Holocaust Studies
A Journal of Culture and History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rhos20

A history of overwriting: Jewish cemeteries in postwar Poland, Ukraine and Belarus

Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina & Magdalena Waligórska

To cite this article: Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina & Magdalena Waligórska (04 Nov 2024): A history of overwriting: Jewish cemeteries in postwar Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, Holocaust Studies, DOI: 10.1080/17504902.2024.2392323

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2024.2392323

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 04 Nov 2024.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rhos20

HOLOCAUST STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2024.2392323

OPEN ACCESS

A history of overwriting: Jewish cemeteries in postwar Poland, Ukraine and Belarus

Marta Duch-Dyngosz, Alexander Friedman, Ina Sorkina and Magdalena Waligórska

Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT
Focused on the post-1944 history of Jewish cemeteries in three towns: Iŭje (Belarus), Berezne (Ukraine) and Biłgoraj (Poland) this paper examines different local trajectories of repurposing and overwriting Jewish cemeteries. This comparative study goes beyond the top-down policy analysis to include the ways the local population participated in and reacted to these acts of overwriting. We complement the historical consideration with an ethnographic approach that explores how 'overwritten' Jewish cemeteries have been used by the local inhabitants, how they featured on their mental maps, what myths and narratives they triggered, and what spatial practices their new status afforded.

KEYWORDS
Jewish cemeteries; Jewish material heritage; antisemitism; Poland; USSR

Introduction and methodology

The post-Holocaust predicament of Jewish cemeteries in East-Central Europe and the politics of their systematic destruction and repurposing has attracted a good deal of research already. Since the early 1980s, historians, local activists and photographers have documented and mapped Jewish cemeteries, and synagogues in Poland as the last vestiges of Jewish material heritage.[1] More recently, scholars shifted their attention to the history of their destruction, which began with the German occupation and continued, at the hands of the local communities, for many decades after the war's end.[2] There is also a substantial body of literature on the postwar legal situation of Jewish property, including cemeteries, and on the early attempts of Jewish survivors to save the remaining tissue of the Jewish necropolises after the war.[3] We know much less, however, about the local participation in, and the responses to, the gradual destruction of Jewish cemeteries in the region.

Historical studies of Jewish cemeteries on the territory of the USSR, especially those addressing the antisemitic politics of the Soviet Union and the context of the Cold War, were practically impossible in the Soviet period. Serious studies on this topic began to appear in Ukraine, Belarus and other post-Soviet countries only after 1991, but they mostly concerned major urban centers, and Jewish cemeteries located in the

CONTACT Marta Duch-Dyngosz marta.duch-dyngosz@hu-berlin.de Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, 10117 Berlin, Germany

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

former shtetls still require systematic study.[4] Few publications on the history of Soviet Jews addressed the post-war destruction of Jewish cemeteries,[5] and the Soviet state policy regarding Jewish cemeteries has, so far, been studied only fragmentarily.[6]

This article examines the fate of Jewish cemeteries in small towns and from a comparative perspective. Focused on three case studies: Biłgoraj (Poland), Berezne (Ukraine) and Iŭje (Belarus), which exemplify different local measures of repurposing the Jewish necropolises, we wish to shed light on the processes that facilitated a full (or partial) physical erasure of Jewish cemeteries in the former shtetls of Poland, Soviet Belarus and Ukraine. Looking at state-level legislation, decisions of local authorities, and grassroots initiatives that resulted in reusing, recycling, or preserving Jewish sites, this comparative study goes beyond the top-down policy analysis to include the ways the local population participated in and reacted to these acts of overwriting. Shifting the gaze from the state directives and the motions of local authorities to the perspective of the inhabitants, we complement the historical consideration with an ethnographic approach that explores how ‘overwritten’ Jewish cemeteries have been used by the local inhabitants, how they featured on their mental maps, what myths and narratives they triggered, and what spatial practices their new status afforded. This ethnography of overwriting is thus multi-perspective, taking into consideration both the official optics: archival sources and municipal documentation, and a range of other positions – of local culture brokers, town inhabitants, Jewish survivors and their descendants.[7]

The selected case studies (Iŭje, Biłgoraj and Berezne) share a few important common features, in the first place, the high proportion of Jewish population prior to 1939. Jewish inhabitants of Biłgoraj’s made up sixty percent of the total population of over 8,000 as of 1939; Iŭje had a Jewish majority exceeding seventy-five percent of the town’s 5,000 inhabitants; and in Berezne Jews made up ninety-three percent of a population of 6,000.[8] Another similarity is the multidenominational makeup of these towns, which historically included Catholic Poles, Greek Catholic Ukrainians, Orthodox Belarusians, as well as Tatars. The three shtetls also share a rich history of changing geopolitical allegiances. Prior to 1795, Iŭje was located in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, while Biłgoraj and Berezne belonged to the Polish Crown. This geography changed in the partition period, when all three towns became part of the Russian Empire and, after the Treaty of Riga in 1921, they found themselves within the borders of the Polish Second Republic.[9] In 1939, Iŭje and Berezne were annexed by the Soviet Union and incorporated into Soviet Belarus and Ukraine, respectively, while Biłgoraj came under the German occupation. From 1941 on, with the German invasion on Soviet Union, all three towns found themselves under the Nazi rule. The area we focus on, comprising today’s western Belarus, western Ukraine, and eastern Poland, was also the territory where *Aktion Reinhardt* and the so-called ‘Holocaust by bullets’ left the most devastating mark.[10] This means that local non-Jewish populations witnessed first-hand the unprecedented brutality of the Nazi-led genocide, and were sometimes implicated in the process: both through participation in locating Jewish fugitives from the ghettos, and, on a truly mass scale, in the takeover of Jewish property in the aftermath of the killing.[11] Despite these important similarities, we also have to keep note of the differences among the three towns, such as their geographical location,[12] war-time occupation experience, post-1944 political allegiance, postwar cultural-religious identification of their new populations (Catholics and

Tatar Muslims in Iŭje; Catholics and Christian Orthodox in Biłgoraj, and Christian Orthodox in Berezne), and the different degrees to which surviving Jews were still present in the three towns (with Iŭje boasting the largest and the longest-lasting Jewish community among the three).

This article looks at how the three towns, located in various geographical regions but with a similar political history and demographic profiles prior to the Holocaust, have repurposed Jewish cemeteries in the differing political conditions of the post-1944 new European order. Focusing on varying legal situations in post-1944 Poland and USSR, differing topographies of the Holocaust (presence of mass graves within or outside of cemeteries, scattered sites of atrocity on the territory of Holocaust by bullets), as well as different degrees of pressure from Jewish organizations (*landsmanshaftn*, rabbis, descendants of Holocaust survivors), we want to answer the question of what factors have impacted the fate of Jewish cemeteries in this part of Europe, but also how the policies of neglect, destruction and 'overwriting,' pursued both by the Soviet and the Polish state in relation to Jewish necropolises, have reverberated in the local communities.

War-time destruction of Jewish cemeteries

Biłgoraj had three Jewish cemeteries prior to the Second World War, two of which were still in operation as of 1939.[13] The 'old cemetery,' located near the city center, was destroyed in 1941 by Germans, who felled the oak trees framing the site, ordered gravestones to be used as building material throughout the town, and constructed wooden stables there.[14] The *matsevot* pillaged from the cemetery were incorporated into the pavements of the central street of the town (Kościuszki Street), the inner yard of the German gendarmerie post, and in a churchyard in Puszcza Solska.[15] The new structures erected in the old Jewish cemetery served as a round-up point for Biłgorajan Jews deported to Bełżec during the *Aktion* on November 2nd and 3rd 1942.[16] The so-called 'new cemetery' on the edge of the town, in turn, served as a site of mass graves for the bodies of hundreds of casualties shot in the town during the existence of the ghetto. For as long as the town's *Chevra Kadisha* existed, it would collect bodies of Jewish victims killed in the streets and in their homes to bury them at this cemetery.[17] In time, it also became the site of mass shootings.[18] Jews captured in hiding would be brought to the cemetery and executed there.[19] In 1948, a group of Jewish survivors came to town to exhume the corpses of 90 Jewish victims from the area, who were then reburied at the 'new cemetery.' The photographs of that funeral, published in Biłgoraj's *yizkor bukh*, show hundreds of *matsevot* still visible on the ground.[20]

The Jewish cemetery in Iŭje was, likewise, the site of executions carried out by the Nazi occupiers and the local auxiliary police.[21] The absolute majority of Iŭje's Jewish population (over 2,500 people) were killed in the mass shooting of 12th May 1942, which took place in the forest near the village of Stanevičy, some 2 km from Iŭje. Soon after the war, Jewish survivors set up a memorial in that location, and, each year, the anniversary of the mass execution gathers the local inhabitants for a commemoration event.

Berezne had two Jewish cemeteries prior to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, an 'old' and a 'new cemetery' with predominantly wooden *matzevot*. The Jewish population of Berezne, circa 3,000 people, were massacred in August 1942 in the vicinity the 'new cemetery.'[22] Berezne's cemeteries, like those in Iŭje and Biłgoraj, survived the war and underwent a complete demolition only in the 1960s.

Postwar legal situation of Jewish cemeteries

The end of the war did not bring an end to the devastation of Jewish cemeteries in Poland, Western Belarus and Western Ukraine.[23] Local inhabitants continued using gravestones as building material; desecrated cemeteries searching for valuables and gold; and repurposed the sites into parks, playgrounds, market places, or arable fields.[24] In the immediate postwar years, the Communist authorities in Poland issued a number of laws regulating the use of private and communal property, which facilitated further destruction and misuse of Jewish cemeteries. The decree of 8th March 1946 regarding 'abandoned property' and 'formerly German' property nationalized Jewish cemeteries. This was possible because the communist state did not recognize the postwar Jewish Religious Congregations as legal successors of the prewar Jewish communities who had owned the sites.[25] Postwar Jewish organizations were, consequently, denied the right to claim prewar Jewish communal property. At the same time, representatives of the Jewish community made an effort to secure legal protection of Jewish burial sites.[26] The new government was initially willing to respect the inviolability and the religious character of Jewish cemeteries.[27] A circular regarding Jewish burial sites, drafted in 1947, made recommendations as to the proper use of such sites, but was never officially released, nor followed by actual legislation.[28] Jewish cemeteries, classified as 'abandoned' or 'formerly-German property,' became the property of the State Treasury. The state often leased them (*przekazać w zarząd*) to various public entities, including local state-owned enterprises.[29] In the 1950s and 1960s, many Jewish cemeteries became allotted as areas intended for local investments and development of infrastructure. This happened despite the fact that the law obliged the authorities to wait a minimum of fifty,[30] and later forty years after the last burial to liquidate a given cemetery.[31] Instead, local authorities often did not pursue any legal procedures to repurpose Jewish cemeteries, but created *fait accompli*. In many cases, human remains were not exhumed and, consequently, profaned. The process of destruction and profanation of Jewish cemeteries that began already in the first post-war decade took a more institutionalized and systemic form in the late 1950s and 1960s.[32]

At the same time, Polish law officially sanctioned vandalism of burial sites.[33] In 1946, a decree 'On Criminal Offences Particularly Detrimental in the Period of the Reconstruction of the State' listed desecration of the graves of 'victims of Nazi crimes' as one such state-destabilizing crime that needed urgent curtailment.[34] In 1959, Polish Supreme Court ruled that extraction of human ashes from the areas of former death camps likewise constitutes a criminal offence, sanctioned with up to 5 years of prison.[35] The project of the Penal Code from 1956 removed the provision referring to graves of 'victims of fascism' and but the later legislation still penalized grave desecration; the current law stipulates the penalty of up to 2 years for grave desecration, and up to 8 years for grave robbery.[36]

In the Soviet case, the legislation enabling the destruction of Jewish cemeteries had a much longer genealogy. With the imposition of Marxist-Leninist ideology and militant atheism, official attitudes towards Jewish cemeteries started to change immediately after the Bolshevik revolution, as religiously sanctioned piety towards burial grounds came to be viewed as an anachronism of the pre-Soviet past.[37] Already in the 1920s and 1930s Soviet authorities began to shut down religious cemeteries and repurpose them into parks and sport fields for children in an attempt to replace 'the past' with 'the future.' Although the destruction of cemeteries had an ideological justification, it was usually framed in utilitarian terms, as actions 'bringing improvements to the fast-growing cities.'[38] In practice, however, such initiatives were often implemented without any plan, were inconsistent and ill-conceived.[39]

Hostile attitude of the Soviet authorities towards Jewish cemeteries had to do not only with the general antireligious line of the state but also reflected the intention to forcibly assimilate the Jewish population. Even before the Nazi German invasion on the USSR, Jewish cemeteries had been closed down in several Soviet cities and, in some cases, like in Moscow and Kyiv, subsequently destroyed.[40] The Jewish deceased would be usually buried at the municipal cemeteries, where, in some cases, there would be separate plots assigned for Jews.[41]

Thus, even prior to World War II, Soviet authorities did not view Jewish cemeteries as cultural heritage and liquidated them for ostensibly pragmatic reasons. After the war, the systematic destruction of Jewish cemeteries only increased in intensity and the process expanded into the former Polish territories, incorporated into the USSR after 1939. In Lviv, for example, the old Jewish cemetery, dating back to the fourteenth century, was completely destroyed in 1947, and a market place, *Krakivs'kiy rynok*, was opened on the site.[42] In Rivne, in turn, the authorities repurposed the Jewish cemetery into a public park in the 1950s.[43]

Both in the Soviet era, and in contemporary Belarusian legislation there is no notion of a 'historical burial site.' Instead, cemeteries are classified into 'public' ones, where the deceased are buried irrespective of their religion, 'confessional' ones and 'military cemeteries.' In Belarus, thanks to a new legislation, historical cemeteries can receive legal protection as heritage sites, if their territory comprises objects of cultural and historical importance, or of outstanding spiritual, artistic, or documentary value.[44] The same applies to the graves of distinguished people, as well as mass graves. Thanks to these provisions, the Jewish cemeteries in Mahiloŭ and in the town of Lenin in the Homel region became recently listed as heritage sites.[45]

In the case of closed cemeteries, both Soviet and post-1991 legislation foresaw a minimum period of twenty years, which would have to pass before a defunct cemetery could be repurposed into a public park. Since 2015, the Belarusian law expressly forbids any construction on the sites of former cemeteries.[46] And a 2015 resolution of the Belarusian Ministry of Housing and Communal Services and Ministry of Healthcare states that the sites of closed cemeteries 'should remain inviolable' and 'existing gravestones retained.'[47] A similar provision has existed in Ukrainian law since 2003. Most recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, an amendment was passed that allows new burials at such closed cemeteries.[48]

Despite a formal ban on construction, local authorities could bypass it by exhuming the human remains. This made the site cease to be legally considered a cemetery. Local authorities could expedite this procedure by publishing an open call to the descendants to rebury the remains of their deceased.[49] Given that, in the case of Jewish cemeteries, only few, if any, descendants of the deceased could be reached in this way, an official call, published in a local newspaper, sometimes served as a sole legal justification for the destruction. The construction of the Red Banner stadium, built atop of the new Jewish cemetery of Hrodna in 1964, was preceded by this very procedure. The *matzevot* from the cemetery were, among others, reused for the foundations of the Lenin monument on the city's main square. In 2003, during the renovation of the stadium, human bones resurfaced again, raising the question of whether earlier exhumations had been carried out properly. The newly found human remains were partly reburied at the 'old' Jewish cemetery and partly removed, together with the bulldozed soil, and used in other road works across the city.[50]

Systematic destruction continued despite the existing legislation prohibiting desecration of graves. The Penal Code of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine from 1927 and of Belarus from 1928, which was in force until 1960, did not sanction desecration of graves.[51] In 1960, both republics introduced articles, which stipulated a restriction of liberty for up to three years or correctional labor for up to one year for desecration of graves, or the theft of objects located inside a grave.[52] The current penal codes of both Belarus and Ukraine have retained these provisions, increasing the penalty up to five years for the desecration of graves of 'defenders of the Fatherland'[53] (Belarus) and 'resistance fighters against National Socialism' (Ukraine).[54]

What prevented the execution of the law was not only the lack of interest on the part of local law enforcement in investigating the acts of vandalism that were publically known.[55] In small towns, notably in former shtetls, Jewish cemeteries, especially those where only a handful of tombstones survived, often do not even feature in any cadastral documents or land registries. Local authorities have little interest in categorizing them as cemeteries, because their maintenance would require organizational effort and financial expenses.[56] They may be listed, instead, as forests or land for public use and, as such, used for development.[57]

Top-down decisions of the authorities

In postwar Biłgoraj, Jewish cemeteries were classified as 'abandoned property.'[58] Consequently, in line with the existing legislation, as of 1st January 1956, their ownership was formally assigned to the State Treasury. Up to that point, all Jewish cemeteries had been in the possession of the Central Liquidation Office, which could assign them under the management of public entities.[59] After the war, the area of Biłgoraj's new cemetery was divided into a few plots of land. And as early as 1950, the state authorities decided to build a factory of concrete construction elements on the site.[60] Given that the factory was assigned a state-level importance, the decision to build it on the ground of the cemetery had to be taken by the Ministry of Construction.[61] Most probably, prior to construction, the ground had been leveled, but local accounts suggest that human remains had not been exhumed.[62] It appears that an official act liquidating the cemetery has never been issued. What is more, the construction began just two years after the last burial took place at the cemetery, which made the construction, de facto, illegal (Figure 1).[63]

Małgorzata Bednarek, who studied the legal situation of Jewish cemeteries in postwar Poland, interprets such actions on the part of state authorities as intentional. They aimed to deprive Jewish cemeteries of any physical characteristics of burial sites without

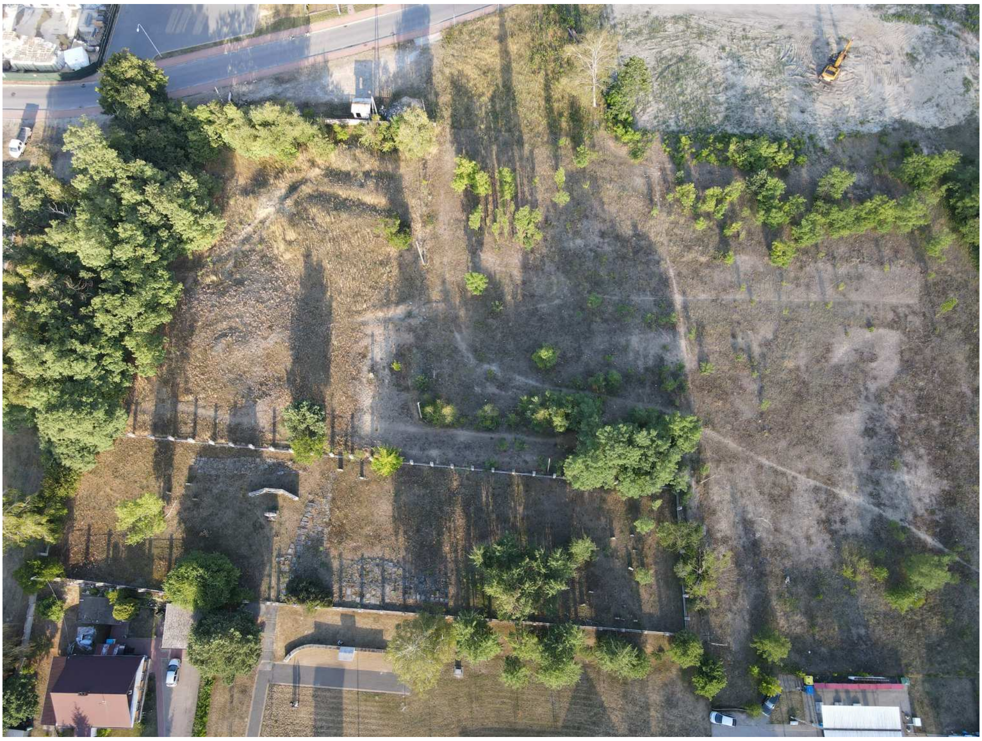

Figure 1. Bird-eye view of the historic area of the new Jewish cemetery of Biłgoraj and the smaller, fenced off area preserved to this day, July 2022. Photo: Tomasz Cebulski.

formally liquidating them.[64] Yet, despite creating *fait accompli* on the ground, bypassing the law resulted in ‘unintended consequences.’[65] In the light of Jewish law, the cemetery still existed, if human remains were still in the ground. The fact that bones would repeatedly resurface in such repurposed areas also helped to preserve the status of these places in the local consciousness. This awareness is reflected even in the official documents. Photographic survey of the Biłgoraj Jewish cemetery and a site plan created by the Regional Monument Conservation Office between 1984 and 1986 maps fragments of gravestones adjacent to the factory building and describes the site as an industrial object located ‘on the grounds of a cemetery.’[66]

In 1986, the municipality fenced a small part of the still undeveloped cemetery grounds, gathering the surviving *matzevot* and arranging a modest memorial from fragmented gravestones. This initiative was put in motion thanks to the pressure on the part of Jewish actors, both in Poland and abroad, in particular the community of Biłgoraj’s Jewish survivors in the USA and Israel. Jewish attempts to fence and preserve the cemetery date back to the immediate post-war period, but these early preservation efforts were thwarted by the mass Jewish outmigration after 1945.[67] After the 1968 antisemitic campaign and the subsequent wave of Jewish emigration from Poland, the poor condition of Jewish sites became of concern to the international Jewish organizations.[68] In was only in the 1980s, however, when the communist authorities began to open up to the West and gradually shift their approach, that such commemoration projects became easier.[69]

In 1980, the Office for Religious Affairs in Warsaw urged Biłgoraj's local authorities to bury human bones scattered across the new cemetery and to prohibit herding cattle or excavating sand from the ground.[70] It also recommended to fence the site as soon as possible.[71] At the same time, the Jewish Religious Union in Poland petitioned the authorities to shut down the concrete factory operating on the site.[72] After the official delegations of both institutions visited Biłgoraj in 1980, a compromise was reached to protect a section of the cemetery where some of the war-time mass graves were located.[73] Ironically, it was the concrete factory that received the mandate to build the fence around the burial site. For the next six years, however, the factory stalled the process.[74] Finally, in October 1986, local authorities unveiled the monument, which read that the Jewish cemetery was 'destroyed by Hitlerites during the Second World War, [but] restored by Bilgoraj's inhabitants.'

After 1989, the Biłgoraj concrete factory was privatized and the enterprise received the perpetual use rights of both the land and the structures erected thereupon.[75] Shortly afterwards, however, the enterprise went bankrupt and the plots of land it owned, including the former Jewish cemetery, were sold. In the land development plan of the municipal authorities, drafted in the late 1990s, the area was designated for services and industry. As the town expanded territorially, the plot became even more attractive. When the new owner, a transport company, began to demolish the factory in the 2000s, and human bones resurfaced during the earthworks again, Jewish organizations demanded an immediate reaction from the local authorities.[76] The owner withdrew from the investment and sold the plot. The Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland arranged a burial of the excavated human bones in the memorial part of the cemetery, but human remains continued to resurface in the following years, too.[77]

The controversy did not discourage the next proprietors from planning a construction of a shopping center and a parking lot on the grounds of the former cemetery.[78] In 2016, the Regional Monument Conservation Officer, however, blocked the investment and listed the whole area as a Jewish cemetery in the regional register of historic monuments.[79] The developer sued, arguing that the extent of previous development projects and earthworks exclude the possibility of human remains being still present on the site.[80] The court files of this ongoing legal strife suggest that the municipal authorities shared that view, referencing the property a 'former Jewish cemetery.'[81] Experts of the Rabbinical Commission, however, insist that, because of the multilayered character of the cemetery, the exhumation cannot have been complete.[82]

The other two Jewish cemeteries of Biłgoraj met a similar fate. Devastated by the Nazi occupying forces, the old cemetery soon became a construction site of a school. Local inhabitants still recall how construction work in the 1960s exposed human bones on the site.[83] In the 1980s, a new wing was added, together with a gym, and a new sports field.[84] Some local respondents suggested that human remains had not been exhumed and are still located on the school grounds.[85] The oldest Jewish cemetery, located near Biłgoraj's synagogue, was used for postwar housing projects, which stretched across the whole historic 'synagogal complex,' comprising the *mikvah*, the *heder* and other community buildings. The last material remnants of the *mikvah* were cleared in 1978 and garages were built on the site.[86]

***

The Iŭje Jewish cemetery survived the war, and, just like the new cemetery in Biłgoraj, was still in active use in the immediate postwar years. Remaining relatively intact into the early 1960s, it was demolished in the late 1960s to make way for apartment blocks and a bank, while local inhabitants began using the *matzevot* to pave their backyards. Given that several Jewish families still inhabited postwar Iŭje, there were local attempts to counteract destruction. Several of our informants reported about a funeral of a Jewish woman from Lida, at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, whose body was transferred to Iŭje to be buried at the Jewish cemetery.[87] 'This was to make it clear to the authorities not to touch the cemetery,' recounts our informant, 'it was a statement that the cemetery was still being used for burials.'[88] The fresh burial, however, did not deter the municipal authorities to level the ground and start a construction site, just a few years later.

In the 1970s, the stone wall surrounding the cemetery was dismantled, with just a small fragment surviving to this day.[89] It was also in the 1970s that a bank headquarters and an apartment block were erected on the site. A center of domestic services, a so-called *bytkombinat,* followed in the 1980s. In 2013, the last remaining undeveloped stretch of green was chosen as the location of an open-air memorial installation. Consisting of fourteen massive boulders placed in a circle, 'The Wheel of History' was intended to commemorate momentous events in the town's history, for example, the first mention of Iŭje in historical documents (1444) and the granting of town privileges (1742). In this monumental town chronicle, the only indirect mention of Jews is a laconic plaque stating that a synagogue was erected in Iŭje in the eighteenth century (Figure 2).[90]

The newest project atop of the Jewish cemetery in Iŭje might be the most poignant one, because of its ostensibly memorial nature. Placed on the site of the Jewish cemetery, 'The Wheel of History' not only reduces the centuries-long history of Jewish settlement to a vague mention that fails to reflect the immense contribution of Jews to the development of the town, but it also performs an act of overwriting. By remaining silent about the physical location it occupies, and the fact that the site was also the place of mass killing during World War II, it perpetuates and sanctions urban erasure.

From the point of view of local municipal authorities, however, the project is a success.[91] State run pro-government weekly *Belarus Segodnya* reporting on the unveiling ceremony of 'The Wheel of History' noted that the memorial encapsulated the 'special aura' of the town, expressing hope that the monument 'would become an important tourist destination on the maps of the Neman region.'[92] Jewish cemetery was not mentioned. Soon, Iŭje's Wheel of History was indeed included into the officially sanctioned tourist route of the 'Multiconfessional Iŭje region,' which Iŭje's district executive committee noted on the website with pride, again, without mentioning that the memorial is located at the former Jewish cemetery.[93] At the same time, however, Iŭje's State Museum of National Cultures began offering a walking tour dedicated to the history of local Jews, which includes stops, among others, at the former synagogues, the mass grave in Stanevičy, and at 'The Wheel of History.'[94]

Over the last few decades one can thus observe a certain evolution in the attitudes of the authorities to their use of the former Jewish cemetery in Iŭje. They shifted from the more radical tendency to demolish and use the site for development to the recent more

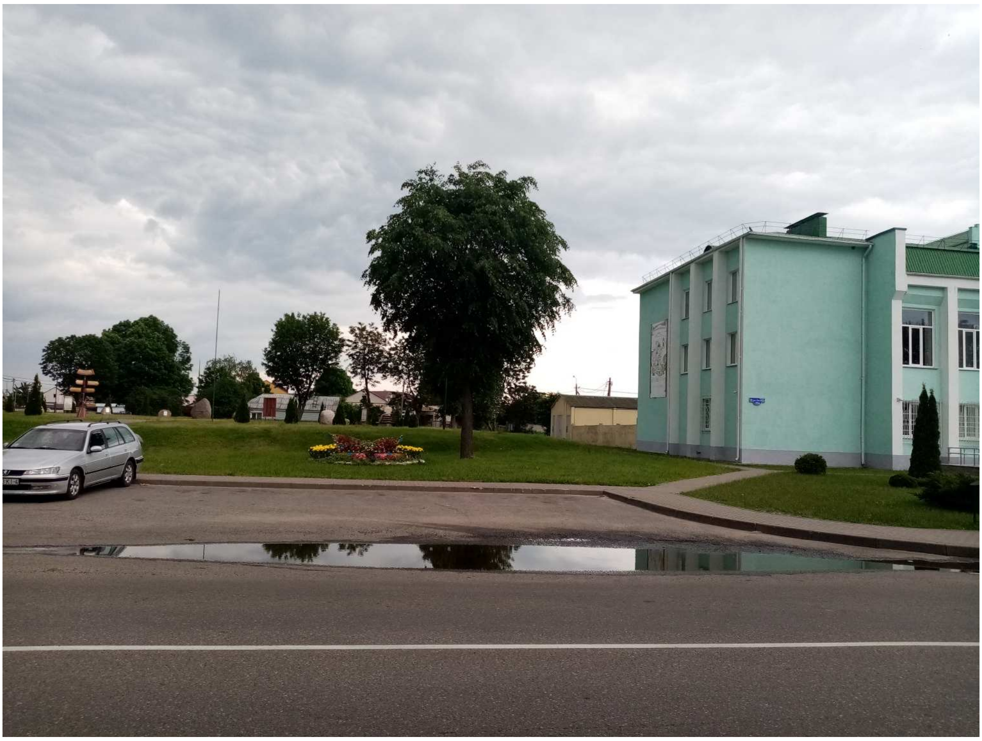

Figure 2. The area of the Jewish cemetery in Iŭje, 2021. Photo: Ina Sorkina.

ambivalent efforts to memorialize and capitalize on the town's multicultural heritage, while denying the history of its postwar effacement.

***

The overwriting of the Jewish cemeteries in Berezne had the most radical nature, because it not only led to a full removal of the *matzevot*, but also durably hid from view the very terrain they were situated on. Right after the liberation of Berezne, in January 1944, the new Jewish cemetery still existed. Raaya Shniper, who survived in a partisan detachment nearby, recalls that, despite some damaged gravestones, the cemetery was still in a good shape. Later, she witnessed how *matzevot* were gradually being removed from the cemetery, and used for construction work.[95] Arie Medeved, who returned from the Soviet interior in the fall of 1945, reports in the *yizkor bukh* published in Tel Aviv in 1954 that 'the cemetery, that had existed [in Berezne] for 100 years, was destroyed by the Ukrainian bandits.'[96]

In the 1960s, on the initiative of the town authorities, the old and the new Jewish cemeteries, which used to be adjacent and separated by a small stream, were both flooded and turned into a pond amidst a stretch of green that got converted into a public park. The decision was preceded by a circular to local authorities from the regional government, which recommended a gradual demolition of the cemeteries of national and religious minorities and their substitution with parks and playgrounds.[97] The recommendation was not adopted indiscriminately in the whole region, as some Jewish

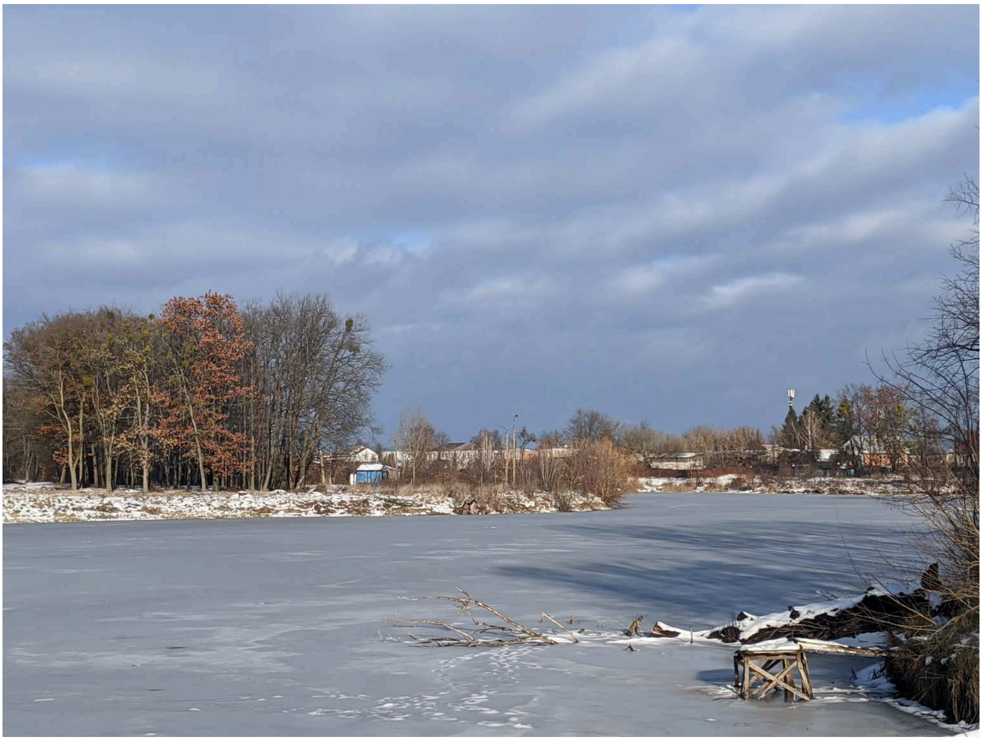

Figure 3. The area of the flooded Jewish cemetery of Berezne, 2023. Photo: Aleksej Zlatogorskij.

cemeteries, for example one located in a forest, circa 25 km from Berezne, remained unaffected (Figure 3).[98]

Local authorities were not only the driving force behind the repurposing of the cemeteries, but also coordinated the recycling of the stone *matzevot* in municipal construction work. Tombstones from the Jewish cemetery of Berezne were used, for example, to strengthen the foundations of an administrative building erected in the 1950s. In the early 2000s, when the cellar of the building was being adapted for a youth club, workers laid bare a number of *matzevot*, lining up the foundations. Natalia Trokhluk, director of the local museum, recalls that perplexed construction workers brought a fragment of a Jewish tombstone to the museum, reporting that 'the whole foundation was made of *matzevot*.' Trokhluk, however, unsure how to proceed, told them to return the gravestone back to the place where they had found it.[99]

Our respondents from Berezne were quick to stress that it was the 'Communist ideology' that motivated the decision to repurpose the cemetery and reuse the Jewish tombstones. They also emphasized that, because of the systemic suspicion towards Western Ukraine as a stronghold of Ukrainian nationalism, Soviet-time local authorities, responsible for these postwar decisions, were comprised of activists from the Soviet interior.[100] The story of the unearthed *matzevot* demonstrates, however, how post-Soviet local authorities were just as disinterested in rectifying, or even just documenting, the historic wrongs of their predecessors. Berezne's history of overwriting still remains buried underground and under water.

Grassroots perceptions

Despite these radical systemic projects to remove any material signs of Jewish heritage in the former shtetls, the memory about the Jewish topography of the towns and of the gradual desecration and destruction of Jewish cemeteries remained. Biłgoraj might be the most straightforward case in this respect as the preserved fragment of the new Jewish cemetery has simply continued to function in the collective perception as 'the Jewish cemetery.' 'There used to be a [Jewish] cemetery and there still is,' noted one local respondent, 'there is no doubt about it.'[101] Informants born before the war, likewise saw the continuity in the function of the place: 'Nothing has happened [to the cemetery]. It is still there.'[102]

In the postwar era, the awareness of the site's history has coexisted, however, with the readiness to use it as a space where to spend one's leisure time. Children sledged down the hill among the gravestones,[103] and teenagers would meet there after school to surreptitiously drink alcohol.[104] Multiple informants remembered human bones scattered over the area.[105] One respondent, reporting about his childhood explorations of the cemetery admitted that today he would be ashamed of what he did there (Figure 4).[106]

The historic function of the old Jewish cemetery, leveled already during the German occupation, and developed in the postwar decades, likewise remained in the social memory of our respondents. Most of them described it as a 'former Jewish cemetery.' They remembered that wooden stables built by Germans on the site were used as a storehouse for a newsagent after the war.[107] One interviewee recalled that he took an exam for a cycling license on the site.[108] The area retained an uncanny atmosphere, however. One

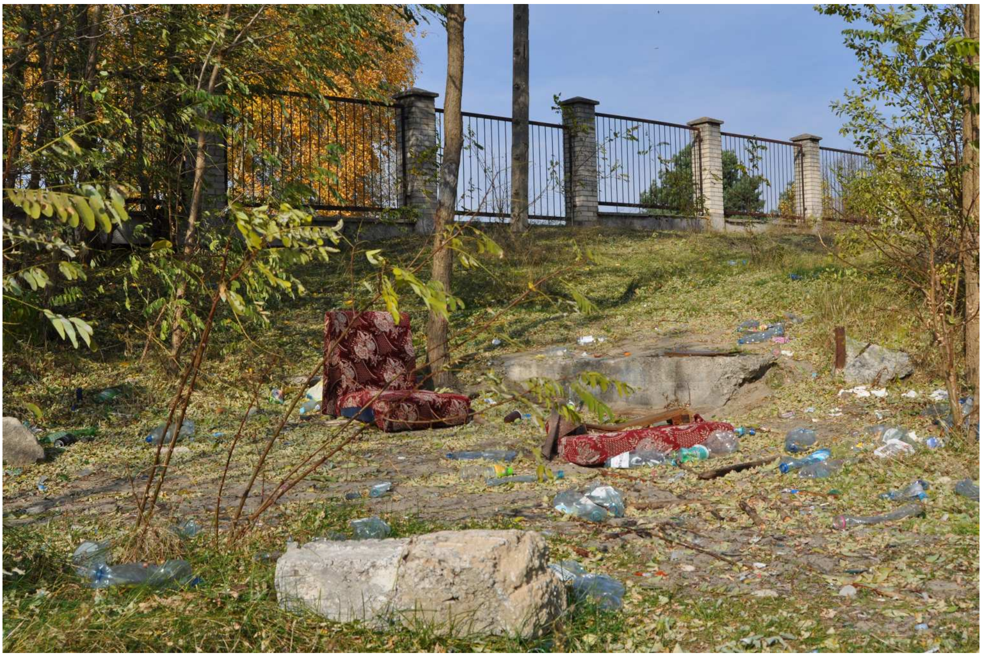

Figure 4. An area used as a meeting point for alcoholics, Jewish cemetery in Biłgoraj, July 2022. Photo: Marta Duch-Dyngosz.

informant, describing the wooden barrack erected at the cemetery stated that it reminded him of Auschwitz: ‘there was something gloomy, mean, repulsive [about it] … It was unrenovated. No one ever gave it a paint job.’[109]

It was during the earthworks for the school building and the adjacent sports field, which began in the 1950s, that many of our respondents born after the war first realized that it was the site of a Jewish cemetery. One female interviewee shared:

> I remember when boys were digging in the ground to secure volleyball posts and they dug out bones. I did not know. We, children, did not know what had happened. I came home upset; I was probably in elementary school. And then I found out that it was a cemetery and that I need to behave decently there … [But] my parents could not forbid me [to play there], … because it was the school playground.[110]

The negotiation between contradictory social norms that apply to a burial ground and a school playground suggests that, despite the complete destruction of any outer markers of the cemetery, some local inhabitants felt a sense of unease about the continued process of desecration that was taking place there. At the same time, however, the protracted presence of human bones in such repurposed Jewish cemeteries – they continued to resurface in the schoolyard well into the 1980s – triggered a process of normalization and caused a degree of social numbness.

A representative of the local museum, when asked whether human remains were still present on the site, responded defensively: ‘There were [there], my goodness, no one conducted exhumations! … the Germans liquidated [only] the topmost layer.’[111] Scattered human remains in this communal urban space became a fact of life that provoked no shock, caused no need for redress, and afforded new social practices that only perpetuated the desecration. As one interviewee shared, local children would come to the former cemetery to play a game of ball with Jewish sculls, which they colloquially called ‘the Jew game’ (*gra w Żyda*).[112] For many local inhabitants, the former cemetery area functioned as an ostensibly ‘empty’ space. The responsibility for its destruction was, in turn, fully delegated to the Germans. ‘[Germans] dismantled the wall, [and] … cut down [the trees] … and for the last few years of the war there was an empty square there,’ stated one inhabitant. ‘And then the [Jewish] community *faded away*, in fact, ceased to exist. It was an empty square, after the war, and practically until the 1980s it was still just a square … no sign of gravestones or anything left.’[113]

Local narratives divorce the ‘disappearance’ of the Jewish community from violence, and, by repetitive emphasis on the postwar material void, fend off any responsibility for the Polish complicity in the demise of Jewish spaces. Despite the fact that the character of such desecrated Jewish sites is fully evident through the constant resurfacing of bones, they remain taboo for the local community, who refuses to address its role in their destruction. In 2014, when a group of educators launched a programme devoted to Jewish history at the local school, and proposed a debate about the fact that the building is standing on the grounds of a Jewish cemetery, the idea was dropped as potentially ‘too distressing’ for the town’s inhabitants.[114]

The majority of our respondents in Biłgoraj did not regard the postwar desecration of Jewish cemeteries as an infringement of social rules. A representative of the local museum went as far as to justify the practice by stating it was common to build over historical burial grounds, such as those adjacent to Catholic churches. He also pointed out that, because the town has had a long and turbulent history, bones regularly resurface during construction work in Biłgoraj.[115] Another respondent disputed the fact that the destroyed part of the new Jewish cemetery had ever been an actual burial ground, arguing it was an empty lot designated for future burials, but never actually used.[116] Others, just like in Berezne, pointed to the Communist regime as solely responsible for the desecration,[117] or tried to rationalize the practice with postwar poverty, or the ignorance about Jewish religious laws that had led Biłgorajans to participate in the destruction of Jewish cemeteries.

> It is difficult to say what motivated people after the war. There was nothing. Everything destroyed. And there were no Jews left, so people did not know Jewish religious laws. Maybe they did not act in bad faith, maybe they collected and removed part of the bones … or maybe they didn't care and thought: "what the hell, it's just some Jews!"[118]

In the recollection of local inhabitants of Iŭje, the Jewish cemetery likewise looms large. In the first postwar decades, when the cemetery was still largely intact, the area was cut by footpaths that the locals used as shortcuts.[119] 'I went to school through the cemetery,' recalls our respondent, 'We [also] went skiing there when we were children. Maybe I would have been scared then, if we had known there was a cemetery on that site. I would not have gone there, had I known that.'[120] The forlorn cemetery, however, attracted children even when it was still fully evident what this place was. A local man, born in 1947, remembers what the site looked like in the first postwar decade:

> The cemetery was very densely packed with *matzevot,* they were standing so close to each other. They were already decaying with many of them falling down. But the thicket was not very dense there yet. Therefore, we, boys, loved to leap from tombstone to tombstone. You walked through the cemetery as if it was a stone jungle.[121]

Children from Jewish families still living in postwar Iŭje, but deprived of any religious education, let alone contact to Judaism, regarded the cemetery with the same sense of awe and incomprehension. Lena Bondar, born in 1960 remembers that she and her friends took an interest in the Jewish inscriptions and symbols on the tombstones:

> I kept asking my mom what kind of letters these were and what kind of tombstones. She told me that this was a Jewish cemetery and that these inscriptions were … in ancient Hebrew. I also insisted that mom tell me what that six-pointed star was and why it was six-pointed. She then explained to me that this was *Magen David*, the star of David.[122]

The cemetery also attracted adults. Local alcoholics would gather there.[123] Others would open the graves in search of gold and valuables. Adults and children alike would participate in grave robbing. While random searches for 'Jewish gold' went on also elsewhere in town, the cemetery was one place that focalized this activity. 'Locals dug every bit of land including the old Jewish cemetery,' shared one respondent.[124] 'My mother told me how, when she went to school, she passed through the Jewish cemetery and skulls were laying around, graves were excavated,' recounted another interviewee. 'This was done by the locals.'[125] The local memory of what was found at the cemetery and in whose hands such finds ended up may be tainted by myth or exaggerated, the high frequency of such accounts suggests, however, that the practice must have been widespread.[126] 'Many locals found lots of gold and coins on the Jewish cemetery and they brought it to the militia station,' recounted one respondent, 'as far as I remember, there was a

Commission of Minors' Affairs, which convened every time children brought a handful of coins.'[127]

As time went by, the *matzevot* were gradually disappearing from the cemetery. 'All the tombstones, the *matzevot*, were looted,' recalls Tamara Baradach, daughter of a Holocaust survivor who lived in the area of Iŭje until the mid-1990s. 'One single tombstone remained lying there for a long time, but before I could take it to bury it at Stanevičy, one morning it just disappeared.'[128] Another respondent remembers that the tombstones were lying scattered along the road, before they were removed.[129] Local inhabitants used the *matzevot* in construction (foundations, porches, fences), to pave their backyards, or turned them into millstones, etc.[130] A single surviving tombstone from the Iŭje cemetery, retrieved during a renovation of a house in the main square, where it served as a step, is now exhibited at Iŭje's Museum of National Cultures.[131]

Local inhabitants also remember well when regular construction work at the cemetery exposed human remains. 'The graves were demolished and they were building a house there,' one respondent recalled, 'kids were playing on the site, … human skulls were found there.'[132] 'I remember how boys were running around our cemetery when the construction of the house of domestic services [*bytkombinat*] began,' recounts another interviewee,

> there were skulls scattered around it … The school was opposite of [the cemetery] and we were running around there. My friends told me that there were teeth there, too. I do not remember it myself. However, I saw the skulls myself.[133]

This last major construction work on the site of the cemetery, launched in the 1980s, was never completed and, eventually, the half-ready structure had to be demolished. In the process, the last remaining *matzevot* were buried in the ground, together with the rubble of the unfinished building.[134] This failure, as well as other misfortunes that allegedly happened during the construction works at the cemetery, fed the local legends about the divine punishment for the desecration of the cemetery. One of our respondents was convinced that the *bytkombinat* building 'was falling apart all the time [because] the cemetery did not let them [the authorities] do it.'[135] Local inhabitants were also reportedly refusing to move into the apartment block built on the site of the Jewish cemetery and the flats had to be distributed among newcomers, who were not aware of the site's history.[136] There are also stories of misfortunes that befell those who moved into the building.[137]

The site of the cemetery remains to this day a place of bad aura to some local inhabitants. During our fieldwork in June 2021, and May 2022, we could observe it ourselves that the 'Wheel of History' square was deserted, and did not seem to be used as a leisure area. One respondent, who had moved to Iŭje in 1984 and therefore had no memory of the Jewish cemetery when it was still intact, shared that she avoids the spot: 'I don't like to walk there … I believe that the place has a wrong aura, it's not a place to trample on. That is why we never go there.'[138]

Our interviews with local inhabitants in Iŭje demonstrated a deep sense of unease about the destruction of the Jewish cemetery. All of our respondents unanimously condemned the authorities' decision to develop the area, and the legends of divine punishment communicated a sense of a violation of taboo that was more pronounced than what we could observe in Biłgoraj or Berezne. Although the respondents from Iŭje openly admitted that the local population participated in the desecration of the cemetery, the looting of the *matzevot*, and grave robbing, some mechanisms of saving a positive group identity were also in place. Reporting about the retrieval of a Jewish tombstone from a local household, one interviewee commented:

> It was non-locals who settled in the houses near the town's center, people who came to Iŭje from other towns, appointed to various positions of power, or as teachers. This meant that this non-local person [who lived in the house where the *matzevah* was used as a doorstep] did not care what it was that he was stepping on his whole life long. One could say it was a tombstone, though, by its very shape. Probably this person was a hardened atheist. Our grandmothers and grandfathers told us that it is forbidden to take anything from a cemetery.[139]

Much like in Berezne and Biłgoraj, the violation of the social norm is ascribed in the first place to outsiders, and individuals related to the Communist power apparatus. Another respondent adds that both Soviet and present-day authorities in Iŭje follow the same policy of *okul'turivanie*, or pragmatic 'productivization' of religious sites. According to one respondent, after the construction of the public utility building (*bytkombinat*) at the cemetery had failed, the 'Wheel of History,' became just another measure to *okulturit* the site, or render it useful to the collective.[140] This ideology-driven agenda thus appeared to our interviewee as a mental legacy of the Soviet-era.

In the Soviet discourse, the term, *okul'turivanie* (which has the word 'culture' as its root) denoted a process of optimization of landscape, which was meant to increase its productivity, flora, fauna, or aesthetics.[141] The main rationale was, however, the functional use of the spaces that, in the view of Soviet authorities, were redundant: like cemeteries of ethnic minorities or religious groups, which – transformed – should bring political, economic, cultural, propagandistic and other benefits. Connoting the victory of culture over nature, advance of civilization, but also acculturation or taming of the alien, the term *okul'turivanie* frames destruction, overwriting and erasure of memory as a civilizational mission, the ultimate integration of the Jewish space into the (post)Soviet ordered, cultivated, and functional urban space. The Jewish cemetery, transformed into a park, thus becomes not only transferred from the state of chaos and neglect into structured order, and lifted from the state of a useless 'wasteland' into an urban space that benefits its current population, but also rendered ultimately un-Jewish.

***

In the local memory of Berezne's residents, the references to the Jewish cemetery were more fragmentary. What is interesting, some respondents seemed to confuse the Jewish cemetery with the Catholic cemetery, also dismantled after World War II. One respondent recounted that she used to have a teacher who would take her and other pupils to the 'Jewish cemetery.' 'She must have been Jewish,' the respondent insisted, 'and she took us all to that cemetery during the after-school activity time. And we walked among these tombstones. They were very beautiful, they had inscriptions in Polish and in Jewish.'[142] Given that the Catholic cemetery and both Jewish cemeteries of Berezne (old and new) were located within 200 meters from each other and were destroyed at roughly the same time to make space for a park, they became conflated into one – a quaint and fascinating space generically marked as alien.

Just like in Biłgoraj and Iŭje, the Jewish cemetery in Berezne was a destination for local children. ‘Whenever we went truant, we would go to play cards at this cemetery and, in the winter, we went skiing [there],’[143] recalls one informant, born in 1936. The cemetery also attracted grave robbers. According to one respondent, several people got arrested in the 1960s for opening Jewish graves in search of gold. He stresses, however that the culprits came from Riga, and were not locals.[144] Director of the local history museum, Natalia Trakhluk, likewise emphatically denies any participation of the locals in the robbing of Jewish graves: ‘This could only have been done by deranged Communists,’[145] she insisted. While pointing to Communist authorities, or outgroup members, as those responsible for grave robbing is a convenient strategy to delegate the most ethically questionable behavior to agents beyond the boundaries of the ingroup, a number of respondents admit that the *matzevot* from the Jewish cemetery were recycled as building materials both by the municipal authorities, and private persons.[146] ‘There were a lot of [tombstones] there,’ recounts one respondent, ‘then, they got smashed and crushed and taken away to build foundations or private houses.’[147] Another respondent shares: ‘They dug up and took all the *matzevot* away. Probably someone [from among the locals] took them for private use.’[148]

These local memories of desecration and repurposing of Jewish tombstones for construction coexist with an urban legend about an ancient Christian cemetery that allegedly existed on the territory, which later became the Jewish district of Berezne. According to one respondent (born in 1971), still in the 1960s and 1970s, there were Christian crosses protruding from the ground in the backyards of the formerly Jewish houses and, during some construction work, one inhabitant allegedly uncovered two graves, which were identified as Christian because one of them contained a thurible.[149] This improbable legend, which contains the remarkable topoi of the sacrilegious ‘overwriting’ of a cemetery of religious others, of the motif of living atop of graves, and of finding a buried ritual object, can be qualified as a discursive act of reversal. In a former shtetl in which Christians took over the Jewish quarters and desecrated the Jewish cemetery, the legend that ascribes the very same acts of sacrilege to *Jews* clearly fulfills a therapeutic function, soothing the collective conscience by reversing the roles of perpetrators and victims.

Conclusions

Post-1944 legal situation of Jewish cemeteries in Poland and the Soviet Union did not differ substantially. In both cases there was no separate legislation that would pertain to Jewish cemeteries specifically. However, while the Polish law spoke of ‘abandoned property,’ the Soviet law was from the onset more definitive in labeling them as ‘closed cemeteries.’ While the Polish nomenclature emphasized their status as ‘disinherited heritage,’ the Soviet authorities conceived of them as defunct even before the administrative motions to formally close them were initiated. The letter of the law, stipulating that a certain amount of time must lapse before a cemetery can formally be repurposed, or that exhumations must take place prior to its closure, was routinely disregarded by local authorities on both sides of the Polish-Soviet border.[150] In the case of the Soviet Union, this was a central policy and thus there were also no differences between the individual Soviet republics of Ukraine and Belarus.

What made the Soviet and Polish cases different was the longer 'tradition' of state-sanctioned policy of dismantling denominational cemeteries, which, in the USSR, dated back to the 1920s. These pre-existing algorithms of destruction in the name of militant state atheism could have facilitated more radical forms of overwriting also in Western Belarus and Western Ukraine where, as of 1944, the Sovietization process was still comparatively fresh, but the state apparatus had more experience in these kinds of policies. Another important difference was the topography of the Holocaust. Existing marked mass-graves within or in the vicinity of the shtetl, which became the focal point of memorial initiatives by the local authorities and/or survivors and their descendants, partly took over the symbolic function of Jewish cemeteries where these had been liquidated. Where other sites (such as mass graves) focalized Jewish memory and official memorial functions, historic Jewish cemeteries could have appeared more 'redundant.'

Despite the differing intensity of the post-1944 secularization projects in the USSR and Poland, the longer pre-history of radical overwriting in the Soviet Union, and the different topography of the Holocaust east of General Government, there is no great qualitative difference in how the local populations of postwar Poland, Belarus and Ukraine misused Jewish cemeteries after the war. Jewish necropolises served as sites of exploration and free play, pastures, quarries of building material, and construction sites all across East-Central Europe. Their destruction was, to a degree, a universal phenomenon. It also took place against the background of more wide-scale policies of urban erasure, aimed to expunge 'dissonant heritage' from the face of the cities, refashioned to fit the new postwar order.[151]

To a certain extent, the vulnerability of Jewish spaces was akin to that of other 'dissonant' heritage sites. As sociologist Anna Wylegała notes, the destruction of places abandoned due to wartime atrocities, migration and expropriation, such as manor houses, German bunkers in the so-called 'Recovered Lands,' or former ghettos, was commonplace. In her view, such sites turned into 'magical, bizarre, abnormal space á rebours' where 'social norms have been suspended.'[152] They also afforded 'carnival-like' behavior because they connoted a certain sense of taboo, but, at the same time, provided space where transgressions would tacitly be accepted by the majority.[153]

The idea of carnivalesque transgression, developed by Victor Turner in his *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (1974), stipulates that collective rituals incorporating transgressive behavior will be used by communities to generate their group identity and temporarily strip the dominant elites of power, by showing irreverence towards them.[154] While transgressive behavior in dispossessed manor houses or on annexed German territories might have carried an element of a 'rite of reversal,' in which the former disempowered groups temporarily claimed control over, and vented hostile energies against, their previous powerholders, the case of desecrated Jewish spaces escapes this paradigm.[155] First, violence against the material vestiges of Jewish culture aimed at decimated and dispossessed victims that never occupied a position of power in relation to the Polish non-Jewish majority. Instead, the transgressive violence followed on the heels of war-time and postwar communal violence, in which non-Jewish Poles possessed an unquestionable position of power over disenfranchised Jews. Second, desecration of Jewish burial sites was not a temporary phenomenon, a passing outburst of transgressive activity, but a long-term, sustained and ongoing process, which led to their full and irreversible destruction. The logic of the carnival requires a return to normalcy sanctioned by social norms. In the case of post-Holocaust Jewish spaces, a return to the 'old order' is not only physically impossible – but for large swathes of the Eastern European societies – unthinkable.

Unlike the mass-scale campaigns of urban erasure, such as the removal of visible signs of German heritage in the so-called Recovered Lands in the West and North-East of post-1945 Poland, or the Soviet attempts to remove the material vestiges of the landowners' culture, the overwriting of Jewish spaces did not follow a political or ideological agenda.[156] On the contrary, the socialist state had a stake in presenting itself as a defender of its ethnic minorities and a guarantor of anti-fascist ideals. The obliteration of Jewish sacred spaces often had a grassroots character and went against the existing legal regulations that were meant to protect them.[157] It should, consequently, be seen less as an eruption of post-conflict retaliatory vandalism of a carnivalesque character, but a continuation of violence towards the disempowered ethnic Other. The desecration of Jewish cemeteries began parallel to anti-Jewish violence unleashed by the Nazi occupying forces in East-Central Europe. After the war's end, however, Jewish sacred spaces became substitute targets of violence, especially after the decimated community of Holocaust survivors left Poland (as well as Western Belarus and Ukraine) in the wake of continued anti-Jewish violence by local non-Jews. As Michael Meng noted, writing about the demolition of synagogues in postwar Poland and Germany, the post-1945 wave of destruction directed at Jewish sites had the function of 'a post-genocidal expunging of the threatening and anxious Jewish abject.'[158]

The fresh memory of local complicity in wartime anti-Jewish violence and the mass-scale participation in the dispossession of Jews likely played a role in the local efforts to remove the signs of Jewish presence in former shtetls. The cases when destruction had no other rationale than a physical removal of Jewish material heritage, such as in Berezne, or when the dismantling of Jewish sites was accompanied by demeaning gestures, such as downcycling of gravestones or covering mass graves with rubbish, are hard to justify with demand for development plots and postwar shortage alone. A sense of tension, denial and unease among the local population in relation to postwar Jewish burial sites signal the possibility that their destruction was motivated by the will to remove the last spatial reminders of one's involvement in genocidal policies. Physical removal of traces, just as the censoring of unwelcome memories from the communal narratives of the past, serves 'mnemonic security'[159] – and is a device protecting a positive group identity.

The continuity of war-time genocidal violence and postwar violence against Jewish material heritage is also evident in the language that present-day respondents use to speak about these sites' postwar history. What ethnographer Magdalena Lubańska calls 'residual references' to 'bones,' 'skulls' or games played with the use of human remains (*gra w Żyda*) reify Holocaust victims, picturing them more as objects than people.[160] Polish terms like *okopisko*, denoting a burial site for animal carcasses, that are still routinely used by local inhabitants as a synonym of a Jewish cemetery, signal the same binary logic that casts Jewish burial sites outside of the category of cemeteries, protected by social norms of respect and inviolability. The unabashed accounts of childhood experiences of playing at the Jewish cemeteries, climbing gravestones or consuming alcohol, coexist, however, with statements which express, if not a direct moral scorn for trespassing a burial site, then a sense of moral discomfort. Accounts that delegate the responsibility for destruction and desecration to others, myths of reversal, or narratives of haunting and divine punishment, indeed, suggest a deep-seated collective anxiety about violating the taboo.[161] Physical obliteration of Jewish sites therefore goes hand in hand with discursive strategies which, as Roma Sendyka noted in her study of unmemorialized Holocaust mass-graves, were designed to ‘sustain the differentiation into humans and non-humans.’[162] Such discourses, in a direct way, continue the dehumanizing Nazi ideology and constitute, *per se*, a form of violence.

Considering the eventual fate of the Jewish cemeteries in all three towns under scrutiny here, it is evident, that there are more similarities than differences among them. All Jewish cemeteries: in Iŭje, Biłgoraj and Berezne have undergone post-war destruction and have been radically overwritten, with just a small part of the Biłgoraj cemetery still marked as a Jewish burial site and remaining under the jurisdiction of a Jewish foundation. The grassroots perceptions of the local Jewish cemeteries do not differ significantly either. Even after the Jewish cemetery had been radically overwritten, the memory of its location, former function and (sometimes) a sense of unease about the complicity of the local inhabitants in its destruction remains present in the former shtetls. These overarching commonalities point to the possibility that it was not so much the postwar political realities (Soviet or Polish jurisdiction, differences in legislation, intensity of secularization measures, size of remaining Jewish population) that played a decisive role for the local erasure of the Jewish cemeteries, but the pre-war legacies of antisemitism, war-time brutalization, and the local populations’ witnessing of the Holocaust atrocities that conditioned a common pattern of overwriting.

Notes

1. Bergman and Jagielski, “Ślady obecności: Synagogi i cmentarze.” Trzciński, *This Very Stone Shall be a Witness*. Trzciński, *Śladem jest ta stela*. It is hard to estimate the scale of postwar destruction. According to Bergman and Jagielski in the end of the 1930s there were more than 1500 Jewish communities in Poland which numbered more than a hundred people. The number of Jewish cemeteries as of 1939 can therefore be estimated at 2,000–2,500. The Institute of National Heritage and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews POLIN have listed 1,200 Jewish cemeteries in present-day Poland.
2. Bielawski, *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich*.
3. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy*. Krawczyk, “Status prawny własności żydowskiej.” Urban, “Zagadnienie pożydowskich synagog i cmentarzy.” Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi*. Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*:, 17–49. Finder and Cohen, “Memento Mori.”
4. Goberman, *Jewish Tombstones in Ukraine and Moldova*; *Evreyskie nadgrobiia na Ukraine*. Nosonovskii, “Starinnye evreyskie kladbishcha Ukrainy.”; “Hebrew Gravestone Inscriptions from Jewish Cemeteries in the Raysn Region (Belarus and Ukraine).”
5. For example: Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity*, 207–19.
6. Kalnitskii and Khandros, “Evreyskiy nekropol’ Kieva v sovetskoe vremya.”.
7. Between 2020 and 2023 we interviewed 105 inhabitants of the three towns (15 local inhabitants of Berezne, 27 inhabitants of Iŭje and 63 inhabitants of Biłgoraj). Additionally, we carried out over 30 interviews with members of the Jewish diaspora originating from these towns (Berezne: 6, Iŭje: 15, Biłgoraj: 11). Respondents were typically senior citizens in their sixties-nineties, who would still have some memory of the occupation and the immediate post-war decades. We contacted our respondents during our explorations of

the former Jewish districts, taking advantage of the snow-ball effect, or using the help of local historians and activists, who would point us to relevant interviewees.

8. See: Skibińska, "Powiat biłgorajski," 196. Spector, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, 201–2, and 830.
9. Frost, *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania.*
10. Snyder, *Bloodlands*. Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde Die deutsche Wirtschaft*; Al'tman, *Zhertvy nenavisti.*
11. Grabowski and Libionka, *Klucze i kasa*; Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*; Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień*; Engelking and Grabowski, *Dalej jest noc*; Grabowski, *Na posterunku.*
12. Iŭje was located in the pre-1939 voivodship of Nowogródek, and Berezne, in the Volhynian voivodship, which both belonged to the so-called *Kresy*, or eastern borderlands during the time of the Second Republic. With the outbreak of World War II, all three towns got under the Soviet control, Biłgoraj, however, located in the pre-war voivodship of Lublin, after a short interlude of Russian occupation in September of 1939, was incorporated into the General Government.
13. The oldest cemetery was located close to the synagogue and other Jewish communal buildings. Abraham Kronenberg and Mosze Tajtlbojm recall in their testimonies that two remaining *matzevot* were standing there before the war. The whole area was overbuilt in the 1960s.
14. *Zagłada Biłgoraja. Księga Pamięci*, translated from Yiddish and Hebrew by Adamczyk-Garbowska et al. Jerzy Markiewicz, testimony, Archive of the Jewish Historical Institute Warsaw (AŻIH) 301/5501. Brzozowska and Trzciński, "Cmentarze żydowskie w Biłgoraju," 105–24.
15. Man born in 1951, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 16 January 2023. Woman born in 1929, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 29 December 2021. Komendant Powiatowy M.O. w Biłgoraju do Komitetu Żydowskiego w Lublinie, AŻIH, Wojewódzki Komitet Żydowski w Lublinie, 355/37, 14. On the discovery of the desecrated Jewish tombstones by returning Jewish survivors, see *Zagłada Biłgoraja*, 106–8.
16. Patt and Crago, "Biłgoraj," 619–21.
17. Tajtlbojm, *Bilgoraj ickor-buch*, 200.
18. Skibińska, "Powiat biłgorajski," Kindle version loc 7015. Markiewicz, "Wojna, okupacja, ruch oporu," 243. For testimonies of eye-witnesses, see: man born in 1921, video interview for Bilgoraj Cable TV, courtesy of Artur Bara. Jerzy Markiewicz, testimony AŻIH 301/5501.
19. Tajtlbojm, *Bilgoraj ickor-buch*, 189, 194.
20. *Zagłada Biłgoraja*, 233–5. Tajtlbojm, *Bilgoraj ickor-buch*, 161.
21. Berl Bakszt, testimony AŻIH, 301/664.
22. Spector, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life*, 43. Natalia Trokhyuk born 1971, Zoom interview with Alexander Friedman, 1 June 2022.
23. Bergman and Jagielski, "Ślady obecności. Synagogi i cmentarze," 471–91. Bielawski, *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich*; Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich.*
24. Bielawski, *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich*; Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union,* 207–19.
25. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich*, 225–7.
26. Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi i domy modlitwy.*
27. Urban, "Zagadnienie pożydowskich synagog i cmentarzy," 41–46.
28. "Okólnik w sprawie żydowskich miejsc pochówku," see: Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie*, 103–20.
29. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich*, 208–11.
30. Until 1959 the authorities were bound by the Act of 17 March 1932 on "burial and determining the cause of death," which stated that the cemetery could be closed down after 20 years and liquidated after 50 years after the last burial. The act obliged to exhume human remains and bury them on the other cemetery.
31. The Act of 31 January 1959 on burial and determining the cause of death changed the previous act from 1932. The cemetery could be liquidated after 40 years from the last burial, see:

Krawczyk, “Status prawny własności żydowskiej i jego wpływ na stosunki polsko-żydowskie,” 194.

32. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich*, 188.
33. A provision against grave desecration was present already in the Polish Penal Code of 1932 (art. 168 and 169). See: Mozgawa-Saj, “Przestępstwa znieważenia oraz ograbienia zwłok.”
34. “Dekret z dnia 13 czerwca 1946 r. o przestępstwach szczególnie niebezpiecznych w okresie odbudowy Państwa” *Dziennik Ustaw* z 1946 r., Nr 30, poz. 192 z dnia 12 lipca 1946 r.
35. The ruling of Polish Supreme Court from January 26, 1959 r. See: Mozgawa-Saj, “Przestępstwa znieważenia oraz ograbienia zwłok … ,” 20–21.
36. Polish Penal Code from 1997, art. 262. On the draft of the Polish Penal Code from 1956 see: Mozgawa-Saj, “Przestępstwa znieważenia oraz ograbienia zwłok … ,” 21.
37. Sokolova, “Novyy mir i staraya smert.”
38. Ryabinin, “Istoriya moskovskikh kladbishch,” 279. *Dorogomilovskoe kladbishche*.
39. Sokolova, *Novyy mir i staraya smert’*.
40. Ryabinin, “Istoriya moskovskikh kladbishch,” 279. *Dorogomilovskoe kladbishche*. Kalnitski and Khandros, *Evreyskiy nekropol’ Kieva v sovetskoe vremya*.
41. Altshuler, *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union*, 207–19.
42. Prykhid, “Kak sovetskaya vlast’ unichtozhila evreyskie zakhoroneniia vo L‘vove.”.
43. “Rovno,” *Elekrtonnaya evreyskaya entsiklopediya*.
44. Decree of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Belarus from 18th August 2015.
45. Rudak, “Prabliemny aspiekt sakraĺnaha abjekta.”
46. Zakon Respubliki Belarus’ ‘Ab pakhavanni i pakhavalnay sprave (novaia redaktsya)’ ad 21.01.2015.
47. “Pravily ŭtrymannya mestsaŭ pakhavannya”, pryniatymi pastanovai Ministerstva zyllyova-kamunalnay haspadarki i Ministerstva akhovy zdaroŭya RB ad 21.01.2015.
48. Ab zmianenni Zakona Respubliki Belaruś ‘Ab pakhavanni i pakhavalnai sprave’ ad 04.01.2015.
49. Expert N1, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 April 2022.
50. Kulevich, “Pomnik na makhile Naydusa stayaŭ da aposhnyaha.”
51. Natsional’nyy pravovoy Internet-portal Respubliki Belarus’, https://pravo.by/upload/pdf/krim-pravo/UK_BSSR_1928_goda.pdf (accessed 18.06.2024).
52. Paragraph 224 of the Belarusian Penal Code of 1960 corresponds to Paragraph 212 in the Ukrainian Penal Code of the same year. Natsional’nyy pravovoy Internet-portal Respubliki Belarus’, https://pravo.by/ImgPravo/pdf/UK_BSSR_1960.pdf, (accessed 18.06.2024). Kryminalnyi Kodeks Ukrains’koi RSR, https://ips.ligazakon.net/document/view/kd0006?an=482535&ed=1969_01_13 (accessed 18.06.2024).
53. Natsional’nyy pravovoy Internet-portal Respubliki Belarus’, https://pravo.by/document/?guid=3871&p0=hk9900275, (accessed 18.06.2024).
54. Kryminal´nyi kodeks Ukrainy, https://kkuua.ru/ru/st-297 (accessed 18.06.2024).
55. A number of our Jewish respondents from Belarus reported that they did not see the point of reporting desecration of graves to the local authorities, because they never took action, despite being well informed of such incidents. Woman born in 1960, telephone interview with Ina Sorkina, 27 June 2021; woman born in 1949, telephone interview with Ina Sorkina, 13 June 2024.
56. Expert N2, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 17 February 2022.
57. Expert N1, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 April 2022.
58. Brzozowska and Trzciński, “Cmentarze żydowskie w Biłgoraju,” 113–4.
59. Główny Urząd Likwidacyjny, GUL administered “abandoned” and “formerly German” property until it was assigned to state institutions or returned to their lawful owners.
60. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich*, 398.
61. Małgorzata Bednarek, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 23 February 2022. The Ministry of Construction operated between 13 May 1949 and 1 January 1951. Some of its responsibilities were later taken over by the Ministry of Public Works.
62. Fragment of a video interview conducted by the mayor of Biłgoraj with a man born in 1921.

63. Bednarek, *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich*, 398.
64. The 1932 law "On burial and the determining of the cause of death," which was still in force for more than a decade after the war, prohibited closing the burial site earlier than 20 years after the last burial, and liquidating the cemetery earlier than 50 years after the last burial. Małgorzata Bednarek, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 23 February 2022.
65. Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*.
66. B. Fus, "Karta cmentarza, 1984," Wojewódzki Urząd Ochrony Zabytków w Lublinie. Delegatura w Zamościu.
67. "Protokół sprawy z 2018 r. wniosku Związku Gmin Wyznaniowych Żydowskich w RP, z udziałem Wojewody Lubelskiego, Starosty Powiatowego w Biłgoraju oraz Miasta Biłgoraj, o przeniesienie własności nieruchomości położonej w Biłgoraju przy ulicy Konopnickiej," Archiwum Komisji Regulacyjnej do Spraw Gmin Wyznaniowych Żydowskich, W.KŻ-I-2172/03. In 1997, The Sejm passed a law enabling partial restitution of pre-war Jewish communal property seized by the state. In 2002 the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) created FODŻ (Fundacja Ochrony Dziedzictwa Żydowskiego), a foundation tasked with reclaiming and preserving Jewish communal property.
68. Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 173–4.
69. *Zagospodarowanie cmentarza pożydowskiego w Biłgoraju 1980–1989,* APZ, Urząd Miejski w Biłgoraju (UMiB), 74.
70. "Pismo od Dyrektora Wydziału do Spraw Wyznań, Urzędu Wojewódzkiego w Zamościu Jana Tura z 01.08.1980 r. do Wicedyrektora Urzędu do Spraw Wyznań w Warszawie Tadeusza Dusika," Archiwum Państwowe w Zamościu (APZ), UMiB, 74, 1-3. "Notatka służbowa sporządzona dnia 19.06.1986 r. w Oddziale Remontowo-Budowlanym przy OSiR w Biłgoraju w sprawie zakończenia prac porządkowych i zagospodarowania cmentarza wyznania Mojżeszowego przy ul. M. Konopnickiej w Biłgoraju," APZ, 74, UMiB, 115–6.
71. "Pismo od Dyrektora Wydziału Urzędu do Spraw Wyznań," APZ, UMiB, 74, 1–3.
72. "Pismo Związku Religijnego Wyznania Mojżeszowego w PRL z 31.07.1980 r. do Urzędu Miejskiego w Biłgoraju. Sprawa: cmentarz żydowski w Biłgoraju," APZ, UMiB, 74, 8.
73. "Notatka z wizji lokalnej i ustaleń dotyczących cmentarza żydowskiego położonego w Biłgoraju, z 28.08.1980 r.," APZ, UMiB, 74, 11–12. Brzozowska and Trzciński, "Cmentarze żydowskie w Biłgoraju."
74. "Pismo z up. Wojewody, Dyrektora Wydziału ds. Wyznanń Jana Tura z 04.02.1983 do Dyrektora Naczelnego Biłgorajskiego Przedsiębiorstwa Budowlanego," APZ, UMiB, 74, 47. The construction works were financed by the Voivodeship Office (Urząd Wojewódzki).
75. It enables the leasehold use of publicly owned land. Although it does not give freehold rights, buildings located on such territory can be owned directly by private entities.
76. E-mail correspondence of Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich to the Mayor Janusz Rosłan. The Rabbi wrote: "this terrain should be protected as part of the Jewish cemetery," http://singer.lbl.pl/pl/galeria/dokumenty-i-mapy-dotyczace-cmentarza-przy-ul-konopnickiej (accessed 12.05.2022). Monika Krawczyk, then director of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland was cited in media: "We will not buy stolen cemeteries". See "W Biłgoraju sprzedali cmentarz", *Rzeczpospolita* 19.11.2008, https://www.rp.pl/kraj/art7945761-w-bilgoraju-sprzedali-cmentarz (accessed on 12.05.2022).
77. Michael Schudrich, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 12 May 2022.
78. Agnieszka Nieradko, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 8 December 2021.
79. Małgorzata Bednarek, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 23 February 2022. The Voivodeship Monuments Register provides less protection than the State Monuments' Register. Because of the absence of gravestones only a small number of Jewish cemeteries in Poland is included in the latter.
80. Ruling of the Provincial Administrative Court in Lublin (Wojewódzki Sąd Administracyjny w Lublinie), 06.04.2017, II SA/Lu 1119/16; Ruling of the Supreme Administrative Court (Naczelny Sąd Administracyjny), 08.05.2018, II OSK 1926/17.

81. “Zarządzenie nr 310/VII/2018 Burmistrza Miasta Biłgoraj, 09.08.2018 w sprawie włączenia karty ewidencyjnej obiektu nieruchomego do Gminnej Ewidencji Zabytków” https://umbilgoraj.bip.lubelskie.pl/index.php?id=239&p1=szczegoly&p2=1301951 (accessed 16.05.2022).
82. Aleksander Schwarz, phone interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 14 December 2022.
83. Man born in 1949, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 6 October 2021. Woman born in 1946, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 21 December 2021.
84. “Protokoły z Sesji Miejskiej Rady Narodowej w Biłgoraju, 1988,” APZ, MRN, 1973-1990, 37/32.
85. Woman born in 1946, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 21 December 2021.
86. Man born in1965, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz and Magdalena Waligórska, 8 July 2022.
87. Tamara Baradach, born in 1949, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2021.
88. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3 July 2021.
89. Woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
90. Tamara Baradach, born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 8 July 2020.
91. Expert N3, date of birth unknown, and Expert N4, conducted by Ina Sorkina on 16 June 2021.
92. “Zyamlya syabroŭ prymae sardechna. U Iŭji ŭ Dzen horada adkrylasya ekspazitsyya ‘Kola historyi’,” *Respublika, 23.06.2013,* https://www.sb.by/articles/zyamlya-syabro-prymae-sardechna.html?AJAX_MONTH=9&AJAX_YEAR=2016&bxajaxid=e0c728a7788737ef8493f42e4c8366ea (accessed 25.06.2022).
93. Turisticheskiy marshrut “Iv’e mnogokonfessionalnoe”, https://www.ivje.gov.by/ru/ivie_konfes-ru/ (accessed 25.06.2022).
94. Turisticheskiy marshrut “Ikh bolshe ne vstretish na ulitsakh goroda,” https://www.ivje.gov.by/ru/ih_net-ru/ (accessed 25.06.2022). On the website of Iŭje district library, the fact that the memorial is located at the site of the Jewish cemetery is acknowledged. See: Ekspazitsyja “Kola historii,” http://ivie-lib.by/informacionnie-resursi/bazy-dannyh/pomniki-gistoryi-i-kultury-iueushchyny/ekspazicyya-kola-gistoryi/ (accessed 25.06.2022).
95. Raaya Shniper, (born 1920), telephone interview with Yehiel Weizman, 14 September 2020.
96. Arie Medeved, cited in Bejgiel, *Mayn Shtetele Berezne zamlung fun zikhroynes fun Berezner-landslayṭ in land un in oysland*, 124 [translation from Yiddish: Yehiel Weizman]. “Bandits” was the usual Soviet term to refer to anti-Soviet partisans, for example members of the OUN-UPA. There is no further information whether the cemetery was indeed destroyed by nationalist armed units, or simply by local hooligans.
97. Natalia Trokhyuk, zoom interview with Alexander Friedman, 1 June 2022.
98. Ibid.
99. Zoom interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk with Alexander Friedman and Ina Sorkina, 13 January 2022.
100. Ibid.
101. Man born in 1949, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 6 October 2021.
102. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 5 October 2021.
103. Woman, date of birth unknown, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 15 November 2021; Artur Bara, phone interview with Magdalena Waligórska, 15 July 2020.
104. Dominika Macocha, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligórska, 2 September 2021.
105. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 5 October 2021; man born in 1942, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 8 June 2022.
106. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 5 October 2021.
107. Man born in 1970, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 17 November 2021.
108. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 5 October 2021.
109. Ibid.
110. Woman born in 1946, zoom interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 21 December 2021.
111. Woman born in 1968, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 7 October 2021.
112. Woman born in 1982, skype interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 15 October 2022.

113. Woman born in 1968, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 7 October 2021. During parts of the interview another respondent was present, man born in 1970.
114. Woman born in 1975. personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 18 November 2021.
115. Man born in 1970. personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 7 October 2021.
116. Woman born in 1968, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 7 October 2021.
117. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 5 October 2021.
118. Man born in 1970, personal interview with Marta Duch-Dyngosz, 17 November 2021.
119. Man born in 1976, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021. Woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 13 June 2021. Woman born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 December 2021. Woman born in 1957, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021.
120. Woman born in 1957, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021.
121. Man born in 1947, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3 July 2021.
122. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 13 June 2021.
123. Man born in 1957, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 12 May 2022.
124. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 June 2021.
125. Woman born in 1978, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
126. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 June 2021. Woman, born in 1979, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021. Woman born in 1978, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
127. Woman, born in 1979, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021.
128. Woman born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2021.
129. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 June 2021.
130. Woman born in 1965, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.Woman born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2021.
131. Woman born in 1978, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
132. Woman born in 1979, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021.
133. Man born in 1976, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
134. Ibid.
135. Woman born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2021.
136. Woman born in 1960, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 24 June 2021.
137. Man born in 1957, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 3 July 2021. Man born in 1976, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021. Woman born in 1979, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 21 July 2021.
138. Woman born in 1962, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 12 May 2022.
139. Woman born in 1978, personal interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 June 2021.
140. Woman born in 1949, zoom interview with Ina Sorkina, 15 October 2021
141. Bykov, *Ekologicheskii slovar*, 216.
142. Woman born 1961, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021.
143. Woman born 1936, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021.
144. Ibid.
145. Natalia Trokhyuk, (born 1971), zoom interview with Alexander Friedman, 1 June 2022.
146. Man born 1936, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021. Man born 1930, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2022. Man born 1950, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021. Woman born 1946, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021.
147. Man born 1930, personal interview with Natalia Trokhlyuk, 20 April 2021.
148. Natalia Trokhyuk, born 1971, zoom interview with Alexander Friedman, 1 June 2022.
149. Natalia Trokhlyuk, zoom interview with Magdalena Waligórska, Ina Sorkina and Alexander Friedman, 31 August 2021.
150. Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie*. Wiśniewski, *Nieistniejące mniejsze cmentarze żydowskie*.
151. Tunbridge and Ashworth, *Dissonant Heritage*.
152. Wylegała, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu*, 274.
153. Ibid.

154. Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, 243.
155. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power*, 131–2.
156. Thum, *Obce miasto*, 285–327; Wylegała, *Był dwór, nie ma dworu*, 240–77.
157. Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 137–38; Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*; Urban, *Cmentarze żydowskie*; Wiśniewski, *Nieistniejące mniejsze cmentarze żydowskie.*
158. Meng, *Shattered Spaces*, 110.
159. The term "mnemonical security," first developed by Maria Mälksoo, was applied in the analyses of Polish culture of memory in relation to the Holocaust by Sławomir Kapralski, and Roma Sendyka. See: Nowak et al. *On the Banality of Forgetting*, 12; Sendyka, *Poza obozem*, 290.
160. Lubańska, "Perspektywa postsekularna w badaniach nie-miejsc pamięci," 280.
161. See also: Dziuban, *The Spectral Turn*. Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*, 149–60.
162. Sendyka, *Poza obozem*, 221.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on collaborative research within the project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands.' Associated researchers, Ruslan Danylyuk and Natalia Trokhluk carried out the oral history interviews in Ukraine. Aleksej Zlatogorskij carried out the photo documentation of the Jewish cemetery in Berezne.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.

Notes on contributors

Marta Duch-Dyngosz is a sociologist, currently based at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Her fields of interest include: Jewish/non-Jewish relations, Jewish heritage, memory of the Holocaust, far-right movement in Poland, social theory, and memory studies. She obtained her PhD in sociology from the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in 2017. She has been awarded a Fulbright Junior Research Award (2012–2013), and a National Science Center grant (2014–2016). She is currently working on a book project on commemorative practices relating to the Jewish past in the former shtetls in Poland. She was a co-investigator in the project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands' (Gerda Henkel Foundation, 2020–2023).

Alexander Friedman is a historian of the Holocaust, specializing on the (post-)Soviet territory, especially Belarus and Ukraine. He holds a PhD from the University of Saarland (2009). His focus lies on National Socialism, Nazi war crimes, history of Jews and Roma in Eastern Europe and propaganda. He has published extensively on the Holocaust, Nazi crimes in the occupied territories of Soviet Union, as well as on the questions of collective memory, representations of the past in popular culture and urban history of Eastern Europe. He was a co-investigator in the research project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands' (Gerda Henkel Foundation, 2020–2023).

Ina Sorkina is a historian of Belarus, particularly the Grodna region. Jewish history and shtetl history are her main fields of expertise. She holds a PhD from the Belarusian Academy of Sciences in Minsk (1998). She has authored, among others, *Mjastechki of Belarus at the End of 18th – First Half of nineteenth Century* (Vilnius, EHU, 2010). She has also led multiple field expeditions in Belarus in cooperation with Warsaw's POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Jewish Historical Institute. She was a co-investigator in the research project: 'Mapping the Archipelago of Lost Towns: Post-Holocaust Urban Lacunae in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands' (Gerda Henkel Foundation, 2020–2023).

Magdalena Waligórska is a cultural historian and sociologist. Her fields of interest include: contemporary Polish and Belarusian history, nationalism and national symbols, Jewish heritage and popular culture, Jewish/non-Jewish relations, music and identity, and memory studies. She is currently based at the Department of European Ethnology of the Humboldt University in Berlin. She has published extensively on Jewish culture, Jewish-non-Jewish relations and nationalism, among others, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, *Holocaust Studies*, *East European Jewish Affairs* and *Jewish Cultural Studies*. She is the author of *Klezmer's Afterlife: An Ethnography of the Jewish Music Revival in Poland and Germany*, Oxford University Press, 2013 and *Cross Purposes: Catholicism and the Political Imagination in Poland*, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

ORCID

Marta Duch-Dyngosz http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9469-5901
Ina Sorkina http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6648-1343
Magdalena Waligórska http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7856-0831

Bibliography

Al'tman, Il'ya. *Zhertvy nenavisti. Kholokost v SSSR. 1941–1945 gg.* Moscow: Fond "Kovcheg,", 2002.

Altshuler, Mordechai. *Religion and Jewish Identity in the Soviet Union, 1941–1964*. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012.

Bednarek, Małgorzata. *Sytuacja prawna cmentarzy żydowskich w Polsce 1944-2019*. Kraków: Austeria, 2020.

Bejgiel, G., ed. *Mayn Shtetele Berezne zamlung fun zikhroynes fun Bereznerlandslayṭ in land un in oysland*. Tel Aviv, 1954.

Bergman, Eleonora, and Jan Jagielski. "Ślady obecności: Synagogi i cmentarze." In *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, edited by Feliks Tych, and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, 471–491. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011.

Bielawski, Krzysztof. *Zagłada cmentarzy żydowskich*. Warszawa: Biblioteka Więzi, 2020.

Brzozowska, Zuzanna, and Andrzej Trzciński. "Cmentarze żydowskie w Biłgoraju." In *Biłgoraj, czyli Raj. Rodzina Singerów i świat, którego już nie ma*, edited by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, and Bogusław Wróblewski, 105–124. Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2005.

Bykov, Boris A. *Ekologicheskii slovar*. Alma-Ata: Nauka, 1983.

Dean, Martin. *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine, 1941–44*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003.

Dziuban, Zuzanna, ed. *The Spectral Turn: Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019.

Engelking, Barbara. *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień: Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942–1945*. Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011.

Engelking, Barbara, and Jan Grabowski. *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*. Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018.

Finder, Gabriel N., and Judith R. Cohen. "Memento Mori: Photographs from the Grave." In *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry. Volume 20: Making Holocaust Memory*, edited by Gabriel N. Finder, Natalia Aleksiun, Antony Polonsky, and Jan Schwarz, 55–73. Oxford: The Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization, 2008.

Frost, Robert. *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Gerlach, Christian. *Kalkulierte Morde Die deutsche Wirtschafts – und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS, 2013.

Giddens, Anthony. *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*. London: Hutchinson, 1976.

Goberman, David. *Jewish Tombstones in Ukraine and Moldova*. Moscow: Image Publishing House, 1993.

Goberman, David. *Evreyskie nadgrobiia na Ukraine*. Sankt Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2001.

Grabowski, Jan. *Na posterunku: udział polskiej policji granatowej i kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów*. Wołowiec: Czarne, 2020.

Grabowski, Jan, and Dariusz Libionka. *Klucze i kasa: O mieniu żydowskim w Polsce pod okupacją niemiecką i we wczesnych latach powojennych 1939–1950*. Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2014.

Kalnitskii, Mikhail, and Boris Khandros. "Evreyskiy nekropol' Kieva v sovetskoe vremya." Evreiskiy obozrevatel' September 2004. Accessed August 21, 2022. www.jewukr.org/observer/eo2003/page_show_ru.php?id = 778.

Kertzer, David. *Ritual, Politics and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Krawczyk, Monika. "Status prawny własności żydowskiej i jego wpływ na stosunki polsko-żydowskie." In *Następstwa Zagłady Żydów. Polska 1944–2010*, edited by Feliks Tych, and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, 687–713. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2011.

Kulevich, Roman. "Pomnik na makhile Naydusa stayaŭ da aposhnyaha: u Hrodnie znayshli nevyadomyya zdymki znishchaanych yaŭreyskikh mokhilak." Hrodna L..e, 26.07.2019. Accessed June 25, 2022. https://hrodna.l..e/articles/nevyadomyiya-fota-mogilak/.

Lubańska, Magdalena. "Perspektywa postsekularna w badaniach nie – miejsc pamięci. Przypadek powojennych mordów w podkarpackim lesie Dębrzyna." In *Nie-miejsca pamięci 1, Nekrotopologie*, edited by Roma Sendyka, 249–284. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 2020.

Markiewicz, Jerzy. "Wojna, okupacja, ruch oporu." In *Dzieje Biłgoraja*, edited by Jerzy Markiewicz, Ryszard Szczygieł, and Wiesław Śladkowski. Lublin: Towarzystwo Regionalne w Biłgoraju, 1985.

Meng, Michael. *Shattered Spaces. Encountering Jewish Ruins in Postwar Germany and Poland*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Mozgawa-Saj, Marta. "Przestępstwa znieważenia oraz ograbienia zwłok, grobu i miejsca spoczynku zmarłego (art. 262 § 1 i 2 k.k.)." Prokuratura i Prawo 1, 2018.

Nosonovskii, Mikhail. "Starinnye evreyskie kladbishcha Ukrainy: istoriya, pamyatniki, epitafii." Evroaziatskiy evreiskiy ezhegodnik – 5768 (2007/2008), http://library.jewseurasia.org/page70/news13435.

Nosonovsky, Michael. "Hebrew Gravestone Inscriptions from Jewish Cemeteries in the Raysn Region (Belarus and Ukraine)." Proceedings in Archeology & History of Ancient & Medieval Black Sea Region. vol. 12 (2020): 954-970.

Nowak, Jacek, Kapralski Sławomir, and Dariusz Niedźwiedzki. *On the Banality of Forgetting: Tracing the Memory of Jewish Culture in Poland*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018.

Patt, Avinoam, and Laura Crago. "Biłgoraj." In *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos 1933–1945. Volume II, Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, edited by Martin Dean, 619–621. Bloomington: Indiana University Press and USHMM.

Prykhid, Viktoriya. "Kak sovetskaya vlast' unichtozhila evreyskie zakhoroneniia vo L'vove." Deutsche Welle, 4.8.2020. Accessed June 25, 2022. https://www.dw.com/ru/как-советская-власть-уничтожала-еврейские-захоронения-во-львове/a-54432947.

"Rovno." Elekrtonnaya evreyskaya entsiklopediya. Accessed June 25, 2022. https://eleven.co.il/diaspora/communities/13540/.

Rudak, Anton. "Prabliemny aspiekt sakraĺnaha abjekta." Kultura, 26.10.2019-02.11.2019. Accessed August 25, 2022. http://www.kimpress.by/index.phtml?page = 2&id = 16591.

Ryabinin, Yury V. *Istoriya moskovskikh kladbishch: Pod krovom vechnoy tishiny*. Moscow: Ripol Klassik, 2015.

Sendyka, Roma. *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania*. Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN.

Skibińska, Alina. "Powiat biłgorajski." In *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski vol 1*, edited by Barbara Engelking, and Jan Grabowski, 191–380. Warszawa: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2018.

Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

Sokolova, Anna D. "Novyy mir i staraya smert': sudba kladbishch v sovetskikh gorodakh 1920-1930-kh godov." *Neprikosnovenniy zapas* 17, no. 1 (2018): 74–94. Accessed June 25, 2022. https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy_zapas/117_nz_1_2018/article/19533/.

Spector, Shmuel, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2001.

Tajtlbojm, Mosze. *Bilgoraj ickor-buch*. Jeruszalajim, 1955.

Thum, Gregor. *Obce miasto: Wrocław 1945 i potem*. Wrocław: Via Nova, 2005.

Trzciński, Andrzej. *Śladem jest ta stela: Stary Cmentarz Żydowski w Lublinie*. Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2017.

Trzciński, Andrzej. *This Very Stone Shall be a Witness: The Jewish Cemetery in Wielkie Oczy*. Translated by Marcin Garbowski. New York: Wielkie Oczy Foundation Publishing, 2019.

Tunbridge, John E., and Gregory J. Ashworth. *Dissonant Heritage: The Management of the Past as a Resource in Conflict*. Chichester: Wiley, 1996.

Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Urban, Kazimierz. "Zagadnienie pożydowskich synagog i cmentarzy w Polsce w latach 1945–1956 (zarys problematyki)." *Zeszyty Naukowe Akademii Ekonomicznej* 695 (2005): 41–46.

Urban, Kazimierz. *Cmentarze żydowskie, synagogi i domy modlitwy w Polsce w latach 1944–1966 (wybór materiałów)*. Kraków: Zespół Wydawniczy NOMOS, 2006.

"W Biłgoraju sprzedali cmentarz." Rzeczpospolita 19.11.2008. Accessed May 12, 2022. https://www.rp.pl/kraj/art7945761-w-bilgoraju-sprzedali-cmentarz.

Weizman, Yechiel. *Unsettled Heritage: Living Next to Poland's Material Jewish Traces after the Holocaust*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022.

Wiśniewski, Tomasz. *Nieistniejące mniejsze cmentarze żydowskie: Rekonstrukcja Atlantydy*. Białystok: Kreator, 2009.

Wylegała, Anna. *Był dwór, nie ma dworu: Reforma rolna w Polsce*. Wołowiec: Czarne, 2021.

Zagłada, Biłgoraja. *Księga Pamięci*. Translated from Yiddish and Hebrew by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, Andrzej Trzciński and Marzena Zawanowska. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2009.

"Zyamlya syabroŭ prymae sardechna. U Iŭji ŭ Dzen horada adkrylasya ekspazitsyya 'Kola historyi'." Respublika, 23.06.2013. Accessed June 25, 2022. https://www.sb.by/articles/zyamlya-syabro-prymae-sardechna.html?AJAX_MONTH = 9&AJAX_YEAR = 2016&bxajaxid = e0c728a7788737ef8493f42e4c8366ea.