

Jewish Cemeteries in Warsaw

Ewa Nekanda-Trepka

The history of the Jewish community in Warsaw dates back to the beginning of the 15th century. It was then that approximately 120 Jews lived within the limits of the municipal walls and had their own synagogue. Unfortunately, the first signs of intolerance with respect to this community made their appearance at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries. Successive centuries were interspersed with periods of restrictions on the settling of Jews in the developing city and those fostering greater freedoms. The first cemetery was located south of the Old Town, along today's Royal Way. However, since no trace of it remains, its precise site is impossible to establish.

New legal regulations from the end of the 18th century univocally defined the rights of Jews in Warsaw. At that time, however, the community was deprived of its own necropolis and, for this reason, its dead had to be taken to neighbouring localities. The first cemetery was founded in the mid-18th century on the right bank of the Vistula River, on the grounds of the Targówek property, outside the city limits. It was formally sanctioned by an entitlement issued by King Stanislaw August in 1780. The entitlement was granted to Szmul (Samuel) Jakubowicz, known as Zbytkower, the royal purveyor and banker. At that time, the cemetery occupied an area of approximately 0.8 hectares.

A Jewish community was formed in 1797 and questions of the settlement of Jews were regulated in 1799 when they became subordinate to general administration and

court jurisdiction. This was the period when, in the wake of Poland's loss of independence in 1795, Prussians governed Warsaw for over a dozen years. In 1799 the Jewish community also received the right to establish a new cemetery on the left bank of the Vistula River. The location designated for the cemetery was outside the western limits of the city, beyond the Lubomirski Battlements (today's Okopowa Street line) between two Protestant cemeteries (Lutheran and Reformed) founded in 1792 as well as a Roman Catholic cemetery, called the Powązki since then and founded in 1790.

Jews settled on both sides of the river in increasingly growing numbers throughout the 19th century. However, they did not inhabit any defined part on the eastern, Praga, side. In the western part they usually selected streets in the northwest section, between the Old Town and the Lubomirski Battlements. It is from this district (precincts IV and V) that a pedestrian walkway leading directly to the cemetery was built as an extension of Gęsia Street. The Jewish community grew continuously throughout the 19th century, which also resulted in a need to enlarge both cemeteries. The Okopowa Street cemetery was always considered the more prestigious, which is why it was the site for tombstones of high artistic quality along specially designed avenues. Chestnut and poplar tree plantings were conducted in the second half of the 19th century. The complex was supplemented by pre-funeral buildings. At the same time, the

Fig. 1 Aerial view of Okopowa Street Cemetery, 1945 (City of Warsaw, Department of Surveying and Cadastres, BGiK)



Fig. 2 Aerial view of Bródno Cemetery, 1945 (City of Warsaw, Department of Surveying and Cadastres, BGiK)



death of space resulted in burials taking place on the sites of previous ones. New earth was added and, as stated in topical literature, there were gravesites with up to fourteen levels by the outbreak of World War II. The Tartar cemetery was established to the west in the years 1838–1839. A second Tartar cemetery was founded somewhat farther north 30 years later. It is thanks to this that a unique complex of six cemeteries of various denominations emerged.

The Bródno Cemetery (Targówek district) was where less affluent Jews were buried in the 19th century. At that time, the cemetery was often described as neglected. Its tombstones were not as striking and the burials themselves were less expensive. The funeral home was a timber structure and the cemetery was not entirely fenced off, which is why there were complaints about it being used as a pasture. A large new Roman Catholic cemetery was established northeast of the *kirkut* in the years 1883–1884. The two were separated by a small street (Rzeszowska Street). This cemetery was destroyed and devastated during World War I.

Efforts were made at putting both cemeteries in order following the regaining by Poland of its independence in 1918. It was especially the Bródno Cemetery that was in need of work. New plantings were made, destroyed tombstones were set upright, and fencing was erected. The Okopowa Street Cemetery was enlarged, but this did not alleviate its shortage of space for long. Efforts to locate a new cemetery even farther west of the city proved unsuccessful. The Jewish community numbered 300–330 000 prior to World War II.

Forced resettling of Jews from the right bank part of the city to a district with a majority population of Jewish heritage followed the entry of the German army into Warsaw in 1939. That part of the city was cut off from the rest on November 16, 1940, creating the Ghetto. The Okopowa Street Cemetery was also found within the Ghetto limits. About 360,000 Jews from Warsaw and 90,000 from other localities were concentrated on an area of approximately 307 hectares (the area was later decreased). The death rate was extremely high, so the dead were not only buried in the cemetery, but also on adjacent land. Approximately 300,000 people were moved by the Germans to the Treblinka death camp. The Ghetto Uprising broke out in April 1943. It continued into November. Battles costing the lives of people were accompanied by the systematic liquidation of the Ghetto by the occupant. The remaining population was taken to death camps and the Ghetto area was, for all practical purposes, razed to the ground. The cemetery was not destroyed. However, the Jewish cemetery, like the two Protestant cemeteries were the sites of insurgent fighting during the successive uprising that erupted in Warsaw in August 1944 with the intent of accelerating liberation. Many tombstones suffered and buildings were damaged. The Bródno Cemetery, after people of Jewish heritage left that part of the city, began to fall into ruin. The Germans took the decision to liquidate it in 1941. The fencing was demolished and approximately 4,000 stone tombstones were removed as building material for roads and new buildings.

Warsaw, working for its rebirth and the return of residents in the wake of enormous destruction, had only a very small Jewish community. Waves of emigration to Israel in the years 1956 and 1968 made that group even smaller, and



Fig. 3 The main avenue of Okopowa Street Cemetery, 2011 (photo by E. Nekanda-Trepka)

many of those who stayed in Warsaw did not own up to their heritage. The tiny Jewish community cared for a single synagogue and the enormous Okopowa Street Cemetery to the best of its ability. The Bródno Cemetery found itself overgrown by young trees to an ever-increasing extent and was treated as “vacant” land. Over the 1980s, thanks to the Nissenbaum Family Foundation, it was fenced off and some of the tombstones were used to form a *lapidarium* of extremely dramatic expression. The design was developed by the architect Bogusław Cyliński. It is of very high artistic quality, but also very serene. Unfortunately, unsupervised and deprived of care it suffered devastation and desecration over successive years.

Following the fall of the socialist system in 1989, the approach to the Jewish community and the heritage left by it changed. This resulted in a strengthening of the Jewish community and a return to their identity by people who, up to that time, had not maintained any ties with it. However, compared with the pre-war population professing the Jewish faith, it accounts for a mere 0.0016 percent (500 people).

Protection and conservation work

The Okopowa Street Cemetery is an active burial ground. Funerals are conducted there to this day. Together with adjacent cemeteries – the Roman Catholic cemetery, known as Powązki as well as two Protestant and two Tartar cemeteries – it was inscribed into the Register of Historical Monuments on July 1, 1965. Currently, the irregularly-shaped cemetery occupies an area of 33.4 hectares. Approximately 150,000 people were buried here up to 1939. About 100,000 people died in the Ghetto during the war, but only a few were buried in individual graves at the cemetery.

The main avenue starts at the gate and leads north, along the eastern boundary. It is the site of almost all important historical tombstones. Accessibility of the western section is currently impeded due to many years of neglect and self-seeding. Today, the elimination and control of invasive vegetation is one of the main problems facing this cemetery. Poland’s legal regulations state that permission for the elimi-



Fig. 4 Falling tombstones demonstrating tree-derived neglect of the burial ground, Okopowa Street Cemetery, 2011 (photo by E. Nekanda-Trepka)

Fig. 5 The tombstone of Jakub Kirsztrot, designed by Henryk Kuna in 1933, Okopowa Street Cemetery



nation of vegetation from sites inscribed in the Register of Historical Monuments is granted by the relevant heritage protection director. However, the legal basis is legislation governing nature protection, not heritage protection and care. Trees less than ten years old may be removed without any official permit. Older trees may only be removed if their health is poor and they are a hazard to human life and property, in this case the historic tombstones. A permit must be procured for the cutting down of such trees and a specialized company with experience encompassing historical sites must perform work. The lack of reaction to the growth of young trees means that, after a few years, a formal permit is necessary. Such absence of monitoring of cemetery vegetation is also a problem facing other historical cemeteries. The most recent amendments to the Act on Nature Protection also apply the additional need to check if trees earmarked for cutting are not the site of nesting birds or other protected species of fauna or flora. In theory, in putting larger tree-covered areas in order, the performance of an inventory and landscape design, or at least a tree management plan is indicated. In this case, it is exceptionally difficult and costly, which is why assessments are performed by experienced persons on the site and trees designated for felling are simply marked. Such a process will have to be entered as a permanent principle of conservation of this area. Work is made even more difficult by the fact that root and branch systems hide thousands of burial locations and tombstones. Neglected tree stands are also more sensitive to gale-force winds. The 2006 summer rainstorms and winds broke and tore out many trees, destroying cemetery tombstones in this part of the city.

Intervention was necessary. Historical tombstones along the main avenue, of natural or artificial stone, are the source of conservation problems similar to those at other cemeteries. In this case, however, the situation is much clearer. Tombstones from the beginning of the 20th century and the interwar period simply lack any caretakers. Relatives of the deceased either died themselves or left Poland. Tombstones from the beginning of the 20th century are rather typical, while those dating from the interwar period usually have high artistic value. The stone sculptures were designed by the best artists of that period. Moreover, people buried here are of special significance to culture, both Jewish and Polish. They include artists, writers, lawyers, medical doctors, scientists, and other significant figures. During the 1980s, Polish volunteer activists conceived and implemented the idea of creating “public committees” for looking over the historical monuments of cemeteries. Some of these committees received the support of the Society for the Care of Historical Monuments (TONZ) – the continuator of a similar society dating from the end of the 19th century. The same is true of the Jewish cemetery. The committees are charged with evaluating and selecting tombstones that shall be subject to conservation in the upcoming year, developing conservation work programs, and procuring funding for work. The primary source of financing is an annual public collection conducted at historic cemeteries on November 1st. Although this is a Roman Catholic holiday, the collection is held at all historic cemeteries, including the Jewish one. The missing funds are usually attracted in the form of subsidies out of

the state or local government budgets. Over recent years, the Capital City of Warsaw earmarked 230,000 zlotys (60,000 €) for this purpose. The money was used to perform work on the following tombs:

- In 2008: Jakub Epstein, Lewi Horowitz, Judy Leib Salinger, Daniel Neufeld, Israel the son of Naftala Hertz from Ciećmierz, Majer and Ludwika Bergson;
- In 2009: Miriam the daughter of Jehudy from Kutno, Maurycy i Wilhelm Levy, Bernard Leśmian and Izaak and Stasia Kramsztyk, Jakub Kirsztrot.

The Okopowa Street Cemetery also has monuments devoted to national remembrance. The monuments commemorate Polish Jews who fought for the independence of their homeland during World War I and World War II, were killed at Katyń, or died in the Ghetto. The boundaries of the Ghetto were marked in 2009 thanks to the initiative of the Capital City of Warsaw. Two of the 22 plaques are found on the cemetery wall.

The Bródno Cemetery in today's Targówek district is a closed cemetery. The last and simultaneously symbolic burial there took place on December 8, 1947. It was then that the remains of Jews were laid in a "brotherly grave". Destroyed and forgotten immediately after the war, in spite of several efforts at putting it in order, it was not until 1985 that it was given a fence and remembrance. In practice, the layout of almost all its avenues has been obscured. The land is flat and grown over by young, fifty-year-old woodland, mainly made up of pine and birch trees. Stone tombstones – overturned, damaged, and covered by mosses, grass, and shrubs – may still be found among the trees. In the 1980s, the grounds were fenced off and the overturned tombstones were used to create a unique *lapidarium*. The designs for the fencing, gates, and monument are exceptionally suggestive. Unfortunately, the cemetery was not effectively closed off and was not subject to official protection as a historical monument. At the same time, the cemetery remains the property of the State Treasury, not of the Jewish community. As a forested area in the centre of the city, it was used by neighbouring inhabitants as a recreational wooded park. At the same time tombstones were devastated by hooligans. Anti-Semitic graffiti are a particular annoyance. Efforts were undertaken in 2007 to have the cemetery grounds inscribed on the Register of Historical Monuments. At the same time, effective supervision over the cemetery grounds was initiated by municipal services and the tombstones were cleaned. Local schools were approached and young people were encouraged to take the cemetery under their special care. Special scientific studies were performed on the basis of archives, written sources, cartography, and iconography, inclusive of an assessment of the state of preservation, so as to encompass the cemetery grounds by legal heritage protection. This documentation indicated that the fencing erected in the 1980s left a major part of the cemetery beyond its limits. There was no choice as to the decision defining the boundaries of heritage protection. It was the historical boundary of the cemetery that was important, not the area delineated by fencing. On May 5, 2009 the cemetery was finally inscribed on the Register of Historical Monuments.



Fig. 6 The main gate to Bródno Cemetery, 2011 (photo by E. Nekanda-Trepka)



Fig. 7 The lapidarium of Bródno Cemetery, 2011 (photo by E. Nekanda-Trepka)

Unfortunately, several decades ago, planners, unfamiliar with historical conditions, designed a new express road along the fencing, running through the cemetery. That road was never built during the time of the previous government system due to a lack of money. It was only recently, when the decision was taken to start planning work that it turned out that the road passes through the site of the historic cemetery. There was no certainty as to whether this section actually served burials, as this was a part last added to the 18th century cemetery. Following consultations with the Jewish community, studies were conducted using ground-penetrating radar (GPR). Numerous burial sites were discovered. This raises a question mark over construction of the new road or requires a technical solution that will not violate the religious principles of the Jews. There is close collaboration with the Jewish community. At the same time, the Jew-

ish community is striving to have the cemetery returned, declaring its readiness to care for the cemetery and hoping to enlarge the *lapidarium* to include tombstone fragments found in various places outside the cemetery. Tombstones from the Jewish cemetery were found in the border structure of a rose garden built at Warsaw's Zoo in the 1960s, for example.

Today, both of Warsaw's Jewish cemeteries, after existing for over 200 years, are under the legal protection of the State. Difficulties stemming from their protection are completely different, however. Problems faced by the Okopowa Street Cemetery are like those troubling the cemeteries of other faiths that are still active – the state of preservation of historic tombstones, protection against devastation and theft, and control of invasive vegetation. The Bródno Cemetery is a monument that should be made accessible and properly displayed. Its vast size and woodland character impede security against devastation and desecration. In both cases the guarantor of the accomplishment of protection-oriented tasks is collaboration among institutions responsible for protection of historical monuments and the Jewish community.

Zusammenfassung

Jüdische Friedhöfe in Warschau

Die Geschichte der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Warschau geht bis in das 15. Jahrhundert zurück. Der erste Friedhof wurde südlich der Altstadt gefunden und existiert nicht mehr. Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts wurde am Ufer des Vistula Flusses auf der rechten Seite ein Friedhof gegründet. 1799 wurde der jüdischen Gemeinschaft das Recht verliehen, einen neuen Friedhof auf der linken Seite des Flusses zu errichten. Der Friedhof auf der Okopowa Straße wurde als ansehnlicher erachtet. Aus diesem Grund wurden hier von wohlhabenden Mitgliedern der Gemeinde, Grabsteine mit einem hohen künstlerischen Wert entlang der markierten Straßen aufgestellt. Der Friedhof im Brudno Bezirk war die Grabstätte für ärmere Juden. Die Grabstätten waren günstiger und die dort gefundenen Grabsteine weniger imposant. Während des Ersten Weltkrieges wurde dieser Friedhof zerstört und verwüstet. Als Polen 1918 seine Unabhängigkeit wieder erlangte, wurden Bemühungen gemacht, beide Friedhöfe wieder herzustellen.

Nachdem die deutsche Arme 1939 in Warschau einmarschierte, wurden die Juden gezwungen, vom Ufer in das 1940 etablierte Ghetto umzusiedeln. Der Friedhof auf der Okopowa Straße lag innerhalb der Grenze. Der Friedhof wurde trotz der Liquidation und der vollkommenen Auslöschung des Ghettos im Jahr 1943 nicht zerstört. Der Brudno Friedhof wurde 1941 liquidiert und die Grabsteine wurden als Baumaterial genutzt. Trotz der Rückkehr von Juden zum neugeborenen Warschau war die Gemeinde nur sehr klein. Der Friedhof auf der Okopowa Straße ist heute noch aktiv.

1965 wurde er in die Liste historischer Denkmale eingetragen. Der Hauptweg ist der Ort für fast alle historisch wichtigen Grabsteine. Ähnlich wie in anderen Friedhöfen sind die historischen Grabsteine Ursprung für die Erhaltungsmaßnahmen. Die Grabsteine vom Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts und der Kriegszeit haben in den meisten Fällen keine Betreuer. Die Skulpturen wurden von den besten Künstlern gestaltet und die hier Beigesetzten haben eine besondere Bedeutung für die jüdische und polnische Kultur.

Der Brudno Friedhof ist ein geschlossener Friedhof. Dank der Nissenbaum Familien-Stiftung bekam der Friedhof einen Zaun. Ein Teil der verstreuten Grabsteine wurden genutzt, um ein Lapidarium zu errichten. Der Rest der Fläche wird als junger Wald belassen. 2009 wurde dieser Friedhof ebenfalls in die Liste der historischen Denkmale eingetragen.

Nach 200 Jahren bestehen beide jüdische Friedhöfe in Warschau und stehen jetzt unter dem Schutz des Staates, aber die Probleme bezüglich ihres Schutzes sind etwas unterschiedlich. Der Friedhof der Okopowa Straße erfüllt seine eigentliche Funktion, wobei der Brudno Friedhof ein Denkmal ist, der eine höhere Beachtung verdient und öffentlich zugänglich gemacht werden müsste. In beiden Fällen ist die Garantie für die Durchführung solcher Aufgaben die Kooperation zwischen den Institutionen, die für Denkmalschutz und die jüdische Gemeinschaft zuständig sind.

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