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Golgotha in paradise: memory and martyrdom in a former Polish shtetl

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how local complicity in the Holocaust is negotiated, silenced, and revealed through the spatial memoryscape of Rajgród, a small town in northeastern Poland where Poles participated in the murder of their Jewish neighbors in the summer of 1941. Using a microhistorical lens, it analyzes how knowledge, denial, and memory are inscribed in physical spaces and communal practices, rendering space a cultural text. Drawing on personal and municipal records and ethnographic fieldwork, the article shows how Catholicism, nationalism, and ritual symbolism shape collective remembrance and moral hierarchies of suffering in post-socialist Eastern Europe.

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Introduction

Two very different monuments were erected in recent years in Rajgród, a small town in northeastern Poland, not far from Jedwabne. The first one is a modest memorial located in the Jewish cemetery, in a forested area on the outskirts of town. There are no traces left of the cemetery, which was destroyed by order of the Germans during the Nazi occupation. Built in 2014, the memorial, a two-part matzevah-like stone slab forming the shape of a Star of David, is accompanied by a rectangular stone bearing a brief inscription about the life and death of the Jewish community that had once lived here. If one visits the place today, however, they will immediately notice that the symbolic headstone has been brutally vandalized and the traces of demolition are evident, leaving a broken void at its center. The other monument is located at the center of town, directly across from the Catholic church. It is known in town as ‘Golgotha’ (*Golgota*) and it features a massive replication of Calvary Hill which symbolically reconstructs the stations of the Via Dolorosa, merging Christian and national iconography. At the center of the site, atop a mound, there is a massive cross with the figure of the suffering Christ.

Located only two kilometers apart, these two sites embody opposing narratives of local heritage and identity, as if bearing witness to two competing memories of victimhood and martyrdom. The stark contrast between the demolished Jewish memorial and the

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carefully preserved Christian site symbolizes, in many ways, what is remembered – and what is not. Focusing on Rajgród, where Poles participated in the murder of their Jewish neighbors in 1941, shows how the knowledge, negation, and memory of the Jews' wartime fate are being inscribed, negotiated, and contested through space and spatial practices. Adopting a micro level analysis and setting the contemporary memoryscape of one town as a departure point, this article elucidates the communal mechanisms through which local complicity in the Holocaust is being silenced *and* – at the same time – disclosed. In the absence of an open discussion of the Jews' fate, a cultural analysis of space reveals much about the ways in which the past continues to infiltrate the present, particularly when dealing with a past which is buried under deep-rooted conspiracies of silence. Reading spaces as cultural texts and drawing on municipal records, local publications, rare personal documents, and ethnographic research, this article offers a unique methodological channel to examine the societal aftermath of WWII in communist and post-communist Eastern-Europe, the ambivalent implications of participating in and witnessing the murder of Jews by their own neighbors, and the entanglement of nationalism and Catholicism in the shaping of collective mechanisms of remembrance and denial.

Over the last 25 years, in the shadow of the Jedwabne affair, scholars have broadened our knowledge and understanding of the deadly violence in northeastern Poland in 1941, its social dynamics, aftermaths, and antecedents.¹ This article turns the spotlight on one of the lesser-known pogroms, and its long-term consequences. It also shifts the focus from national-level debates on recent Polish-Jewish memory battles – often centered on ideological conflicts in media, cultural institutions, or official commemorative policies – to the granular, local dynamics of small communities implicated in the crimes.² It reveals how communal denial, religious symbolism, and ritualized mythmaking actively reshape memory at the micro level, exposing the tensions between silenced histories and the material traces of violence embedded in everyday landscapes.

Historical background

Etymologically, Rajgród means 'paradise city,' and it is indeed a picturesque town, surrounded by lakes and forests. It is located in the Grajewo county, in the voivodeship of Podlaskie, close to Białystok and right on the historic border with Former East Prussia to the north. Some 1,600 people live today in this small urban-rural settlement, which – during the summer months – boasts many tourists, mainly from Poland, who stay in one of the several hotels on the lakeshore. The first Jews arrived at the royal town of Rajgród at the end of the sixteenth century but it was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that an established Jewish community emerged, with a synagogue and a cemetery.³ Following the partitions of Poland, the town was included in Prussia, but since 1815 it was part of Congress Poland, under the Russian empire. By then, the Jewish population formed the majority in town and towards the end of the century around 90 percent of the population was Jewish. Like in other shtetls, Jews lived in the center and were dominant in the local economy. Many of them were craftsmen, handlers and fishermen.⁴ The number of Jews declined due to massive emigration at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly to North America, the impact of the First World War, which heavily affected Rajgród, and subsequent waves of emigration in the 1920s and

1930s (mainly to Palestine), caused by anti-Jewish violence and deteriorating economic conditions.⁵ On the eve of WWII some 750 Jews lived in Rajgród – around one third of the population.⁶ The interwar years were characterized by growing interethnic tensions and an antisemitic atmosphere.

Between 1939–1941 the town was included in the areas under Soviet occupation. During these two years, businesses, including Jewish, were nationalized and independent political and cultural associations were closed. As part of the Soviet repressions dozens of individuals and entire families, Jewish and non-Jewish, were deported deep into the Soviet Union, with many sent to Siberia.⁷ In wartime and later accounts recorded by Christian Poles, as well as in local publications, Jews are often described as sympathizers and collaborators with the Soviets and as oppressors of Poles,⁸ but apart from general and generic accusations there is no evidence to suggest that Jews showed more support to the Soviets than other groups or that Jews served in the Soviet institutions and security apparatus in significant numbers. In fact, it appears that the local functionaries in the Soviet administration and security apparatus were local Poles or Russians and Belarusians brought from outside.⁹

Following *Operation Barbarossa* in June 1941 the town was included in the administrative unit *Bezirk Białystok*. As in many towns in this area, the German invasion and the Soviet retreat were followed by anti-Jewish violence by the local non-Jewish population. In the first days after the Soviet retreat, a local militia was formed among Christian Poles and they began running things in town, which included robbing of Jewish property, beating up and humiliating Jews, and also executing Jews, as well as other people who were accused of serving the Soviets. Interestingly, the two main leaders of this militia were themselves part of the Soviet administration before June 1941.¹⁰ It was not until September that a permanent German presence would be established in Rajgród, and it was during that summer that the local de-facto Polish new elite, which included high school teachers, prewar policemen, a pharmacist and peasants, had a free reign to terrorize the town's Jews, while Germans would visit the town sporadically, mainly to supervise the situation. In one of those visits, probably between 29 June and 3 July, few Germans, two according to most accounts, arrived at Rajgród, and soon after the perpetrators began rounding-up dozens of Jewish men at the market square, where they were cruelly beaten and humiliated.¹¹ According to postwar testimonies and investigations between 40–100 Jewish men were violently marched to the 'Fir Tree Forest' (*Las Choinki*), a small coniferous forest outside town, escorted by some 50 Rajgród residents and the Germans.¹² In the meantime – similarly to other towns in the area – other Jews were beaten and murdered in their houses by local inhabitants who also took property and forced Jews to march in the streets, holding red banners and singing different songs.¹³ Polish eyewitnesses described how women were forced to run naked in the streets. Other accounts mention how local inhabitants, men and women, entered Jewish houses and emptied them. Those who attempted to run away were caught and beaten by the crowd.¹⁴ According to the postwar investigations there are conflicting accounts concerning what exactly happened in the forest and to what extent the Germans were involved, if at all, in the killing, and who took an active part in the shooting. Some of the defendants testified that the Germans first shot two or three Jews and then handed the murder assignment over to the Poles, while others recalled that the execution began after one of the Germans asked who knows how to shoot and passed

on the rifles to the militia men, who executed the Jews. According to the investigation and to Polish eyewitnesses, those Jews who didn't die from the shooting were beaten to death by the Poles with spades and axes. The latter also buried the victims under a thin layer of land.¹⁵

In the following lawless weeks, the Polish perpetrators continued to murder dozens of Jews in other places around the town, with permission of the Germans, mainly on a small hill outside town where they were forced to lie down and stabbed to death.¹⁶ At a certain point the Germans decided to put an end to this unregulated violence and established a permanent presence in town. They even dismissed the main leader of the militia from his position.¹⁷ A semi-open ghetto was established, to which the remaining Jews from Rajgród and nearby localities were deported, but Poles continued to take an active part in the persecution and supervision of the ghetto and rob Jewish property.¹⁸ Many Jews were taken to work in local farms and households of Polish families. The ghetto didn't survive for long and already in November 1941 it was liquidated. Local peasants were ordered by the Germans to provide their carriages and transport the Jews to the ghetto in Grajewo.¹⁹ From there, all Jews were sent to the transit camp in Bogusze and from there they were deported in two transports to Treblinka and Auschwitz, where they were almost certainly all killed.²⁰

Among Rajgród's Jews who were deported from the ghetto, most likely nobody survived. Few Jews managed to escape to the Soviet Union right after the German invasion in the summer of 1941, and a handful of Jews tried to find shelter in the villages nearby before the liquidation of the ghetto – probably only one of them survived. According to official records, only two Jews returned to Rajgród after the war.²¹ One of them was Lejb Lewintin, who heard from the townspeople the gruesome details of the murder of the Jews. He was also able to reclaim some of his family's real-estate and sold them to his neighbors, before leaving Poland in 1948. In a matter of a couple of months after the war, the transfer of Jewish houses, shops, and movable property to non-Jewish hands was finalized, regulated, and received official approval. Some larger businesses and real-estate were nationalized or allocated to the local authority. As a local Polish woman later said, 'Rajgród was built with Jewish gold.'²²

The local involvement in the murder of the Jews and the looting of their property was known to all in town, as Lejb Lewintin discovered when talking to the townspeople after the war, and as the official investigations from the 1940s and 1950s clearly showed. Despite some discrepancies and conflicting versions in the investigation and trial materials – the picture that emerged was unequivocal and incriminating and revealed the extent of the local involvement in the destruction and dispossession of the Jewish community of Rajgród. This, however, didn't guarantee that justice was made. Eventually only six Polish men were convicted of 'collaboration' with the Germans and served few years in prison.²³ The leader of the militia was sentenced to 15 years in prison but in 1958 his appeal was accepted, and the verdict was repealed. Another man, who had been sentenced to death, received amnesty.²⁴ Some of those involved in the murder returned to their positions, and one of them even served on the local town council in the 1950s, as the representative of the teachers' union. Alongside him in the local council served a man whose house was a local drinking hub where the leader of the militia came to drink right after the massacre in the forest. Another member of the town council served as the head of the city court during the German occupation.²⁵

While the local involvement in the murder of the Jews was no secret, soon after the war it was gradually buried under thick layers of silence, making sure that knowledge of what had happened during the war remained concealed.²⁶ This dynamic was manifested already in the late 1950s, when several of the earlier witnesses changed their version of the events, leading to the acquittal of one of the principal perpetrators who appealed his previous sentence.²⁷ A decade later, during a brief investigation of the West German legal authorities, local inhabitants displayed a uniform front and presented an account according to which only Germans murdered Jews in Rajgród.²⁸ Among the witnesses in the renewed investigation in the late 1960s were those who, only a few years earlier, incriminated local Poles who were involved in the killings.²⁹ Now, in the 1960s they painted an entirely different picture in which Germans appeared in the role of the sole perpetrators. The denial of any Polish involvement in the murder of Rajgród Jews testified to the efficiency and cohesion of the local networks of silence that sanctioned any discussion of the fate of the Jews to remain within the boundaries of the community. It coincided with the official state policy and was part of the concentrated attempts in the 1960s and 1970s to strengthen the national narrative around the notion of innocence and martyrdom of the Polish nation.³⁰

However, while the memory of the Jews – and especially of the local involvement in their fate – was publicly silenced and remained taboo, traces of obscure knowledge in local folklore and private conversations attest to its persistence in communal memory. This was evident in the abundance of local legends about the mysterious, divine punishments said to have befallen the main participants in the pogrom – whose identities were no secret.³¹ Although it is not easy to talk to people about this topic, I heard two similar versions of these legends according to which none of the killers died a natural death.³² Expressing, perhaps, an implied moral condemnation, regret, self-exonerating remorse, or the stereotypical fear of the ‘vengeful Jews,’ these stories reveal a communal mechanism that both maintained the silencing of the crime and, at the same time, disclosed its endurance in local consciousness.³³

A grave in the forest

The story of the murder of Jews by Poles in Rajgród would perhaps have remained confined to the hushed circles of local folklore, had it not been for Halina Masztalerz – a high school teacher born in a village near Rajgród in 1932.³⁴ In 1986, she began writing impassioned letters to local, district, and national authorities, as well as to Polish-Jewish organizations, in which she recounted what had happened in the summer of 1941 in the forest beside her family’s house. She was nine years old when she saw several dozen Jewish men being driven toward the forest while being beaten. ‘The bandits leading them to death beat them brutally,’ she wrote, ‘and they were not Germans but Poles, residents of Rajgród.’ Later, she described how the Jews were murdered in a forest clearing and buried there. She heard the shots and learned from neighbors, who hid behind trees and witnessed the killing, what had occurred: ‘Their heads were slashed with spades and, half-dead, they were pushed into pits and buried. The ground groaned with the moans of suffocating people.’ Before the shooting, she recalled, one of the Jews tried to escape and reached her family’s backyard – which bordered the forest – asking her mother for a glass of water. Then one of the Polish perpetrators came

running, tore a wooden beam from their fence, beat the man, and dragged him away to die.

According to her letters, the people living nearby knew the exact location of the grave. She herself remembered, as a child walking through the forest, seeing hands and other body parts protruding from the pit. She also recalled that when the killers returned from the forest, they rinsed the blood from their spades in the grass behind her family's house and warned the nearby residents – including her parents – that if they spoke about what had happened, they would share the Jews' fate. 'That is why,' she wrote, 'only now, in 1986 – after my mother's death – am I no longer afraid to talk about it.'³⁵

In her dozens of letters, she provided additional details about the killings in the forest near her house, the Polish perpetrators, the fate of her Jewish friends, and the widespread looting of Jewish property. Her correspondence also illuminates the postwar atmosphere in Rajgród – an environment overshadowed by denial of the Jews' murder, even though everyone knew who the perpetrators were and who had profited from Jewish belongings. The main purpose of her letters, however, was to protest what she called 'the profanation' of the Jews' resting place and the 'deliberate attempt to desecrate their memory' (*bezczezczenie pamięci*), and erase any trace of the crime.³⁶ She wrote that for several years a carcass-disposal facility of the firm *Bacutil* had been operating directly on the site of the mass grave, destroying it as animal remains were mixed with human bones and the area became contaminated. In addition, the site had turned into Rajgród's garbage dump: both the municipality and local residents discarded their waste there, causing irreversible damage and further desecration. Now, she warned, the town had begun preparatory work to build a new waste-disposal and liquid-waste treatment station on the very same site. Such plans, she cautioned, would obliterate the last traces of the crime and the memory of the dead, and she accused the authorities of ignoring her repeated pleas.

Halina Masztalerz continued sending her urgent pleas to all possible addressees; the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, state officials, and even to Łech Wałęsa, when he served as president at the beginning of the 1990s. She demanded not only that the contamination and profanation of the place be stopped, but also that it be recognized as a site of national martyrdom and a permanent monument be built there and even suggested that it would be donated by the inhabitants of Rajgród as an act of expiation, since 'many Rajgród residents benefited from the Jews' material possessions.'³⁷ Despite her passionate pleas, the contamination of the area continued. Town and district officials argued that the waste facilities could not be relocated to another place and that they were essential to the local economy, refusing to support her initiative to erect a memorial there. One of the local officials who heard her pleas told her ironically that 'maybe a monument will be built – but from garbage.'³⁸

Masztalerz often met with dismissive responses. Although she frequently wrote in her letters that many people were outraged by what was happening to the grave, she acted entirely on her own, without support. Nevertheless, her persistence and resourcefulness could not be ignored. Given the sensitivity of the letters' content, the matter was transferred to the inspection of voivodeship and state authorities, including the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland in 1987. Interestingly, the investigating committee didn't directly confront Masztalerz's version of the events, but simply stated that the Jews were murdered by the German occupiers – as opposed to

the findings of their predecessors a few decades earlier. While the latter admitted that ‘few dozen Jews were indeed killed’ in this particular forest, they nevertheless maintained that it was impossible to determine exactly where they are buried, ‘since wild animals dug up the grave and obliterated its outlines.’³⁹

In subsequent years the disputed area was further destroyed, due to the activity of the dump yard and the infrastructure work for the opening of the new landfill. These debates unfolded as waste management became an increasingly urgent municipal concern. In town council discussions from the mid-1980s, officials warned about villages and forests around Rajgród where residents were dumping garbage illegally, creating serious hygienic and health hazards.⁴⁰ As elsewhere in rural Poland, these sites were described as ‘wild dump yards’ (*dzikie wysypiska*) – informal dumping grounds in abandoned lots or forest clearings. Among them, the ‘Fir Tree Forest’ (*Las Choinki*) was repeatedly mentioned.⁴¹ The call for a modern, centralized landfill became a recurring theme in council meetings, reflecting mounting frustration through the late 1990s. As Poland prepared to join the European Union and the region sought to attract Western tourists, concerns over hygiene, order, and aesthetics only amplified the ‘problem’ of the forest site. These debates inevitably intersected with the persistent pleas of Halina Masztalerz, who continued to demand commemoration of the Jewish victims and accused local leaders of concealing the crime by placing the new landfill over their graves. When, after years of bureaucratic delays, funds were finally allocated for a new landfill – near the old dump – the underlying tension surfaced openly. Town leaders insisted there was no alternative location, arguing that the grave lay elsewhere: some claimed it was deeper in the forest, others noted that gravel excavations in the 1980s had revealed no human remains, while still others maintained that the bodies had been buried in the Jewish cemetery two kilometers away.⁴²

Masztalerz, who attended several council meetings, disputed these claims, presenting her own maps and arguing that the absence of remains resulted from decades of deliberate contamination and destruction. Even without physical traces, she insisted, the site must be protected and commemorated.⁴³ The mayor, accusing her of being ‘too emotional,’ promised to find other forms of commemoration but maintained that ‘this is one of the most important investments in our municipality.’ Regardless of the exact location of the killing site, he argued, moving the designated landfill elsewhere was simply impossible: the costs of preparing a new site and meeting environmental regulations would be too high.⁴⁴ The implicit logic was clear – since the forest had long served as a dump, it was the most ‘rational’ place for the new one.

Where exactly were the Jewish victims shot and buried – and are there truly no traces left? Perhaps the more pertinent question is not the precise location of the grave but how this particular site became so closely linked with garbage, making it the ‘natural’ choice for yet another waste facility. How did it come to serve, officially and unofficially, as the town’s dump yard?

The persistent use of this forest site for waste disposal, and the repeated insistence on its designation as Rajgród’s permanent dump, set it apart from other ‘wild dumps.’ It appears, in a sense, to have been *chosen* as an *ex-territorial*, abjected space – ‘a stinking reservoir for all sorts of waste [and] a poisoned rubbish dump,’ as Masztalerz described it. Even if residents and officials did not act with conscious intent, their practices are embedded in a broader communal pattern. Over time, habitual imitation has produced

a local tradition – a mimetic continuity that reinforces the site’s abject status. When asked why this particular place became a dump, locals simply replied, ‘It’s been like this for years.’ Such responses may suggest a tacit, unspoken recognition of the site’s negative aura – a collective accommodation to its charged presence, even if emptied of historical awareness.⁴⁵

This dynamic is indicative of a larger, well-documented phenomenon. Across Eastern Europe, Jewish mass graves and other killing sites often became ‘marked’ through waste – a pattern that suggests a deeper logic at work and testifies to the ‘strong symbolic link between the treatment of the dead and the treatment of refuse.’⁴⁶ In many places – some still visible today – the littering of such spaces has become ingrained in local folklore, functioning as a kind of negative material witness to the site’s unsettling history and dissonant atmosphere. In some cases, heaps of garbage remain the only physical markers of these locations, forming a rough, almost ‘natural’ boundary that sets them apart from their surroundings.⁴⁷ While the aggressive nature of such littering practices may not stem from deliberate intent, their persistence suggests a deeper symbolic dimension. These repeated acts of dumping and defilement can be understood as forms of *profanation* – symbolic gestures that both negate and acknowledge the charged presence of the site.⁴⁸ Through their recurring, almost ritual character, such practices desacralize the space, stripping it of historical or moral significance, yet at the same time mark it as distinct, as a place set apart from its surroundings.

This theoretical framing illuminates the tension at the heart of Rajgród’s ‘grave in the forest.’ The site’s repeated contamination and official designation as a dumping ground can be read as a communal response – conscious or not – to its moral and historical charge: an attempt to neutralize, efface, or simply respond to its unsettling presence. Yet paradoxically, these very gestures of defilement make the place more conspicuous, reinscribing the memory they seek to suppress. Instead of negating unwanted history, they preserve its material outlines; instead of diminishing the traces of the past, they negatively demarcate them in space. A similar paradox unfolds at the discursive level: debates over the precise boundaries of the grave and the siting of new waste facilities, though framed in technical or administrative terms, likewise intensify the site’s presence. Through these discussions, the unspoken nucleus of the story – the repressed murder of the town’s Jews by their neighbors – returns to the surface.

When we grasp this peculiar dynamic, it becomes clear that the very uncertainty surrounding the exact location of the murder site and mass grave has only heightened its unsettling presence and ambivalent place in local consciousness, endowing it with a vague yet powerful, almost phantom-like existence. Precisely because it was neither here nor there, it came to be felt everywhere. The inability to determine where the Jews were shot and buried – or whether any human traces remain at all – seems to have ‘infected’ the entire forest with a sense of menace, to the point that the forest itself became synonymous, in local discourse and folklore, with the repressed memory of the Jews’ fate. Thus, for example, as part of the local legend about the cruel deaths inflicted on the perpetrators, people tell of the killer who crashed his motorcycle and died next to the forest – a story recounted as a form of divine poetic justice. In these retellings, the forest itself appears as a cursed space, haunted by its history.

When speaking with people in contemporary Rajgród, it became clear to me how deeply the forest has come to be associated with something antagonistic and ominous.

More than once, a casual conversation with passersby took an unexpected turn when I mentioned the name of the forest.⁴⁹ During a friendly chat with a local restaurant owner about what to see and do in town, his cheerful demeanor abruptly changed when I said I wanted to visit the Fir Tree Forest. ‘Why do you want to go there?’ he asked suspiciously. ‘There’s nothing to see there.’ Another resident told a Polish journalist who asked if he knew where the forest was: ‘Everybody knows where it is, but nobody goes there – the mushrooms are all worm-eaten.’⁵⁰

Discussions about locating Rajgród’s new landfill continued into the new millennium, as did Halina Masztalerz’s opposition. Eventually, in the early 2000s, the town abandoned its plan to place the new dump in the disputed forest and began looking for other sites. Although officially explained by technical and bureaucratic hurdles, the shift may also have been influenced by the Jedwabne debate of 2000-2001, which drew national and international attention to the 1941 pogroms in northeastern Poland. While local participation in the murder of the Jews remained denied or unspoken, officials seemed to grasp the explosive potential of dealing too openly with the subject and quietly sought to resolve the matter of the grave, which was beginning to attract media interest.⁵¹ The site was never commemorated as Masztalerz had wished, but the old dump was gradually dismantled. Residents, however, kept throwing garbage there. In 2012, the local council formally banned dumping, fenced off the area, and posted signs warning of penalties – an indication of how strongly the place still invited waste.

Today, the section of forest believed to mark the 1941 massacre looks like an industrial wasteland: a scarred patch amid trees, enclosed by wire and broken concrete, heavy with neglect. Though ‘nobody goes there,’ as people often say, a few still do. Looking through the fence, one can see several large, fresh garbage bags scattered among the ruins (Figure 1).

The memorial

The beginning of the 2000s marked a crucial moment in Poland’s public engagement with its Jewish past. A decade after the Jedwabne debate and several years after Poland’s 2004 entry into the European Union, Jewish culture and Holocaust memory had become key arenas for negotiating national identity and historical responsibility.⁵² As Poland opened itself to the world, the ‘rediscovery’ of Jewish history in towns and cities across the country brought together non-Jewish activists, emerging Jewish communities, and descendants of Polish Jews abroad.⁵³ Yet this renewed attention was never purely celebratory. In the lingering shadow of Jan Gross’s *Neighbors*, a new generation of scholars and public activists pressed for a reckoning with Polish antisemitism and wartime complicity – provoking a defensive backlash from conservative and nationalist circles intent on preserving the narrative of Polish innocence and sacrifice.

The aftershocks of *Neighbors* were also felt in towns in the vicinity of Jedwabne, among them Rajgród.⁵⁴ In May 2001, amid national and international debates, the editor of the local newspaper – and the town’s unofficial historian – published a long piece titled ‘Neighbors in Rajgród.’ While he did not deny that local inhabitants had participated in the murder, abuse, and looting of Jewish property, he was careful to stress that some Jews had collaborated with the Soviets between 1939 and 1941. He concluded: ‘We should never rush to general and unequivocal conclusions. Not all Jews from



Figure 1. The location of the mass grave in the Fir Tree Forest (*Las Choinki*). Photograph by the author.

Rajgród collaborated with the NKWD and betrayed Poles. Not all Poles – residents of Rajgród – murdered Jews. Only the Germans are responsible for the Holocaust, and those Poles who murdered Jews succumbed to the savagery of those bestial times.⁵⁵ Despite its apologetic tone, the article represented the first public acknowledgment of Rajgród's involvement in the murder of its Jews, breaking a long-standing local silence. In subsequent issues of the local paper, several readers expressed satisfaction that people were finally 'trying to come to terms with their difficult history.' One contributor even shared an excerpt from his father's wartime diary, describing Rajgród residents as 'degenerates' and 'scoundrels' who had helped the Germans kill the Jews and plunder their property.⁵⁶ These tentative gestures of acknowledgment marked a subtle shift in local memory, though one that remained fragile and easily unsettled.

All through this period, public discourse around the wartime killings remained tense. In 2011, ten years after President Kwaśniewski's apology at the new Jedwabne memorial, the site was vandalized with swastikas and the slogans 'I am not sorry for Jedwabne' and 'They burned fast.' Acts like this, encouraged by the growing populist right, underscored how sensitive the question of local participation in the Holocaust still was. Within this climate, descendants of Rajgród Jews from around the world started an initiative to commemorate the Jewish community – which until then had not been memorialized in any way in the town. The group, consisting mainly of Israeli and American second-generation descendants of Jews whose parents emigrated from Rajgród before the Holocaust, came up with a plan to erect a monument at the site of the completely erased Jewish cemetery, on the outskirts of town. Neither the town nor district authorities were involved in the project; since the area of the cemetery is not owned by the town but rather by the Forest Authority, the former's approval to erect the memorial was not needed. The design of the memorial and the funding were provided solely by outside actors – the

group of Jewish descendants and the Warsaw-based Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage, the artist who created it was Israeli, and even the stone used to carve the memorial was a Jerusalem stone which was shipped to Poland by sea from Israel. The memorial consisted of two parts which are intersected in the middle by a gap, creating the shape of a Star of David. Next to it, there is a stone column with texts in Polish, English and Hebrew, providing historical background on the life and destruction of the Jewish community (Figure 2).

Conscious of the risks of controversy, the initiators of the project chose the wording of the inscription with particular care: 'In July 1941, the Germans established a ghetto to which all Jews were confined. During this period approximately one hundred Jews were murdered in Rajgród.' Although town and district leaders were not initially involved, they eventually joined the memorial's inauguration on September 18, 2014. The ceremony brought together Polish-Jewish activists from the region, representatives of the Jewish community in Warsaw – including Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich – a few local residents, and descendants of Rajgród's Jews from abroad. Speakers emphasized the importance of commemorating the Jews, recognizing their contribution to the town's development, and recalling Polish-Jewish coexistence. One descendant described Rajgród as 'a model of a town where Poles and Jews lived side by side,' while another recalled his father's pride in calling it 'our town.' Polish officials spoke empathetically about the victims. 'It is with great regret that such a fate befell them,' lamented a representative of the Forest Authority. A district official added: 'By reaching into the past, we are better able to grasp and look into the future. Given what is happening today, it is all the more necessary to return to the past and talk about it.'⁵⁷

Yet participants were careful not to probe too deeply. Throughout the event, no one – neither Poles nor Jews – mentioned or even hinted at the participation of local inhabitants in the murder of the town's Jews. From the speeches, it seemed as though Poles and Jews had lived peacefully together for centuries until the Germans arrived and



Figure 2. The memorial in the Jewish cemetery. Photograph by the author.

annihilated the community. The atmosphere was one of empathy and shared mourning; the memorial's unveiling was celebrated as both a moral gesture toward the town's former Jewish residents and a hopeful step toward the future.

Despite the harmonious and optimistic atmosphere during the inauguration, only three months later the memorial was brutally attacked; the upper part of the symbolic headstone was smashed and devastated, leaving a large asymmetrical void in its middle, violently rupturing the Star of David. It wasn't clear who committed the devastation, and due to lack of evidence the police investigation was discontinued. The local authority renounced responsibility for the memorial, arguing that it was located outside the municipal jurisdiction and that they could not guarantee the safety of the monument nor find the resources for its renovation. The prevailing explanation in town was that those responsible for the act were young hooligans from outside of Rajgród, but the nature and level of devastation of the memorial – a solid stone slab – shows the determination of the perpetrators, who had to come specifically to the location of the memorial and arrive prepared with the appropriate heavy tools to cause such substantial damage.⁵⁸

Several months after the devastation, the memorial was partly renovated, through the efforts of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage, only to be destroyed again a few months later. After the second devastation the memorial's initiators came to the conclusion that it would make no sense to renovate it again – since in its location it would probably be vandalized again. During the discussions, the idea of relocating the monument to the town center was raised, justified by the argument that it would be easier to protect it there; however, no further steps were taken. In the meantime, in May 2016 the memorial became yet again an object of profanation after it was sprayed with anti-semitic slurs. This time, the police argued that the perpetrator was arrested – a 16-year-old boy who escaped from a nearby juvenile correction facility.⁵⁹ The town made sure to remove the graffiti but not long afterwards the memorial suffered additional damage in an apparent attempt to set it on fire. Locals with whom I spoke told me about other attempts to demolish the memorial, in one of them a car deliberately smashed the stone but failed to break it (Figure 3).

The repetitive attempts to vandalize and destroy the monument in the Jewish cemetery render them a kind of ritualistic act, which discloses the extent to which the memorial is 'taken seriously' by the profaners – hence the concentrated efforts at obliterating the memory it represents. Whether or not the perpetrators are merely 'young hooligans,' they seem to adhere to the cultural pattern that characterizes the phenomenon of desecration of Jewish cemeteries after the Holocaust, which – according to Gertrud Koch – is 'a politics of (non)remembrance, which consists not only in disturbing the rest of the dead-as-enemies, but also in destroying the iconic representation system of their grave-stones and graveyards.'⁶⁰ But there seems to be something more to it in this particular case. Given what we know about the fate of Rajgród Jews and about the rooted communal mechanisms that governed the silencing of the pogrom, the recursive devastation of the memorial is perhaps yet another spatial manifestation of denial and symbolic violence which aims to obfuscate any trace of the past, in the most physical sense. As one former inhabitant who returns to his hometown every summer told me angrily: 'The murderers tried to destroy the grave in the forest, and now their descendants are trying to destroy the monument.' Just as the contamination of the mass grave in the



Figure 3. The demolished memorial in the Jewish cemetery. Photograph by the author.

forest paradoxically reaffirms the powerful presence of the obliterated object, there seems to be a similar dynamic at work here. The ongoing attempt to demolish the symbolic trace of the town's Jews invertedly achieves the opposite goal and perpetuates the memory of deadly violence and the undeniability of the past which is concurrently being disavowed.

The meaning of Holocaust memorials, as James Young argued, is determined not merely by its creators' intentions but by its reception and the relationship it maintains with its locale.⁶¹ The afterlife of the memorial in the Jewish cemetery of Rajgród appears to demonstrate this point. The ongoing attempts to demolish the monument in the cemetery do not necessarily prove the failure of commemoration. Rather, it negatively 'commemorates' the unsettling and antagonizing nature of the memory of the Jews in Rajgród.

Golgotha

A day before the unveiling of the Jewish cemetery memorial, on September 17, 2014, the town marked the 75th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland. The date – known in Poland as the International Day of the Siberian Deportee (Światowy Dzień Sybiraka) – was established in 2004 by former deportees and embraced by nationalist and anti-communist circles, highlighting Polish suffering under Soviet rule, especially that of Christian Poles deported to Siberia. In Rajgród, as every year, the anniversary was observed with a Via Dolorosa procession to the nearby Golgotha site, where participants carried a wooden cross through fourteen stations. Inaugurated in 2010 with great fanfare, the grandiose 'Golgotha of Rajgród,' or 'Rajgród's Calvary,' is among the newest and most striking calvary hills in Poland. Its stations form a semicircle around a central hill

depicting Christ on the cross, flanked by Mary, the mother of Jesus, and St. John the Apostle. Below the cross, an altar bears a relief of the crowned Polish eagle and the engraved dates of key events in the national calendar (Figure 4).

The initiative to build the local Golgotha came from the town's parish, which raised funds from congregants and received support from the local authorities. Though some residents criticized the project's extravagance and questioned why such a small town needed a sanctuary of this kind, it soon became a source of pride and a regional center of Catholic life – hosting pilgrimages, ceremonies, and patriotic commemorations.⁶² Constructing sacred replicas of Jerusalem's Golgotha has a long tradition in Poland. Yet while most calvaries date back centuries, newer ones blend Christian imagery of Christ's martyrdom with narratives of Polish sacrifice and suffering – reflecting the Church's enduring role in shaping national identity.⁶³ According to the local priest who initiated the project, the idea emerged in the summer of 2001 during a meeting with regional church leaders.⁶⁴

It was clear from the outset that the project was not purely religious. As its founder explained, 'I would like our Golgotha to have both a religious and patriotic character.'⁶⁵ Soon after its inauguration in 2010, the site hosted a *Way of the Cross* procession on September 17 – the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland. The cross was carried between stations by scouts, students, teachers, officials, foresters, and parish groups. At each stop, after brief prayers, participants read texts about Polish suffering under Soviet rule, forming what organizers described as a 'catechesis of the Polish Golgotha of the East' (*Golgota Wschodu*).⁶⁶

The religiously charged term 'Golgotha of the East' is dense with symbolic and historical meaning. By fusing the Passion of Christ with the suffering of the Polish nation under Soviet and communist rule, it became a central motif in nationalist-Catholic



Figure 4. The Golgotha of Rajgród. Photograph by the author.

commemorative discourse after 1989 – aligning the martyrological reading of Poland’s twentieth-century fate with anti-communist sentiment.⁶⁷ The term titles numerous literary works, journals, educational programs, historical exhibitions, semi-academic studies, memorial events, and sacral sites – all dedicated to commemorating Polish suffering under the Soviets, particularly the deportations to Siberia, the terror of the Gulag, and the Katyn massacre.⁶⁸ It functions not only as a powerful metaphor but also as an official commemorative category, enshrined in a 2008 parliamentary resolution honoring the victims of *Golgotha of the East*.⁶⁹

Images of Golgotha, the Via Dolorosa, and the Crucifixion have long been part of the Polish national imagination, serving as central representational figures of national suffering and grounding the Christian-patriotic conception of Polish messianic victimhood.⁷⁰ Since the fall of communism, however, imagery of the Crucifixion has increasingly been reframed through a nationalist lens, assuming a growingly central role in the political imagination and the commemoration of modern Polish history – particularly the Second World War and its aftermath.⁷¹ In Polish Catholic circles since 1945, the motif of Golgotha was also used to frame and interpret the Holocaust and the Jewish fate – a Christian martyrological vocabulary carrying complex and often conflicting implications, expressing both appropriation and exclusion, as well as inclusion and recognition.⁷² But in recent decades, invoking the Passion and the Cross in relation to the Holocaust has taken on an increasingly exclusive tone, often serving as a means of ‘Polonizing’ the Holocaust by ‘reclaiming’ sites associated with the Jewish fate and recasting Jewish victimhood as Polish martyrdom.⁷³ The use of the Cross, in this regard, is not only a declaration of faith but a performative act redefining spaces linked to the Jewish fate as sites of Polish suffering.⁷⁴ More than merely instrumentalizing religious symbols to serve a nationalist agenda, this discourse re-sacralizes them as national symbols, using them as mnemonic shields in the battle over who constitutes the ultimate innocent victim.⁷⁵ This tendency is evident, for example, in the Passion processions held at sites identified with Jewish mass murder – such as Birkenau, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Majdanek – where participants carry wooden crosses to honor the martyrdom of Catholic Poles during the Second World War. The site of Treblinka also features a permanent ‘Via Dolorosa’ installation whose stations lead visitors to the place where mostly Jewish prisoners were executed, now dotted with hundreds of crosses that render it a ‘Christian Golgotha.’⁷⁶

A similar symbolic logic shapes the post-communist notion of the ‘Golgotha of the East’ (*Golgota Wschodu*), referring to the suffering of Poles under Soviet rule. Here too, the martyrological language of the Crucifixion turns the story of persecution into *our story* – the collective drama of Polish-Catholic suffering and redemption – implying, through the very figure of Christ, a claim to the ultimate status of the innocent victim. While Polish Jews also suffered under Soviet terror, this symbolic field centers almost exclusively on Christian Poles and forms part of the broader endeavor of the ‘Holocaustisation’ of the Polish fate.⁷⁷ Framing the Polish martyrdom under the Soviets in terms of the Passion can therefore be understood as a way of reinstating Catholic-Polish victimhood by ‘dethroning’ the Holocaust from its paradigmatic memory of persecution, driven by a feeling of historical deprivation. ‘Hitler and his monstrous crimes have already been tried and condemned,’ we read in a text by the conservative Catholic Radio Maryja, ‘[and] Stalin and the communist system, guilty of the deaths of millions of victims,

including hundreds of thousands of Poles, remained unpunished. ... We call this vastness of monstrous Bolshevik evil the Golgotha of the East.⁷⁸

This metaphor harbors yet another layer: since the martyred victim is, by definition, immaculately innocent, any attempt to undermine the moral integrity or innocence of the Polish nation – viewed as the ‘Christ of Nations’ – must therefore be rejected and denied.⁷⁹ Such a narrative recenters Polish suffering while displacing the memory of the Holocaust and blocking any reflection on Polish participation in anti-Jewish violence. Pushed further, the ‘Golgotha of the East’ trope may even imply a moral logic for such violence: it draws on the traditional Christian notion of Jewish suffering as divine punishment for betraying Christ, now reconfigured through the widespread belief that Jews collaborated with the Soviets and thus betrayed the Poles. Within this symbolic field, denial and justification coexist paradoxically – the refusal to acknowledge Polish participation overlaps with its rationalization as an act of righteous retaliation. As a local saying common in postwar Rajgród put it: ‘Nothing happened. The Jews betrayed the Poles, and the Poles killed the Jews.’⁸⁰

This paradoxical logic of denial and justification operates within a broader cultural and political field in post-socialist Poland. Rooted in what Kate Korycki calls the ‘mythical conflation of Jewishness and communism,’ it ensures that any discussion of communist crimes inevitably turns into an accusation against the ‘Jew-as-essential-communist,’ a pattern that intensified after the Jedwabne debate.⁸¹ It thus sustains the dissonance whereby ‘nothing happened,’ and yet what *did* happen is cast as a just act of revenge. This very logic, as Elżbieta Janicka argues, is embodied in the modern Polish Golgotha, which enacts the phantom of *Żydokomuna* and thereby reactivates ‘an instrument of rationalization and moral legitimization’ of crimes committed against Jews by Poles.⁸² Seen from this perspective, framing the Polish wartime experience through the prism of Golgotha not only supersedes the Jewish victims but also operates as a coded reversal of moral positions – obliquely shifting the boundaries between those imagined as victims and those imagined as perpetrators.

But to what extent is this layered narrative of suffering and redemption invested in Rajgród’s Via Dolorosa? How do the town’s inhabitants themselves make sense of their local *Golgotha* amid the broader ‘competition’ of Polish and Jewish martyrologies and the unsettling wartime past? For most of those I spoke with, the *Golgotha* is woven naturally into Rajgród’s ritual geography – a new yet familiar element of Catholic life. At the same time, it is viewed as a site of patriotic significance, a link so self-evident that few even reflect on it. Regular wartime commemorations held there reinforce this dual identity, merging religious devotion and national memory into a single moral framework. The moment of its appearance is perhaps not accidental. Rajgród’s Golgotha emerged precisely when both national and local martyrdom narratives were being unsettled by renewed scrutiny of Polish involvement in Holocaust-era violence. It entered the commemorative landscape at a moment of moral uncertainty, offering a means to reaffirm communal identity under the sign of Catholic suffering – absorbing rather than confronting the tension between faith, nation, and memory as it played out across the local townscape.

Rather than being imposed from outside, the association between Golgotha and Rajgród’s uneasy past emerges intermittently within local talk. In online exchanges and casual conversations, Golgotha surfaced in reflections on the town’s history and

uneasy moral inheritance. One anonymous commenter in an internet discussion wrote: ‘After the war, on the site where the corpses of the Jews murdered in Rajgród were buried, a depository for animal bones was established. There is silence over those buried there. Stations of the Cross are being built – but not in the places where they should stand.’⁸³ Another man, born in Rajgród, voiced similar unease, remarking bitterly that the funds used to maintain the Golgotha might be better spent protecting the memorial at the Jewish cemetery from further destruction.⁸⁴ Such statements are rare, yet precisely for that reason they are revealing. As the founders of the Italian microhistory school remind us, such limited and marginal voices act as ‘indicators of meaning which can potentially assume general dimensions’ – offering crucial clues to what is otherwise unspoken and exploring what is censured or concealed.⁸⁵ They show that the local Golgotha, though cast as a religious site, functions within a broader moral economy of commemoration – pulled into the same contested field of martyrdom and memory that shapes Poland’s postwar landscape, where national narratives are reworked within the micro-spatial drama of the town. In a landscape saturated with images of the Crucifixion – where faith and history remain deeply intertwined – any monument to suffering inevitably becomes part of this struggle over meaning. As Halina Masztalerz, herself a devout Catholic, remarked with quiet irony about Rajgród’s Golgotha: ‘They should have added another station – in memory of the Jews murdered here in the forest.’

Conclusion

Analyzing the concept of ‘Battlefield of Memory’ in the context of Polish-Jewish relations, Sławomir Kaprański writes:

The conflict over the landscape does not stop when one of the competing groups is no longer in the competition but turns into a passive conflict of memories. ... In such a situation, the memory of the group that perished and its material representations can be manipulated in an unrestricted way by those who remained. Landscape preserves what the group wants to remember; that which the group wants to forget is destroyed, neglected or preserved in a distorted way.⁸⁶

If we examine the contemporary townscape of Rajgród as a ‘Battlefield of Memory’ we might see how the desecrated memorial in the Jewish cemetery, the phantom mass grave in the forest, and the local Golgotha maintain a relational proximity and mirror each other. Placing them together on the same ‘symbolic axis’ shows a clear hierarchy that dictates which monument should be preserved and which should be destroyed, and, accordingly, which historical memory must be remembered, and which must be forgotten or erased. But it also seems to show the persistent presence of those troubling episodes from the past, whose negation discloses their power. Placing these three sites on the same triadic nexus, and analyzing their place in the local discourse, allows us to ponder to what extent these different material metonyms are locked in a dialectical interplay over the memory of what had happened here in the summer of 1941.

Seen from this perspective, the ambivalent and multilayered association of the mass grave in the forest with waste and garbage, and the spectral ambience it continuously radiates, are in a way transformed into a repeating vandalism of the monument in the Jewish cemetery. This dynamic, which seems to amplify the presence of the disputed

object, perhaps receives symbolic expression in the local reenactment of Golgotha, with its religious and historical overtones. Thus, the communal forces that maintained the conspiracy of silence over the murder of the Jews by their neighbors, and sustained the negation of history, continue to bolster the community's sense of innocence by reclaiming the role of the victim and recasting the local story of martyrdom. Yet in doing so, they also reveal the fragility of this hermetic narrative – the crack through which the repressed story endures, creating the potential for telling and retelling alternative versions of the past.

Notes

1. See Gross, *Neighbors*. For a general overview of the 1941 pogroms in northeastern Poland see Bender, “Not Only in Jedwabne”; Żbikowski, “Pogromy i mordy”; Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*; Tryczyk, *Miasta pogromów*. For a synthetic analysis of the pogroms in the entire Eastern Polish borderlands, see Kopstein and Wittenberg, *Intimate violence*. On the Jedwabne affair and its aftermath in the academic and public discourse see Polonsky and Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond*; Forecki, *Po Jedwabnem*.
2. For an example of such studies, see Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence*.
3. Welingstein, Finkelstein, and Shenhav, *Rajgród*; Spector and Wigoder, *The Encyclopedia*, 1055.
4. Sobolewski, *Rajgród*, 71–2.
5. Welingstein, Finkelstein, and Shenhav, *Rajgród*, 28.
6. “Rajgród”, in *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of Ghettos*, https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/he/research/ghettos_encyclopedia/ghetto_details.asp?cid=1039.
7. Sobolewski, *Okupacja sowiecka*, 7–14.
8. Jerzy Sadowski, “Pierwsza sowiecka okupacja Polski,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 198 (8), August 2006), 22; Arkadiusz Chyliński, “Okupacja sowiecka,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 10 (289), November–December 2014, 28–32. The stereotypical conviction that Jews, as a whole, welcomed the Soviets and collaborated with them against Poles appeared frequently in wartime underground reports. See Libionka, “ZWZ-AK.” For a deconstruction of the commonly held accusation in Jewish collaboration see, among others, Gross, “Jewish Community”; Żbikowski, “Pogroms in Northeastern Poland,” 348. For an exhaustive examination of Polish-Jewish relations under the Soviet occupation, see Żbikowski, *U genezy Jedwabnego*.
9. Sobolewski, *Rajgród*, 137.
10. Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, 305. In Jedwabne, too, some of the principal perpetrators had previously served the Soviet authorities. See Gross, *Neighbors*, 117.
11. Żbikowski, “Pogromy i mordy,” 184–5. Most of the information about the murder of Rajgród's Jewish community comes from postwar investigations conducted in communist Poland, preserved in the Białystok branch of the Archive of the Institute of National Memory (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej – AIPN). Another key source is the 1947 testimony of Lejb Lewintin, who escaped Rajgród after the German invasion and later gathered information from Poles during his postwar visits to the town. Additional evidence includes later accounts by Polish residents published in local and regional periodicals and private letters, as well as a fragmentary testimony of a Jewish man who managed to flee on the day of the pogrom.
12. Tryczyk, *Towns of Death*, 306.
13. Żbikowski, “Pogroms,” 333–5; Datner, *Zagłada*, 119.
14. Archiwum Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego (AŻIH), Testimony of Lejb Lewintin, 301/2600; 301/3149.
15. Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, 306; Bender, “Not Only in Jedwabne,” 22. Archiwum Akt Nowych (AAN), letters of Halina Masztalerz to various authorities 1986–2001, Rada

- Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa (ROPWiM), 63/82; AIPN Bi, 1/1028, investigation of Halina Prostko-Maształercz, 17 February 1987.
16. Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, 308; Żbikowski, “Pogromy i mordy,” 185.
 17. Tryczyk, *The Towns of Death*, 309.
 18. AŻIH, Testimony of Lejb Lewintin, 301/2600; 301/3149.
 19. Janusz Sobolewski, “Śąsiedzi po Rajgrodzku,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 134–135 (4–5), May 2001, 22.
 20. Megargee, Dean, and Hecker, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia*, 945.
 21. Archiwum Państwowe w Suwałkach Oddział w Elk (APE), Akta Miasta Rajgrodu, 150/49, 4 October 1946.
 22. Tryczyk, *Towns of Death*, 315.
 23. The legal basis for the postwar judicial proceedings was the so-called August 1944 Decrees. See Kornbluth, *The August Trials*.
 24. Tryczyk, *Towns of Death*, 315. The judicial handling of the matter resembled its counterpart in Jedwabne. See Persak, “Jedwabne before the Court.”
 25. APE, Akta Miasta Rajgrodu, 150/8, List of town council members, 1 September 1948.
 26. The historian Szymon Datner briefly mentioned the events in Rajgród in his posthumously published monograph on the extermination of the Jews in the area of Białystok. See Datner, *Zagłada*, 119.
 27. This dynamic of retraction from the previous incriminating confessions was evident also in the investigation of the murder in Jedwabne. Jan Gross attributes this change of versions to “assorted instruments of informal pressure potent in a small-town community.” See Gross, *Neighbors*, 82.
 28. Yad Vashem Archive, T.R 10/1823, Letter of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland to the Central Office for Investigation of Nazi Crimes, 10 September 1969.
 29. The testimonies from Rajgród were collected by the director of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, who compiled the concluding investigation summary presented to the German legal authorities, which had requested the renewed inquiry.
 30. Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims*, 177–21. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 75–88.
 31. Ireneusz Sewatianowicz, “Wcześniej był Rajgród,” *Gazeta Współczesna*, March 23 2001.
 32. Interview with Halina Maształercz, Rajgród, 5 September 2024; Interview with J.S., Rajgród, 17 September 2025.
 33. For example, in Jedwabne, local lore tells of perpetrators who later suffered deadly illnesses, of children born with disabilities, and of mysterious deaths. See Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence*, 81.
 34. In the 1960s, Halina Maształercz moved to Białystok, where she worked as a teacher but continued to spend her summers in the family house in the village. She still lives in Białystok today and stays in Rajgród from June to November each year.
 35. AAN, Urząd do Spraw Wyznań (UdW), 132/238, letter of Halina Maształercz to the Jewish Theater, 21 September 1986.
 36. Most of the letters are stored in AAN, ROPWiM, 63/82.
 37. AAN, ROPWiM, 63/82, Chairman of the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites, 3 June 1986.
 38. Private collection of Halina Maształercz, letter to the Head of the Local Town Council, 15 September 2023.
 39. AAN, ROPWiM, 63/82, Report of the Łomża office of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, 25 February 1987.
 40. Archiwum Państwowe w Białymstoku Oddział w Łomży (APŁ), Rada Narodowa i Urząd Miasta i Gminy w Rajgrodzie, 33, Presidium of the National Council of Rajgród, 11 June 1987.

41. APL, Rada Narodowa i Urząd Miasta i Gminy w Rajgrodzie, 73, protocols of Environment Protection Committee discussions, 27 November 1984; 10 September 1985; 14 November 1985.
42. “Wieści z Grodu Raj,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 5 (87), May 1997, 2–3.
43. Halina Masztalerz, “List otwarty do rady miejskiej w Rajgrodzie,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 11 (117), November 1999, 4.
44. Zygmunt Dziądziak, “Odpowiedź burmistrza Rajgrodu,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 11 (117), November 1999, 5.
45. For a summarizing theoretical discussion on how people operate through embodied skills, habits, and styles, rather than through deliberate adherence to values or doctrines, see Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies.” On the unconscious reproduction of a symbolic social structure see Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.
46. Anstett, “What Is a Mass Grave?,” 185.
47. Weizman, *Unsettled Heritage*, 137; Sendyka, “Uncommemorated Sites of Genocide,” 24.
48. For an interesting theoretical distinction between ‘profanation, and ‘desecration’, see Grimes, “Desecration of the Dead.”
49. Most of my ethnographic impressions were gathered in situ—through field work and spontaneous, often unplanned conversations with residents of Rajgród whom I encountered in the street, while buying groceries, sitting in a café, or in the immediate vicinity of the spaces discussed in this article. Experience has shown me that this approach is far more effective than conducting formal interviews, especially when engaging with sensitive and emotionally charged topics, or when seeking to grasp the level of practical consciousness and tacit knowledge. On the advantages of such ethnographic practice, see Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method.”
50. Pytlakowski, *Strefa niepamięci*, 12.
51. Sewatianowicz, “Wcześniej był Rajgród.”
52. Glowacka and Zylinska, *Imaginary Neighbors*; Michlic, “The Jews.”
53. Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited*; Murzyn-Kupisz, “Rediscovering the Jewish Past.”
54. On the reactions by townspeople of Jedwabne, see Wolentarska-Ochman, “Collective Remembrance.” For a comprehensive review of how regional historical studies have dealt with the 1941 pogroms, see Majewski, “Pogromy a Podlasie.”
55. Janusz Sobolewski, “Sąsiedzi,” 22.
56. Tadeusz Poziemski, “Listy Opinie,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 7–8 (137–8), August 2001, 11; Wojciech Więckowski, “Zaświadczenie z Pieczętka,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 6 (136), June 2001, 14.
57. Janusz Sobolewski, “Rededekacja cmentarza żydowskiego w Rajgrodzie,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 288 (9), April 2014), 22–23.
58. Agnieszka Domanowska, “Pomnik na cmentarzu zniszczony od pół roku. I nikt go nie naprawił,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 21 May 2015, <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,17953123,pomnik-na-cmentarzu-zniszczony-od-pol-roku-i-nikt-go-nie-naprawil.html>.
59. “16-latek zniszczył pomnik upamiętniający dawny cmentarz żydowski w Rajgrodzie,” *Dziennik.pl*, 31 May 2016, <https://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/wydarzenia/artykuly/522116,16-latek-zniszczył-pomnik-upamietniajacy-dawny-cmentarz-zydowski-w-rajgrodzie.html>.
60. Koch, “Between Fear,” 81.
61. Young, *Texture of Memory*.
62. “Daniel,” *comment on* “Równanie szans w Rajgrodzie,” e-Grajewo.pl, 4 November 2007, <https://e-grajewo.pl/wiadomosc,rownanie-szans-w-rajgrodzie,4676.html>.
63. On the national and patriotic dimensions in contemporary Catholic shrines in Poland, see Niedźwiedz, “Competing sacred places.”
64. The clergy’s initiative was part of a larger attempt to strengthen the religious status of the local diocese. A year before, in 2000, thousands of people attended the coronation of the Image of Our Lady of Rajgród in the parish church, where it was crowned with a Papal Cross. This event joined a long-standing Polish tradition of crowning Marian images in

- shrines – a tradition that in recent years is becoming increasingly merged with patriotic sensibilities – most notably in Licheń and Jasna Góra.
65. “Droga Krzyżowa przy sanktuarium,” *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 5–6 (160–161), June–July 2003, 19.
 66. Marian Podlecki, *Z życia parafii*, *Rajgrodzkie Echa* 9 (247), September 2010, 9.
 67. Kosicki, “Forests, Families, and Films,” 741.
 68. Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper, *Milieux de Mémoire*, 68n132.
 69. “Uchwała Sejmu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 17 września 2008 r. w sprawie upamiętnienia ofiar ‘Golgoty Wschodu,’” 17 September 2008, <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WMP20080700628/O/M20080628.pdf>.
 70. In the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Sorrows near Starachowice, for example, a 33-meter-high monumental ‘Golgotha’ complex was built in the late 1980s, where, according to its website, ‘the suffering of Christ and the suffering of the Polish nation merge into one.’ Another example is the ‘Golgotha of the Polish Nation’ in Kałków-Godów. See Bogumił and Głowacka-Grajper, *Milieux de Mémoire*, 51–86.
 71. On the many usages and meanings of the cross in contemporary Poland, see Waligórska, *Cross Purposes*.
 72. The image of Golgotha entered Polish reflections on Auschwitz already during the war, as in Zofia Kossak-Szczucka’s 1942 underground book *Golgota*, which framed the extermination of the Jews in theological terms. Later, Pope John Paul II’s 1979 declaration that “Auschwitz is the Golgotha of our times” (*Golgota naszych czasów*) gave this imagery renewed resonance and invited diverse interpretations within Polish Catholic thought. For some, especially within more conservative and nationalist circles, it provided a framework that tended to “Christianize” or universalize the Holocaust, aligning Jewish suffering with a broader narrative of Polish martyrdom. Others, particularly among more liberal theologians and clergy, drew on the same language to express empathy toward Jews and to confront the moral and theological challenge of Auschwitz while preserving the distinctiveness of Jewish suffering. These debates reflected the wider postwar effort within Polish Christianity to reconcile faith with the memory of evil, redemption, and the meaning of Jewish fate in history. For the various strands of reflection in Polish Catholic circles regarding Auschwitz and the Holocaust, see Obirek, “Dialog chrześcijańsko-żydowski”; Barcik, “A my mamy Kolbego’.”
 73. As was demonstrated in the War of Crosses during the 1980s and 1990s in Auschwitz-Birkenau. See Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*.
 74. Incorporating Christian symbols into Jewish or Holocaust-related contexts can convey an alternative meaning. For example, in rural areas, signposts pointing to Jewish cemeteries occasionally feature a cross. This is not necessarily an effort to ‘Christianize’ these spaces, but rather to signify that these locations are regarded, at least in name, as “religious sites.”
 75. Zubrzycki, “The Cross,” 134.
 76. Elżbieta Janicka, “Negacjonizm po Polsku. Na czym polega? Tłumaczy badaczka antysemityzmu i Holokaustu,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19 April 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/alehistoria/7,121681,30891534,eldorado-treblinka-zaczynalo-sie-na-stacji-tlum-oblegal-pociagi.html>.
 77. Janicka, “Instead of Negationism,” 249. Janicka reads the Monument to the Fallen and Murdered in the East in Warsaw—known as the “Golgotha of the East”—as a bid to assert the symbolic dominance of the national-Catholic narrative within patriotic discourse. By co-opting Holocaust imagery, particularly in the former Ghetto area identified with Jewish trauma, the monument reframes Polish-Christian suffering as the central wartime experience. Situated near the Umschlagplatz, it forms part of what she calls the “Muranów axis.”
 78. <https://www.radiomaryja.pl/kosciol/ojciec-swiety-jan-pawel-ii-oredownik-golgoty-wschodu/>.
 79. In the heat of the Jedwabne debate, after Gross’s publication of *Neighbors* in 2000, a reader in one of the Polish magazines proposed that the book be awarded the Nike Award (the highest literary prize in Poland) for ‘removing Poland—the Christ of Nations—from the cross.’ See Janion, “Wprowadzenie,” 7.

80. "... a nic takiego się nie stało. Żydi wydawały Polakof, to Polaki wymordowały Żydof [sic]." Private collection of Halina Masztalerz, letter to the Head of the Local Town Council, September 15 2023.
81. Korycki, "Politicized Memory," 2, 7.
82. Janicka, "Instead of Negationism," 257.
83. Cited in Domanowska, "Polacy mordowali Żydów. Rajgród - kolejne Jedwabne," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13 September 2015, <https://bialystok.wyborcza.pl/bialystok/7,35241,17562872,polacy-mordowali-zydow-rajgrad-kolejne-jedwabne.html>.
84. Interview with J.S. Rajgród, 17 September 2025.
85. Edoardo Grendi, quoted in Levi, "On Microhistory," 1992, 109. For the notion of the 'clue' in microhistorical analysis, see Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads."
86. Kapralski, "Battlefields of Memory," 37.

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