]o the memory of 630 Jews killed in 1942 by the Hitlerites'<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 3).

In some cases, exhumation was needed. As Jakubowicz informed the regional authorities in 1964, in Słomniki, '[t]he grave is located on private property and this year it has been planted over with potatoes'.<sup>17</sup>

13 On JDC's return to Poland see A. Sommer Schneider, *Behind the Iron Curtain: the Communist Government in Poland and Its Attitude towards the Joint's Activities, 1944–1989*, [in:] *The JDC at 100: A Century of Humanitarianism*, ed. by A. Patt et al., Detroit 2019, pp. 315–360.

14 More on JDC work see: J. Gryta, *Forgotten? Holocaust Monuments and Jewish Activism in 1960s Poland*, "Jewish Culture and History" 2025, vol. 25, iss. 1, pp. 62–81.

15 JDC, inv. G55-64/4/50/16/PL.226, Memorandum from Maciej Jakubowicz...

16 UWK, inv. SO.II.5010/132, p. 153.

17 UWK, Wydział Rewaloryzacji Zabytków Krakowa i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, file documentation.



Fig. 2  
The memorial in Biecz,  
photo by Janek Gryta



Fig. 3  
The memorial in Myślenice,  
photo by Anne White





To exhume the bodies, he needed the support of the authorities. It took two years for the Polish bureaucracy to act. Eventually, in 1964, the mass grave was exhumed, bodies were moved to the Stomniki Jewish Cemetery, and a boulder with a plaque was erected, reading, '[t]o the memory of the Jews murdered by the Hitlerites in August 1942'. Interestingly, the monument was paid for by the Kraków Voivodship Citizen Committee for the Protection of Monument of Fight and Martyrdom, the regional affiliate to the ROPWiM, which, at the exact same time, was working hard to obscure information about Jewish suffering in camps across the country.<sup>18</sup>

Exhumations were in fact a staple of the memory work of the KPS. The bodies of Nazism's victims from Skawina, Wesola, Tymbark and Czastaw were brought to the Miodowa Street Cemetery in Kraków, where a memorial was created in their names. Similarly, the mass grave from Maków Podhalański was moved to Wadowice cemetery.<sup>19</sup> As those examples demonstrate, the memory work undertaken in the 1960s was an extension of the efforts that started in the 1940s, but the KPS had to adapt to the new reality. Just as in the 1940s, the starting point for Jakubowicz's and Fiszgrund's work was the need to bury and protect the bodies appropriately. More often than in the 1940s, concrete sarcophagi were created to protect the bodies. Easier to maintain than earth graves, concrete graves also protect bodies against the elements and grave robbers. The exhumations, sometimes from far-flung places, were based on a similar imperative. For religious Jews, such as Jakubowicz, it was a priority to reunite the bodies of the dead with the bodies of their ancestors. However, Jewish Poles in the 1960s were only capable of maintaining and protecting a limited number of cemeteries. The exhumed were thus taken to the active cemeteries instead of their hometowns, where it was thought, in the words of a JDC representative, 'hooligans would destroy such unattended [...] tombstones'.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

In 1969, Maciej Jakubowicz returned to the Chodówki case. As mentioned above, in 1964 the KPS erected a monument there in collaboration with the Voivodship Citizen Committee for the Protection of Monument of Fight and Martyrdom. However, Jakubowicz realised that the monument marked the site of the killings, but that the mass grave was elsewhere. Thus, he petitioned the Voivodship Committee to mark the mass grave as well. This time, after the 'anti-Zionist' campaign of the Polish authorities, his plea fell on deaf ears.<sup>21</sup>

18 Ibidem.

19 JDC, inv. G55-64/4/50/16/PL.226, Poland: Monuments and Cemeteries, *Notatka*, December 15, 1964.

20 Ibidem, Akiva Kohane to Mark Uveeler, September 11, 1964.

21 UWK, inv. L. Dz. 82/69.

The Chodówki case not only confirms the importance of the 1968. It also reminds us that before 1968 the situation was diametrically different. The antisemitic elements in the Party and State apparatus gradually gained power and influence through the 1960s, but were not yet completely dominant. The Voivodship Committee working hand-in-hand with the KPS and paying for a memorial in Słomniki should not surprise us. In the early 1960s, regional officials, such as the Voivodship Committee members, had enough freedom from Warsaw to enact their own policies. Moreover, even the ROPWiM presented an ambivalent stance towards the Jewish past and some of its leaders, such as its head Janusz Wieczorek, at times exhibited pro-Jewish sympathies.<sup>22</sup>

1968 is not only a pivotal moment in Jewish-Polish history but also a turning point in the history of memory in Poland. Before the Jewish communities were broken up and depleted, Jewish Poles were capable of commemorating their dead. In two waves, one in the late 1940s and another in the early 1960s, they marked the south-eastern countryside with a chain of monuments. Those memorials marked mass graves and were designed to protect the bodies of Nazism's victims in accordance with Jewish tradition. What is more, they also narrated the history of the war as the story of the persecution and suffering of Jews-as-Jews: suffering that today we remember as the Holocaust. ■

22 JDC, inv. NY AR195564/4/47/8/674, Poland: Reports, A. Kohane, Report on Visit to Poland – May 25–29, 1962.

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