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# ACCESSING CAMPSCAPES: INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR USING EUROPEAN CONFLICTED HERITAGE

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# EDITORIAL: LIVING DEATH CAMPS

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The conviction that post-Holocaust landscapes – the concentration and extermination camps, and Nazi killing sites – are inherently excessive, and as such resist all endeavors to make them unambiguously and assertively meaningful, is shared by many contemporary cultural theorists. Referring to places marked by violent histories, Aleida Assmann articulates this excessiveness through the concept of ‘traumatic sites’. These spaces defy containable and exhaustible narrativization and, instead, invite complex traffic between past and present, absence and presence, life and death. James Young attributes the excessive nature of post-Holocaust landscapes to their symbolic and functional multidimensionality that problematizes a one-sided and single-perspective interpretive gaze: the camps *live on* as ‘authentic’ historical sites, as cemeteries, relicts, forensic evidence, memorial landscapes, educational centers, tourist attractions, arenas of private and politically charged remembrance, and as locations of commemorative art. Georges Didi-Huberman, in turn, associates the excessiveness of the camps with the aporetic nature of the sites themselves, which has its foundation in their warped, paradoxical temporality. He writes about the irreducible interplay between the sites’ inaccessible ‘past time’ as camps and their challenging material being-there in and for the present; already non-existent, they are tenaciously ‘still there’ inviting a variety of responses and evading any hegemonic closure of meaning. The complex and excessive *lives* and *afterlives* of the camps in/for the present are the subject of this issue of our e-journal. It focuses on the dense material, symbolic and political dynamics of less known and seemingly forgotten, silenced or marginal sites on the map of the Holocaust: the camps of Płaszów, Staro Sajmište and Targu Jiu, and the landscapes of Maly Trostenets and Ponar.

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The issue is structured around the syntagm of *living death camps*, a term borrowed from the art/research project bearing this title and conducted by the art collective *Grupa Spomenik* [Monument Group] and *Forensic Architecture*. The project, addressed in my contribution, developed the notion of life emerging at the camps in the Former Yugoslavia in the aftermath of violence, entangling them both with present-day conflicts and with political, economic and also existential struggles. At the camp of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade, whose trajectories I analyze, the life of/at the site took a literal form: the camp was inhabited for decades and thus became a site of ordinary daily life; this condition was to change when the plan to memorialize the site also envisioned the eviction of its residents. Here, then, the focus is on the tension between the camp belonging both to the realm of memory as sacralized space and to everyday life as a *common* one, shared by and accessible to all. In her contribution to this issue, Roma Sendyka, in turn, takes a critical look at the ways in which the *life* of the camp can be approached theoretically. Following Didi-Huberman and locating her reflection in the horizon of post-anthropocentric paradigm, she works against reductive takes on the ontology and temporality of the Płaszów camp in Kraków, Poland. After unpacking the related concepts of scandal and *scandalon*, Sendyka works towards a notion of the camp as a complex assemblage of the human and non-human, the man-made and environmental, a “living/dead organism” of persistent and ostentatious physical/material/affective/cultural being.

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In Dana Dolhin’s and Anne-Lise Bobeldijk’s texts, the *life* of the camps is considered in political and symbolic terms. Focusing on the recent resurgence of interest in two former camps, Targu Jiu in Romania and Maly Trostenets in present-day Belarus, the authors

show how the camps – which even during the Second World War served multiple functions – became invested with a new *lease of life* through ever-new debates revolving around their history and their meaning for the present day. But in both cases, the idiom of *living death camps* could be seen as conveying a deeper layer of meaning: in contemporary Romania as much as in Belarus, the contentious memory of the camps and various political, symbolic and material practices at and around them operate through the silencing of certain aspects of the past and, as a result, perpetuate hegemonic and exclusionary frames. These frames include the narrative of sovereignty rooted in prewar nationalist imaginary in Romania (thus downplaying, amongst other things, the significance of Romanian collaboration with the Nazis) and the concealment of the Holocaust in Belarus (testifying to the enduring legacy of the Soviet framing of the war and to the lasting othering of Jews). Those frames continue to *live on* as persistent and problematic ‘excess’ that remains uncontested, even in the wake of present-day engagement with the history and memory of those sites.

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In her contribution on the Nazi site of mass murder at Ponar in present-day Lithuania, Milda Jakulytė-Vasil adopts a different interpretive approach, looking at the site from the perspective of bottom-up practices unfolding beyond or below its hegemonic framing. Defying hegemonic closure to the meaning of Ponar, these practices, performed by members of the Jewish community in Lithuania, could also be framed as ‘excessive’. Jakulytė-Vasil shows how the will of Jewish survivors to remember and honor their relatives who died at Ponar transformed the site of death into a living space of resistance. It manifested resistance against not only the selective and mendacious memory politics in Soviet Lithuania but

also against continuous antisemitic violence, which did not cease with the end of the Second World War and continued to affect the lives of Lithuanian Holocaust survivors. In this case, the memory practices performed at the site served to reclaim agency and the community’s ‘will to last’. This ‘will’ was also to be sustained in the ultimate absence of the Jewish community following the wave of emigration to Israel in the 1990s. By planting trees, whose living presence at the site bridged – symbolically, materially, and biologically – the boundary between the dead and the absent living, the Jewish community performed yet one more attempt at reclaiming life at the site of death, and thus at resisting forgetting. Ponar was to *live on* as, what Sendyka termed, a “living/dead organism”.

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# PŁASZÓW, OR A SKANDALON: THE COMMUNITY LIFE OF A 'POST-CAMP-SITE'

## From a Scandal to a *Skandalon*

The Polish dictionary defines a 'scandal' as an event resulting from an action that causes indignation and outrage, while, in a broader sense, also affecting its surroundings.<sup>1</sup> The former concentration camp in Płaszów only reenters contemporary collective awareness when something outrageous or 'scandalous' happens that makes the headlines: "human bones have been found again"<sup>2</sup>, "a dog has dug up a human skull"<sup>3</sup>, "the police are looking for the vandals who destroyed a monument commemorating those murdered during World War II".<sup>4</sup> Alarming phrases such as "desecration of corpses", "albescent shin bones", "the prosecutor has secured" succeed in attracting attention for a while. Indeed, the particular temporal trait of scandals is that they are short-lived; they clearly differ from everyday events surrounding them; they occur in the here and now; and they cause only temporary tremors.

The site of the former Płaszów camp seems to exist in a different temporal dimension: it exists all the time, and it is invariably *here*. It quickly becomes apparent that thinking about it in terms of a scandal is, in fact, reductive and a simplification, as it presents its existence within a limited timeframe, as if it were just a single point in time. At this moment, the object becomes active in its meaning – all of a sudden, we see it

1 Elżbieta Sobol (ed.), PWN, Słownik wyrazów obcych, Warszawa 2002.

2 Piotr Drabik, Na terenie byłego KL Płaszów budowlańcy wykopali kości, <http://www.dziennikpolski24.pl/aktualnosci/a/na-terenie-bylego-kl-plaszow-budowlancy-wykopali-kosci,9447038/> (6 June 2018).

3 Karol Surówka, Pies wykopał ludzką czaszkę na terenie dawnego obozu Płaszów, <http://www.radiokrakow.pl/wiadomosci/krakow/pies-wykopal-ludzka-czaszke-na-terenie-dawnego-obozu-plaszow-szczatki-prawdopodobnie-z-czasow-ii-w-s/> (6 June 2018).

4 Maciej Grzyb, Zdewastowano pomnik na terenie byłego obozu koncentracyjnego w Krakowie, <http://www.rmfm24.pl/fakty/polska/news-zdewastowano-pomnik-na-terenie-bylego-obozu-koncentracyjnego,nld,241711> (6 June 2018).

clearly, but only for a moment, and only from one drastic perspective. There can be no doubt that this rapid and short-lasting cognitive mode hampers profound understanding of the site of the former camp which by today has evolved into a complex being. In light of this clear incompatibility, I wish to re-conceptualize the 'scandalousness' of the areas of the former Płaszów camp, thus seeking ways to redirect our focus; and this time permanently.

The contemporary understanding of the term 'scandal' is built around a sense of sin and guilt, thus revealing the extent of the influence of Christian culture. However, the word itself is older and its etymology enables a different distribution of emphasis, which in turn transforms our positionality towards the object that mobilizes our attention. The contemporary scandal is a descendant of the Latin *scandalum*, a term present in the Latin of the Church. It came from the Greek *skándalon*. The source of this chain of related terms can be found in the Hebrew Bible: *mikshowl* (לושכמ). It is a 'stumbling block', which is linked to a prohibition: "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind" (Book of Leviticus 19:14). In the letters of the Apostles, this block was called "a stone of stumbling" (λιθον προσκομματος, *litos proskommatos*) and then "a rock to make them stumble" (πετραν σκανδαλου, *petra skandalou*)<sup>5</sup>. The former Płaszów camp is itself very much a block, making it all the easier to return to the source meaning. It is, quite literally, an obstacle, a block placed on a seemingly straight path. We stumble over it while walking through a well-kept renaissance town which is popular with tourists; it disrupts the course of the narrative of a metropolis widely admired for its rich heritage; it interrupts the smooth story of the history of Jews in Kraków whose key pillars are the foundation of Kazimierz as a town, the erection of synagogues, its thriving culture, the development of a strong academic centre and the contemporary story of the Jewish revival.

5 The first letter of St Peter, 1P 2:8.



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### Shift of Perspectives: Recognition

“Stone’s time is not ours”, as the eco-philosopher Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has recently written.<sup>6</sup> A close and sudden encounter with a petrified world makes us aware of the difference between us: “lithic-induced perspective shift triggers an ontological and temporal reeling, a rocky movement of affect, cognition, horizon.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, stumbling over a *mikshowl* could also incite new thinking and permit different insights: it is an act of cognition; it opens the mind, it initiates a recovery of sight (if we remember that in the Pentateuch a block on the path was a threat to the blind). Thus, a collision with an obstacle may have beneficial results – it may enable a reorientation of thinking and recognition (however painful) of the full complexity of a difficult situation.

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However, evasion is a more common response to a resistant object than the strategy of facing it courageously. How do we protect the blind from stumbling? The simplest solution is to remove the block. Large post-camp areas seem to be objects that cannot be removed permanently from physical reality, yet such projects are indeed attempted and sometimes even succeed. The Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk recently recalled one such attempt. In a drama written for the theatre Schauspielhaus Graz about a World War I camp near Graz, he brought the Thalerhof into view again. This was where Ruthenians and the Lemko people were interned. Deprived of necessary food and shelter, prisoners died there in large numbers, with their graves later becoming a site of pilgrimage for contemporary Lemkos. The site of this difficult history has been effectively and permanently transformed, but in such a way that it does not overwhelm the world around it with feelings of guilt and suffering or hinder comfortable movement. It has, quite literally, been absolutely flattened and secured. The area was concreted over and turned into an airfield.

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Minneapolis 2015, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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One strategy that could potentially lead to new recognition would be to influence the cognitive apparatus of passers-by: indeed, it is possible with practice to train the gaze, calibrating the sharpness of eyesight so that it can recognize a hard object and find a way through it. As a result of the scopic nature of this activity, visual artists are exceptionally effective at such tasks. In the series of works *Tote Winkel* (Dead Corners),<sup>8</sup> the journalist Ansgar Gilster, in contributions to the journal *Osteuropa*, photographs the locations of acts of mass annihilation: ‘post-camp-sites’, mass graves and places of execution. A distinguishing feature of his series is to direct the lenses so that they omit the line of the horizon which stabilizes the world and provides the eye with a point of orientation; the viewer’s gaze is thus directed towards the ground. This gesture makes the author’s work stand out among many professional and non-professional documents produced by film and photo cameras. The artist seems to look carefully at whatever is placed at a low level, just in front of him. The frame is filled with visually unattractive spots of mud, heaps of dry leaves and unnecessary items; plants sprout between them and water drips. By watching his feet, the wayfarer does not fall because he has time to stop before the “stumbling block” – a human bone.




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Ansgar Gilster, *Dead Corners*. Mass grave, Crimea. Courtesy of the artist.

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<sup>8</sup> For the project documentation, see <http://ansgargilster.de/deadcorners.html> (6 June 2018).





Ansgar Gilster,  
*Dead Corners*. Mass  
grave in the centre  
of Dnepropetrovsk  
changed into a  
football field.  
Courtesy of the  
author.

Visual work may not result in the cataract being removed from the eyes of the blind. Viewers can be offered additional tools to assist them in seeing more clearly. The sense of sight can be enhanced by markers, charts<sup>9</sup> or maps thus providing a script for moving about the 'post-camp-site'. Such a practical guide is contained in the series of photos by Jason Francisco entitled *Time in Płaszów* (since 2010).<sup>10</sup> Sensitive to the differing ways in which time is experienced in such locations, the artist

<sup>9</sup> In the spring of 2003, just before the ceremonies of the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto in Kraków, information boards were placed around the camp to read as follows: "Dear Visitors! You are entering the area of the former concentration camp of Płaszów. Please behave in a way that respects the dignity of the place". <http://www.fzp.net.pl/shoa/oboz-pracy-przymusowej-plaszow> (6 June 2018).

<sup>10</sup> For the project documentation, see <http://jasonfrancisco.net/time-in-plaszow> (6 June 2018).

creates a visual narrative, combining past and contemporary photos. He tears today's image off the retina, forcing the viewer to overcome the inertia of the eye and see what cannot now be seen with the naked eye – working prisoners, roads covered with white stone, towers and guards, wires and fences. He constructs a special guidebook supplemented with clear tips for undirected visitors: this is a cemetery, do not sit here, do not sunbathe; barracks once stood here – do not light bonfires here; this is a mass grave – do not play football here; this is the gate to the camp – do not play soldiers here.

### Cartographic Abstraction/ Socialized Life

A 'post-camp-site' is related to the "post-ghetto-site" which Jacek Leociak has movingly described on many occasions: "the place has survived but it has been in a way hollowed out, deprived of its contents, interior; [whatever] was here, has been annihilated, but this 'here' has remained, and is obscured by another presence. A frame containing a different reality remains; a topographic point remains; it is a cartographic abstraction."<sup>11</sup> The area of the former camp at Płaszów has similar characteristics: the area's durability and ostentatious "still being here" is linked to the absence of symbols carrying a message about the past. It faces the threat – as does the area of former Warsaw ghetto – with "cartographic abstraction".

In Płaszów too, albeit to a different degree, the roads and paths leading through an area marked with violence have changed. The area has been dug through, systems have been installed in the mixture of rock and bones to provide all utilities which are needed today: cables and pipelines put an underground corset on the area. Although the area has not been completely urbanized, a residential estate has been constructed on its north-eastern part. The spaces which could continue to be readable

<sup>11</sup> Jacek Leociak, *Aryjskim tramwajem przez warszawskie getto, czyli hermeneutyka pustego miejsca*, in Lidia Burska and Marek Zaleski (eds.) *Maski współczesności*, ed. Lidia Burska, Marek Zaleski, Warsaw 2001, 84.

("walking across the extensive area of the former camp, one can find foundations of camp facilities, wells, traces of water tanks, ditches, sewage discharge and water supply facilities"<sup>12</sup>), have been covered with plants. It is hard to believe that two aerial maps, a contemporary one and one from during the war, show the same area. Today's image is intensely green; the one from the past gleams with the bareness of the rock – one cannot fail to think of a bare, uncovered bone.

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Which map should be used to read the 'post-camp-site'? The Proxima Project Group, which prepared a design for reconstructing the areas of the former camp at Płaszów, added several cartographic documents to its study.<sup>13</sup> Each map is different. There is one that leads us through Austrian fortifications from World War I. Another one marks paths and roads that have transformed the site. Another one shows the network of pipes and ducts transporting water, electricity and gas to houses in Kraków. Another one marks trees, clearings and growths, evident after taking an inventory of flora and greenery. Further on, red lines mark the areas of pre-war cemeteries. There is a map showing the locations of camp facilities. And another one that shows relics and other remains from that period. Finally, there is an administrative map which shows boundaries of land ownership. There are contours and reference points; the scale and a key are provided. Which of these maps is true? Which leads us through the genuine 'post-camp-site'? The answer is clear: each of them, and none of them.

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"I like maps because they lie," the poet Wisława Szymborska once wrote.<sup>14</sup> Maps falsify the reality that is experienced even when they undoubtedly tell the truth. According to the maps, the camp at Płaszów was located almost entirely in the district Wola Duchacka; however, it is commonly referred to today as "Płaszów" (Płaszów was a neighboring settlement). Maps – like the ones from a historical study, updated for the 2007

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12 Ryszard Kotarba, *Niemiecki obóz w Płaszowie 1942–1945*, Warsaw/Kraków 2009, 160.

13 I wish to thank Borys Czarakczew for making this material available to me.

14 Wisława Szymborska, *Map*, in *Collected and Last Poems*, Boston/New York 2015, 432-433.

competition to develop the area of the former camp – do not provide access to the truth of the place. They divide it according to particular categories that make it readable, orderly and comprehensible. A map is flat, rigid, "Nothing moves beneath it / it seeks no outlet", the colors are clear, everything is "small, near, accessible".<sup>15</sup> The daily physicality of the 'place-after-a-camp' is different: it is inaccessible, unreadable, confusing. The area is not flat. The ground is not stable: it has been dug up and tunneled through by animals (and people), moved by geological forces, and by the strength of plants and water courses; it is changing and transforming, even though the speed of the process renders it barely visible to the human eye. The orders of systems, greenery, etc., might be disconnected in the theory of the map, yet they are empirically inseparable; we know that a technical network cannot be maintained (map No. 3) without getting into the world of map No. 5 (cemeteries) and without intruding into the world of map No. 4 (plants). The roots of trees have grown into pre-war graves. How could we thus separate what Michel Serres calls "us subject-object", "us, crowd, entangled stones"? "This mixture has no name in any language," he wrote.<sup>16</sup>

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The contemporary experience of the 'post-camp site' thus entails a danger, namely that of the possibility of failing to recognize traces of the past; this is a (painful) mistake concerning layers of time, one that casually overlooks the difficult part of that heritage. Nothing that could prevent changes from occurring has been introduced to the area; over seventy years the life of the neighborhood has absorbed the past of the site of the camp and developed it for the present, making access to it even more difficult. Płaszów camp now evokes the need to look for guides, guidance, descriptions. A visitor wants a framework, or at least an idea of where borderlines and graves are marked. Where can we go freely? What would produce a different route through the site? How can all these realities be encompassed in one experience – animal and human, the past and present, vegetal and lytic? Our cognitive apparatus demands organization, division

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15 All expressions are taken from the poem by Wisława Szymborska.

16 Michel Serres, *Statues: The Second Book of Foundations*, London, 2014, 63.



and reduction. A 'post-camp site', on the other hand, can manage the excess perfectly well; it exists in its subject/object coupling. It absorbs all realities which are irreconcilable for us. Future plans for transformations of the place will have to confront this powerful amalgamated rock of meanings that deserves respect.

One possible way of communicating with this living/dead organism has already been mentioned here – namely, the modest activity of “careful observation of the ground”. “A place like this requires the visitor to think about his own act of looking”, Georges Didi-Huberman wrote about walking through the area of the former camp. “A certain configuration of my own body [...], and a certain fundamental fear – was prompting me to look mostly at things close to the ground. As a general rule I walk with my eyes downcast. Something must have persisted of a very old (not to say childish) fear of falling. But also of a certain propensity to shame, such that for a long time, looking straight ahead was difficult for me. [...] I've acquired the habit of transforming this general timidity in the face of things, this desire to flee or to remain in perpetually vacillating attention, into observation of all that is low: the first things to see, the things 'under your nose', the down-to-earth things. As if stooping to look somehow helped me to better think about what I see. At Birkenau, a particular dejection in the face of history no doubt made me lower my head slightly more than usual”.<sup>17</sup> In Kraków, it is worth following the same plan: bend down to see, to be able to think, bend down more than usual.

Roma Sendyka (Jagiellonian University)

<sup>17</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Bark*, Cambridge 2017, 41-42.

An earlier version of Roma Sendyka's text was published in: *Plaszów - Discovering*, Marcin Baran (ed.), Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, Krakow 2016. The research was conducted within the framework of the project *Uncommemorated Genocide Sites and Their Impact on collective Memory, Cultural Identity and Inter-cultural Relations in Contemporary Poland* (NPRH 2aH15012183).



Jason Francisco, *Time in Plaszow* (Sine 2010). Courtesy of the author.



The soil near the main memorial at the former extermination camp Treblinka II. Photo by Dorota Głowacka.



# STARO SAJMIŠTE: A SITE OF ONGOING LIFE

02

As Harold Marcuse argued in his essay *The Afterlife of the Camps*, the history of the National Socialist concentration and extermination camps did not end after their liberation or with the conclusion of World War II.<sup>1</sup> Even before their transformation into memorial sites, the camps had been used and reused in a variety of ways: as forensic evidence of the atrocities committed by the Germans, as penal facilities for Nazi criminals, as provisional hospitals for former inmates and survivors, as Displaced Persons' or refugee camps, and for educational purposes within the framework of the 'punitive pedagogy' directed at civilians living in the vicinity. The functions that the camps fulfilled after the war depended greatly upon their location, their wartime purposes, and the state of the camps' infrastructure; they also influenced the postwar research and politics of memory enacted at and around the sites of former camps. Marcuse writes about the postwar trajectories of the camps as their *afterlife*, but the practices unfolding at the camps could also be framed in terms of an *ongoing life*: the camps were/are in a constant process of transformation, resulting from inhabitation, dismantling and reconstruction, memorialization and political mobilization, each of which perpetuates their 'existence' and invests them with a new lease of life. Sometimes the *ongoing life* needs to be understood literally, as is the case with Staro Sajmište, a former Nazi camp in Belgrade, whose buildings were settled after the war with new residents and remain occupied to this day. Between 2012 and 2014, an art/research project took on the task of investigating the implications of this (potentially disturbing) coexistence between the horrors engraved in the landscape of the former camp and the ordinariness of daily life unfolding in its midst. The project, launched by the art collective *Grupa Spomenik* [Monument Group] and *Forensic Architecture* (in cooperation with Caroline Sturdy Colls), was called *Living*

<sup>1</sup> Harold Marcuse, *The Afterlife of the Camps*, in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, New York 2010.

*Death Camps*. It took a critical stance towards processes leading to the eviction of the inhabitants of the former camp, putting an end to the "ongoing life in the place of death".<sup>2</sup>

Located at the site of the prewar Belgrade Fairground which was built in 1937 in a modernist, panoptic style, the Staro Sajmište (Old Fairground) functioned between 1941 and 1942 as *Judenlager Semlin*, a detention center and extermination site for Serbian Jews, Sinti and Roma, while from 1942 to 1944 it functioned as *Anhaltenlager Semlin*, a concentration and transfer camp for civilians and political opponents of the National Socialist regime.<sup>3</sup> It was located on the left bank of river Sava, which formed a border between Serbia and the collaborationist Independent State of Croatia during World War II. It is estimated that around 7,500 Jews and Sinti and Roma were killed in the camp or in gas vans, before being buried in mass graves outside the city. Like many other former Nazi concentration and extermination camps, it was not dismantled after the war but reused according to the social and political needs of the time. The remaining structures – the former exhibition buildings converted by the Nazis into barracks for the camp's inmates and warehouses – were turned into artists' studios and used as state-funded emergency residences for the poorest and most vulnerable social groups, namely Sinti and Roma, the unemployed and the homeless. In 2015, as many as 2,500 people still inhabited the site of the former camp.

<sup>2</sup> Living Death Camps – Forensic Architecture and Grupa Spomenik, in Forensic Architecture (eds.), *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, Berlin 2014, 193. The project addressed, too, the afterlives of the concentration camp in Omarska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), operational throughout 1992, transformed into an industrial plant. For a documentation of the project, see <https://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/living-death-camps/> (10 November 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Christopher R. Browning, *The Final Solution in Serbia: The Semlin Judenlager*, in *Yad Vashem Studies* 15 (1983); Sajmište, in: Israel Gutman (ed.), *Enzyklopädie des Holocausts. Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden*, Band 3, München/Zürich 1998.





The central tower of the  
Old Fairground. Courtesy of  
Caroline Sturdy Colls.

Yet, as a result of rapid postwar urbanization and, more recently, capitalist urban development, Staro Sajmište ‘moved’, finding itself in the immediate vicinity of the city center and thus this historic location has felt the effects of privatization and commercialization. In 2013, the site, which for decades functioned as a spatially and socially marginalized urban enclave consisting of deteriorating inhabited edifices, barracks lacking sanitation built without planning permission, small workshops and a privately-owned restaurant (located in the former camp’s mortuary), faced the impact of yet another change. In its efforts to become a member state of the European Union, the Serbian government was convinced that a state-sponsored Holocaust memorial should be unveiled at Staro Sajmište as a way of fulfilling the demands of European memory politics.<sup>4</sup> This required the eviction of the tenants of the former camp. And indeed, the first round of the forceful removals of the Staro Sajmište residents took place in the summer of 2013.

Even before that, the landscape of Staro Sajmište had acted as a multilayered field of various hegemonic articulations reflecting changing approaches to the Holocaust and World War II in socialist Yugoslavia and post-socialist Serbia. In the immediate postwar period, the site had occupied a marginal position on the Yugoslav commemorative map, with this neglect being an expression of the official culture of remembrance that was centered on resistance and struggle, while the Holocaust was understood within this framework as an event that was in no way unique but rather one of many ‘crimes of fascism’. The narrative of “Brotherhood and Unity”, which framed the centralized and selective memory politics in Tito’s Yugoslavia, intentionally blurred the identities of both the victims

<sup>4</sup> Srdjan Radovic, Politics of Space and Memory in Serbia or: How One Learns to Stop Worrying about the Camp and Love the Mall, [http://www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/radovic\\_essay\\_sajmiste.pdf](http://www.starosajmiste.info/userfiles/files/download/radovic_essay_sajmiste.pdf) (10 November 2018); Srdjan Radovic, Memory, Culture, and Urban Reconstruction: The Case of Staro Sajmište in Belgrade, in Christine Brants, Antoine Hol and Dina Siegel (eds.), Transitional Justice: Images and Memories, Farnham 2013.



and the perpetrators in order to hold in check (potential) ethnic tensions between various citizen groups, especially those between the Croats, who had collaborated with the Nazis, and the Serbs. This was reflected in the first monument unveiled at the site in 1974 (and later renewed in 1984), which was dedicated to the “forty thousand people from all parts of the country”.<sup>5</sup> The victim groups were not named as victimhood was generalized. The postsocialist transition and subsequent rise of nationalism in the Yugoslav republics during the wars of dissolution brought about a transformation of the prism through which the camp was viewed. According to Jovan Byford, “the newly embraced emphasis on the history of Serbian martyrdom played a key role in shaping the public reception of the Holocaust.”<sup>6</sup> Staro Sajmište was (re)appropriated and instrumentalized as a symbol of common Jewish and Serbian suffering (caused by the Nazis and Croats) – an interesting and perhaps even paradoxical response to the transnationally recognized cultural shift from the ‘memory of triumph’ to the ‘memory of trauma’, described by Bernhard Giesen.<sup>7</sup> A new memorial, this time dedicated to “Serbs, Jews, and Roma”<sup>8</sup> and the victims of Ustaša camp Jasenovac, was unveiled near Staro Sajmište in 1995. After that, the site once again fell into oblivion, forgotten by everyone but its inhabitants.<sup>9</sup>

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In 2007, the international scandal surrounding the organization of a concert by British music group Kosheen, which was to take place in the former camp’s hospital, drummed up renewed interest in Staro Sajmište

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5 Jovan Byford, *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, 2009, [www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin](http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin) (10 November 2018).

6 Jovan Byford, *Between Marginalization and Instrumentalization: Holocaust Memory in Serbia since the late 1980s*, in Jean-Paul Himka and Joanna Michlic (eds.), *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, Lincoln/London 2013, 530.

7 Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma*, Boulder 2004.

8 Byford, *Between Marginalization*, 535.

9 See for instance Rena Rädle *Der Lager Sajmište in Belgrad – ein vergessenes KZ?*, <http://www.igbildendekunst.at/bildpunkt/2011/smrt-postnazismus/raedle.htm> (10 November 2018).

both locally and internationally.<sup>10</sup> A myriad of bottom-up initiatives, fostered by various interest groups and organizations lobbying for Holocaust commemoration – the Memorial Sajmište Organization, the Initiative for Memorial Education Center, and the internet-based research project *A Visit to Staro Sajmište*<sup>11</sup> – transformed the former camp into a discursive event without actually affecting the living conditions of its present inhabitants. This was to change with the development of the new Memorial Center – a Serbian “entry ticket” into the European Union and the European “community of memory” structured around institutionalized and transnationalized remembrance of the Holocaust and the promotion of ‘universal’ human rights.<sup>12</sup>

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The intervention initiated by the *Grupa Spomenik* and *Forensic Architecture* focused exactly on this problematic and paradoxical aspect of the interaction between the requirements of transnationalized memory politics and the socially damaging outcomes of its implementation: the obvious contradiction between the assumed moral appeal of the Holocaust memorial, which, after all, embodied a set of ‘universalized’ humanitarian values, and the politically legitimized harm inflicted on the already vulnerable inhabitants of the former camp. This was rendered all the more acute by the fact that many of those living in the camp

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10 Maldenka Ivankovic, *The Sajmište (Exhibition Grounds) in Semlin, Serbia: The Changing of Memory*, in *Jewish Political Studies Review* 22 (2010) 3-4, <http://jcpa.org/article/the-sajmiste-exhibition-grounds-in-semalin-serbia-the-changing-of-memory/#sthash.3A6sxBCE.dpuf> (10 November 2018).

11 The project has been conducted since 2010 by artist Rena Rädle and journalist Dirk Auer, <http://www.starosajmiste.info> (10 November 2018).

12 The phrase “European entry ticket” comes from Tony Judt, who used the term to describe the contemporary political situation in which accession to the European Union depends greatly on the ability and willingness of the government of a given country to commemorate the Holocaust and, in this way, fulfill the postulates of the 2000 Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum of the Holocaust. The objective of the conference was to provide a common European transnational framework for cultural remembrance, based on the consensual recognition of shared humanitarian values and the promotion of ‘universal’ human rights. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, London 2005, 803.

were representatives of the Sinti and Roma communities who had also been victims of Staro Sajmište during the war. Their impending eviction alarmed the group, something that translated into a clear and legitimate claim: “a Holocaust memorial cannot be built on forcefully cleared ground without immediately compromising its purpose.”<sup>13</sup> The remembrance of violence should not rest on violence towards *ongoing life*.

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The project did not question the need to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust but rather the social, economic and existential ramifications of the government’s plan. Instead it proposed a set of activities and actions which could be considered as an alternative to the planned official commemoration and a form of protest against the imminent evictions. Based on an extensive archeological survey of the site and the creation of an on-site public forum at which its outcomes could be presented and discussed with all those interested in the future of the camp, it aimed to expose both the importance – if not indispensability – of the place to its present inhabitants and the profound role of their daily routines and spatial practices in preserving the remains of the former camp. “Staro Sajmište stands today thanks to its ongoing inhabitation, which has sustained it for the past sixty years”,<sup>14</sup> it concluded. Unoccupied and uncommemorated, the material structures of the former camp would almost certainly have deteriorated. Moreover, the presence of Sajmište residents at the site prevented further privatization of the centrally located and potentially profitable urban area. The main practical outcome of the research was, therefore, a proposal that the role and needs of the Staro Sajmište residents would be acknowledged and included in the planned project, which instead of their eviction, resulted in “commemoration that would remain responsive to the demands of ongoing life.”<sup>15</sup> Instead of turning the former camp into a Holocaust

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13 Living Death Camps, 194.

14 Ibid, 195.

15 Ibid, 193.

Memorial Center and thus separating it from the necessities of daily life, the *ongoing life* that should provide a starting point for a project that would allow a reversal of the mechanisms of social and economic exclusion that presently determine its form, and instead “rehabilitate its homes and modernize its infrastructure, in order to support its potential as a common space”.<sup>16</sup>

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The understanding of ‘common’ put forward by *Living Death Camps* in its engagement with the coexistence between the landscape of the former camp and the ordinariness of daily life likewise provides an alternative to the politics behind the official plan to commemorate the site and, more generally, behind national and transnational (European) memory perspectives, which rest on ‘sacralization’ of the Holocaust. Aleida Assmann writes that the sacralization of the Holocaust has resulted in memorial sites being depoliticized and trapped within the framework of a ‘civil-religious’ (*zivilreligiös*) discourse.<sup>17</sup> While this discourse often invisibilizes the dense politics that underpins projects to commemorate the Holocaust at the former camps (and beyond), it also translates into sites and their meanings being subjected to hegemonic closure. The *ongoing life* is arrested, the sites rendered unavailable, bounded, separated from daily/common use. The *ongoing life*, indeed, becomes Marcuse’s *afterlife*, rendering the past politically inoperative or subject to one, dominant articulation, leaving no room for further critical uses of the past (and the site) that could, for instance, shed light on present-day instances of the political, economic and structural violence that to some degree still shapes the landscapes of the former camp.

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Through its engagement with the *ongoing life*, *Living Death Camps* reversed this logic and “disputed the inscription of [in-]equality within the

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16 Ibid.

17 Aleida Assmann, Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur: Eine Intervention, München 2013, 90.



space that is defined as common”,<sup>18</sup> that is the planned state-sponsored memorial site. In this, it not only destabilized the commonplace trajectories of the debates on the politics enacted at the memorial sites, but also enabled a more critical rethinking of the politics that they put into practice. Firstly, by pointing out the equivalence between the problem of Staro Sajmište and the broader, doubtless transnational, issues of social exclusion and social distribution of the common space – be it a poor urban neighborhood or the site of memory, or both – the project relocated the question of commemoration and entangled it within the context of broader contemporary discussions on spatial politics, gentrification and the democratization of public space.<sup>19</sup> In this way, it re-politicized the problem of Holocaust remembrance – designating it as a place for critical engagement with the present injustices beyond and below national and transnational integration agendas and the tensions that their encounters produce. Secondly, this debate that is centered around the fate of the memorial site has engendered reflection on social actors and subjects who have no part in it or are not typically invited to participate, with the project proposing an understanding of the common that disrupts the existing coordinates of commonality. Instead, it proposes new, more democratic ones in which those who are deeply marginalized and ignored gain visibility and become not only audible participants, but also active carriers of Holocaust remembrance. To live on, the camps, sometimes, need to be sites of an *ongoing life*.

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<sup>18</sup> Beth Hinderliter et al., Introduction, in Beth Hinderliter et al. (eds.), *The Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, Durham/London 2009, 7.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge/London 1998.

One the former camp buildings at Staro Sajmište. Courtesy of Caroline Sturdy Colls.



3D model of Staro Sajmište. Courtesy of Caroline Sturdy Colls and ScanLAB Projects.



# THE TARGU JIU CAMP: HUMANITARIANISM, SOVEREIGNTY AND RE-EMERGING MEMORIES

03

In 2014, while European debates were grappling with the porous humanitarian ethics of refugees and borders,<sup>1</sup> the Romanian media were re-discovering the history and the afterlife of the former camp of Targu Jiu.<sup>2</sup> The facility, situated in an isolated mining area in the Carpathians, was used long after its construction in 1939. Yet in 2014, after decades of being all but forgotten, it was its initial history as a refugee camp that incited public interest. Discussions focused on the short period of neutrality of the Romanian government at the beginning of the Second World War. In 1939, the regime of King Carol II and the Grigore Gafencu government granted temporary residence rights to approximately 100,000 Polish citizens. Among them, around 6,000 officers were placed in Targu Jiu camp, which was built specifically as shelter for this group. Their presence on Romanian territory during the war was mobilized in recent debates over the government's response to the border situation, who framed it as a commendable humanitarian precedent, while newspapers and other public outlets were lamenting the absence of such relevant cases from the past in today's collective memory.

Despite the general consensus in 2014 that such heritage should be reclaimed from disinterested public authorities, it had been controversy, rather than erasure, that led to its silencing. After the Polish officers were effectively handed over to the Wehrmacht in 1941, the regime of Marshal Ion Antonescu began operating an "internment camp for political

1 See for instance Dan Stone, Refugees then and now: Memory, History and Politics in the Long Twentieth Century: An Introduction, in Patterns of Prejudice 52 (2018) 1.

2 Ion, Alin, Cum a fost transformata tabara de la Targu Jiu, Adevarul, March 30, 2016, [https://adevarul.ro/locale/targu-jiu/cum-fost-transformata-tabara-refugiati-politici-targu-jiu-lagar-ceausescu-dej-fost-colegi-detentie-1\\_56faa70c5ab6550cb85be399/index.html](https://adevarul.ro/locale/targu-jiu/cum-fost-transformata-tabara-refugiati-politici-targu-jiu-lagar-ceausescu-dej-fost-colegi-detentie-1_56faa70c5ab6550cb85be399/index.html). December (18 November 2018).

opponents" on the site, including persecuted Jews. Ironically, they were detained next to members of the far-right Iron Guard movement after the organization fell out with the Antonescu regime in January 1941. It was the policy towards the Jewish community that partly motivated the long-standing tensions between the leader of the Iron Guard, Horia Sima, and the Antonescu government. There were structural differences in the way Antonescu framed these persecutions as part of a national war effort, on the one hand, and what he argued were only personal interests of the Iron Guard and detrimental to Romanian economy, on the other. In the winter of 1941, the dispute over the spoils of Jewish property resulted in open street clashes, massive arrests and imprisonment of the Iron Guard 'brotherhood' and pogroms against the Jewish community. Yet, despite the arguable difficulty in codifying this history into the heritage of the camp, it was its following period of usage, synonymous with the political beginnings of the communist authorities, that was largely responsible for this site falling into oblivion. Since many of those who later became prominent members of the Communist Party were interned in the camp, including both Party leaders, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej and Nicolae Ceausescu, the nearby museum, built in the late 1960s, saw generations of school children learning about the 'illegal' activities of those in the higher echelons of power. The internment camp consequently became a staple of propaganda, and served as a heritage site illustrating the origins of the communist movement in the prewar and wartime political opposition. After 1989, this history was all but erased in the general anti-communist logic of the early 1990s. Incidentally, only the monumental clock built in 1941 by the departing Polish officers stood as a marker testifying to the existence of a former Second World War camp.

The affirmative tone of several articles investigating this refugee history in 2014 suggests that the symbolic remembrance of the camp presented the Romanian government with an opportunity to expand on its rightful actions during the war. The exhibition organized by the Polish government in early 2018 in the town of Targu Jiu on the topic,

stoked the memory of past state tragedies to an equal degree for both sides: for the Polish government it was the exodus caused by the Soviet invasion, while for Romanian authorities it emphasized commendable past responses to other refugee situations.<sup>3</sup> Memorialization, in this case, was framed in terms of a reaction to mounting opposition, nationally and internationally, against the refusal to partake in the general European negotiations concerning the relocation of refugees. Paradoxically, these roots and the heritage of humanitarianism became instrumental in locating and nostalgically emphasizing a long tradition of liberal oriented thought in the prewar period, in order to respond to the criticism of a contemporary authoritarian streak of both governments.



Aerial photograph of the camp in 1941. Courtesy of the Romanian National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> The so-called Polish-Romanian Alliance of 1921, a defense act between the two countries, allowed for the evacuation of the Polish Army through the port of Constanta and military support in case of invasion.

Nevertheless, even such a skewed and sudden foray into the history of the camp was a break with the complex memorial dynamics that saw this type of heritage being interpreted solely as a trace of communist propaganda. The 2014 debate not only discussed the long-standing effacement of the camp from memory, but also challenged the one-sided post-1989 vision according to which spaces of political mobilization and of self-aggrandizing communist victimhood were better off forgotten. Articles were now instead condemning the “neglect” and “ruin” of the perimeter.<sup>4</sup> Despite minimal interest after 1989 in the origins of the ideology of the interwar national working-class movement, the debate was now implicitly retrieving the camp as a usable past in efforts to construct a vision of postsocialist liberal democracy. It is in this context that the debate around Targu Jiu made evident the contradictory entanglements of the collective memory of past authoritarian politics and the post-1989 Romanian political imaginary. What in the 1990s had been seen as ‘legitimate’ erasure, necessary to conveying successful liberal and sovereign statehood (identifying itself through its capacity to ‘clean’ its own authoritarian past), was now being revisited to ‘perform’ rather than simply explain a history of humanitarianism.

Silencing the political heritage of socialism has been part of a memorial stance framed by criminalization: legal, rather than humanitarian, and engaging with leftist authoritarianism only inasmuch as it shows the ‘success’ of breaking with state socialism.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1990s, this memory perspective provided a trope for a nationalist, apolitical angle praising the newly acquired sovereignty from a foreign political system. In 2014, the refugee narrative was again folded into a transnational dynamic, this time constructing collective memory around the ideal

<sup>4</sup> Romanian National Archives, Presedintia Consiliului De Ministri Stenograme 1944-1959 Inv 2336, 22.03.1944, 2/1944.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Maria Malksoo, Criminalizing Communism: Transnational Mnemopolitics in Europe, in *International Political Sociology* 8 (2014) 1, 82–99.

of human rights<sup>6</sup> and reducing what in fact was a pragmatic politics of collaboration into a European negative memory of “totalitarianism” legitimizing current liberal democracies. Although this bind of communism and National Socialism was meant to paint a past which provides the foundations for post-1989 European liberal democracy, the emerging humanitarian narrative around the heritage of Targu Jiu shows that such usability again necessarily abstracts from historical reality. In the particular context of 2014, the history of humanitarianism perpetuates a narrative of sovereignty rooted, in fact, in inter-war nationalist and far-right imaginaries.

#### **Territoriality and Collaboration**

Targu Jiu was built at the height of a political polarization triggered by the affinities of the Romanian Kingdom with Nazi Germany, yet the framing of the remembrance of the refugees’ stay reproduced an older idea that collaboration was, in fact, dictated by geopolitics and was thus unavoidable. It has been a staple of memory culture to ease the perspective on the Antonescu’s far-right policies by exclusively focusing on the war against the USSR that resulted in the loss of the provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina following the advance of the Soviet Army. The Antonescu regime indeed defended the potential for war in distinctly territorial terms, especially after the dismembering of Czechoslovakia in 1938: war was necessary and even inevitable in order to preserve state sovereignty. Records of the Gendarmerie and the police in fact suggest that Antonescu feared the general opposition that the arrival of refugees might instigate against this justification of war.<sup>7</sup> The presence of Polish refugees in Romania was perceived as a liability for Antonescu’s pragmatic political narrative that sovereignty hangs on the alleviation of anything that might prompt the action of Nazi Germany.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Cambridge 2012, and his *Not Enough*, Cambridge 2018.

<sup>7</sup> RNA, Presedintia Consiliului De Ministri Stenograme 1944-1959 Inv 2336, 23.04.1944, 4/1944.

Furthermore, hosting Polish refugees could have incited retaliation from the Iron Guard who opposed helping a group already seen as ideological enemies due to their attachment to the monarchy. Territorial integrity was an argument that proved as significant for the xenophobic discourse of the Iron Guard as it was for successive nationalist governments since the end of the 1920s. It was such political reasoning that ensured that refugees were in fact allowed in the country, in particular those coming from Poland, whose alliance against the USSR dating from 1921 had formed part of both interwar governments’ nationalist discourse.<sup>8</sup> Fulfilling its humanitarian obligations as a neutral state was also a means of prolonging the formal collaboration with France and the United Kingdom, who had pledged to guarantee the independence of the Kingdom of Romania. However, this perspective overlooks the strong authoritarian nationalist narrative fueling politics from the 1930s, which led to the alliance with Nazi Germany, while perpetuating a memorial angle grounded in the notion of earnest attempts to maintain the integrity of the state.

In 2014, the same arguments relating to territorial integrity, hardly hid their admiration of authoritarianism in Romania. They left little room to present the genuine political polarization that characterized the era around the Second World War, which was caught between the authoritarian royal monopoly of power (before 1940) and the nationalist inflected defensive narrative of the Antonescu regime. There were, for instance, attempts to curtail dissent, evident in the decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers in 1941<sup>9</sup> to appoint a ‘praetor’ whose role was to respond to the complains of the local population, including those

<sup>8</sup> The independence and ‘threatened’ territorial integrity of both Romania and Poland were the basis of foreign policy at the time. See for instance Irina Livezeanu, *Interwar Poland and Romania: The Nationalization of Elites, the Vanishing Middle, and the Problem of Intellectuals*, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies Vol. 22, Cultures and Nations of Central and Eastern Europe* (1998), 407-43.

<sup>9</sup> RNA, 44/1941.



related to the camp.<sup>10</sup> Given the anti-royalist dissatisfaction expressed by workers in the area, there were also explicit attempts to curtail contact with the world outside the camp. The actions taken by the police shows that the closely observed those living in the villages around the camp. This reactive politics also applied to momentary spats around economic exchanges between officers in the camp and locals or the ‘clandestine’ political activities of Polish officers in 1939. The local police monitored the officers closely, while the Gendarmerie kept political organizations emerging in the camp under surveillance. For instance, the disappearance of Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły (Commander in Chief of the Polish forces) made authorities wary of the emigration of Polish officers from the camp, with transit visas to the Black Sea issued in the camp.<sup>11</sup> As the authoritarian streak of the regime was, in fact, minimized and explained as a general consequence of the conditions of war, the heritage debate on Targu Jiu failed to address the strong opposition against the growing authoritarianism of the monarchy at that time.

### Erasures

Interestingly, the memory of the war as a compromise collaboration remained unchallenged even after the communist takeover of 1947. Members of the Iron Guard who did not flee to the West or Latin America were absorbed in large numbers into the new communist political class and adapted quickly to the new realities. Many of them were the first to join the repressive apparatus and institutions of the communist government, becoming perpetrators of crimes against political prisoners in camps in the 1950s. Given this somewhat paradoxical overlap, the ‘anti-fascist’ narrative of the new communist ideology found legitimation in the idea of the myth of national integrity rather than in a past common (fascist) enemy.<sup>12</sup> This is evident in the relative ease with which both

<sup>10</sup> RNA, 22-66/1942.

<sup>11</sup> RNA, Targu Jiu 18/1942.

<sup>12</sup> See Hugo García et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Antifascism: History, Memory and Politics, 1922 to*

Antonescu and the Iron Guard could be mentioned after the early 1950s. Consequently, the nationalist discourse on sovereignty continued to be excused by “territorial integrity” in communist historiography. This overlap also became evident during the 2014 debate, when the history of the Iron Guard’s role in the camp was effectively minimized. Similarly glossed over was the cohabitation of members of the far-right Iron Guard, communist and Jewish inmates in the camp after the Iron Guard rebellion of January 1941.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, in August 1941, for instance, many Iron Guard members were released from the camp after the facility came under the scrutiny of authorities for preferential access and treatment in the camp. An inmate who paid to be allowed to stay in the camp (which shows it offered a better chance of survival) spoke about the free movement of certain prisoners in the camp.<sup>14</sup> Their actions were explained by the general chaos caused by the war, which depoliticized the ideological roots of the Iron Guard.

These broader memorial dynamics around the far-right enabled the humanitarian perspective expressed around 2014 to reiterate the silence of the 1990s regarding the involvement of the Romanian authorities in the Holocaust. The Jewish history of Targu Jiu and its history as a station for the deportations to Transnistria was ignored, despite the fact that in June 1941, an order issued by the Antonescu government stated that all members of the Jewish community aged between 18 and 60 in the villages between Siret and Prut were to be evacuated from the region of Oltenia to the camp. Most arrived in Targu Jiu.<sup>15</sup> One year later, those interned, Jews and “communists” alike, were deported from the camp to Transnistria. There are also testimonies of individuals who, after they were allowed to return from Transnistria in early 1944 were

*the Present*, London 2016.

<sup>13</sup> RNA, Targu Jiu 14/1942, 16.

<sup>14</sup> RNA, Targu Jiu 14/1942, 20.

<sup>15</sup> RNA 78/1941.

again imprisoned in Targu Jiu.<sup>16</sup> The widespread circulation of testimonies of those deported to Transnistria during the 1946 trial of war criminals nurtured Jewish memory temporarily. Yet, as communist historiography did little to emphasize the ethnicity of the activists before the political takeover in 1948, the importance of Targu Jiu in the persecution of the Jewish community was effaced at a time when the history of the camp was of interest.

The way this old narrative of sovereignty was spun into the discourse around the refugee debate in 2014 demonstrates how the history of the Shoah and the early roots of socialism, as a massive class disenchantment against the political establishment, is conditioned by the anti-communist perspective of the 1990s on territorial integrity and state sovereignty. The first prisoners arrived in the camp as a consequence of strikes in the 1930s but this aspect was overlooked after 1989 even though the entire region was known as the site of the first widespread protests against the communist regime in 1979. But given the focus on the 'state' as a liberal, renewed construction, both seemed to question the shift of 1989. The situation was further complicated by the fact that in the early 1990s thousands of workers from this mining area participated in the street protests orchestrated to support the newly appointed provisional Romanian government. The violence then discredited the political resistance angle, which also informed the history of the Targu Jiu camp, because it was deemed harmful to the meaning of the 1989 political change.

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance Targu Jiu, in Geoffrey P. Megargee and Joseph R. White (eds.), *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945, Camps and Ghettos under European Regimes Aligned with Nazi Germany*, Bloomington 2018.



Polish officers next to the monumental clock. Courtesy of the Dorin Brozbă Collection.

The monument at Targu Jiu today. Courtesy of the Dorin Brozbă Collection.



# HOLOCAUST SYMBOLISM IN BELARUSIAN MEMORY OF MALY TROSTENETS

04

In June 2015, the Trostenets memorial complex was unveiled just outside the Belarusian capital Minsk.<sup>1</sup> It is dedicated to the victims of the Nazi forced labor camp Maly Trostenets and the extermination sites in two nearby forests. The last state-sanctioned monument was erected at the site during the Soviet era in 1963, to commemorate the Soviet citizens who were murdered there. That many of these Soviet civilians were killed because they were Jewish was not reflected in the monument, nor was the fact that many victims were deported Jews from Western European countries. Despite the large number of victims coming from various European countries, the site remained unknown for a long time. It garnered more interest in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, Maly Trostenets still remains almost absent from the memory of the Holocaust in the rest of Europe today. This analysis of the Trostenets memorial complex, which consists of a number of monuments, shows how the fact that Maly Trostenets fell into oblivion provides space for a specific Belarusian interpretation of the Holocaust in Europe.

In early 1942, the SS in Minsk created a camp on the site of the former Karl Marx kolkhoz in the village of Maly Trostenets on the outskirts of Minsk. It was used as a forced labor camp for Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs), Jewish and non-Jewish Belarusians, and Western European Jews. Some three kilometers from the camp lies Blagovshina forest which before the German occupation had been used as a killing site by the NKVD to eliminate so-called 'enemies of the people' and political prisoners held in Minsk prison. From the beginning of the occupation of the city, the forest once again served as one of the main execution

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper given at the conference 'Beyond camps and forced labor: Current international research on survivors of Nazi persecution' in London in January 2018.

sites. In late 1941, Belarusian Jews from the Minsk ghetto were executed there, while from May 1942 onwards Western European Jews deported from cities located in present-day Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic met the same fate there. Between October and December 1943, Sonderkommando 1005-Centre was deployed in Blagovshina forest with the aim of removing all traces of the massacres, including the destruction of mass graves by digging up and burning the remains. In early 1944, another killing site, located in Shashkova forest just southeast of the Maly Trostenets camp, was used to burn the corpses of people who had been killed in gas trucks. Many of these victims came from the Minsk region and were killed in anti-partisan actions. The use of Shashkova forest and the site of Maly Trostenets as killing sites continued until early July 1944. After the liberation of Minsk, the Extraordinary State Commission, established by the Soviet authorities to investigate mass graves, estimated that approximately 206,500 people had been killed at all three sites in and around Maly Trostenets.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the relatively high number of Western European victims, Maly Trostenets remained unknown in the West until the 1990s and early 2000s. Around this time, interest in this killing site increased, both abroad and inside the new Belarusian Republic. As the old Soviet monument erected at the site in the 1960s only mentions a very specific group of victims, the "Soviet citizens who were tortured and burned by the German-fascist invaders in June 1944", local memory entrepreneurs and foreign NGOs began to lobby for a monument to honor all victims at Maly Trostenets. These efforts eventually led to the creation of the memorial complex. In June 2015, the first part of the complex was unveiled at

<sup>2</sup> According to the Extraordinary Soviet State Commission to Investigate German-Fascist Crimes, 150,000 people were killed in Blagovshina forest, 50,000 in Shashkova forest and another 6,000 in the camp at Maly Trostenets. This number seems to be on the high side as scholars have estimated that approximately 60,000 people were killed at these killing sites. See Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die Deutsche Wirtschafts- Und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland, 1941 Bis 1945*, Hamburg 1999, 770.)



the former camp. Belarusian president, Aleksandr Lukashenko, gave an address at the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, before a crowd of veterans, survivors and other interested people. In his speech, he referred to other countries which “share the pain of Trostenets” with the Belarusians; at the same time, he lauded the wartime accomplishments of the Red Army and the “greatness of the Soviet people whose descendants we are”.<sup>3</sup> The shared pain of Trostenets refers here to the idea of European countries having a shared past in which the Holocaust is a key feature, while the reference to the greatness of the Soviet people relates directly to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, which was the master narrative in the Soviet Union regarding the period of 1941 to 1944. According to this narrative, the ‘German fascist invader’ occupied the country but was eventually defeated by the Soviet Red Army. This acknowledgement of both sides – the Soviet inheritance and the shared European past – has also been reflected in the design and narrative of the new memorial site. While particular choices reflect attempts to place the history of Maly Trostenets more thoroughly within the framework of the European memory of the Holocaust, the overall design of the memorial complex and the narratives conveyed in plaques still demonstrates a strong connection to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War.

The memorial complex is situated on the outskirts of Minsk, on the boundary with the small village Maly Trostenets, standing in stark contrast to its surroundings. Against the background of tall apartment buildings and a supermarket across the street, a sign directs visitors towards the different elements of the complex: ‘the road of death’, the ‘ruins of the death camp’ and the ‘site where 6500 prisoners were burned’. The apartments overlook the main monument, the *Gates of Memory*, and the

<sup>3</sup> Requiem Meeting: The Gates of Memory, June 22, 2015, The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/) (03 January 2018).

*Road of Memory* that leads to it. Large stone blocks with commemoration plaques listing all sites where the Nazis committed crimes in Belarus are located on both sides of the road. The road culminates at a ten-meter high bronze sculpture depicting a group of human figures emerging from two very high gated doors. The figures are only half dressed, most of them in rags or in striped outfits and there is a look of despair on their faces. The bronze doors imitate a wooden camp gate and appear to be wrapped in barbed wire. One of the gated doors has a sign on it stating “Kl. Trostenets”.

In the Soviet Union and in the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR), there was little or no room to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust as Jewish victims were simply seen as Soviet civilians. Although the idea of viewing everyone as Soviet civilians also enabled commemorations of different groups under the same heading, it mostly translated into rendering the Holocaust invisible and resulted in indifference towards the fate of people persecuted for the fact that they were Jewish. In post-1991 Belarus, there is still not much space for the memory of specific groups of victims, although this situation has begun to change and the country has slowly started to embrace its Jewish past.<sup>4</sup> Most of the victims of Maly Trostenets were either Western European or Belarusian Jews, and this fact seems to be underlined in the symbolism employed at the memorial site. Several aspects of the memorial complex draw connections to Holocaust icons embedded in European memory of the Holocaust. The striped pyjamas worn by the figures depicted in the monument remind the visitor of the striped pyjamas that prisoners in concentration camps had to wear. The sign “Kl. Trostenets” evokes the abbreviation KL, *Konzentrationslager*, placed in front of the names of the concentration camps such as KL Dachau, KL Buchenwald or KL Auschwitz.

<sup>4</sup> Magdalena Waligórska, Jewish Heritage and the New Belarusian National Identity Project, in: *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 30 (2016), 334–35.

Although monuments are never a literal representation of the past, in his speech at the unveiling of the monument, president Lukashenko stressed that the architects had a difficult task in “preserving the historical truth and giving a complete picture of people’s suffering”.<sup>5</sup> The project director and leading architect of the memorial complex, Anna Aksënova, likewise emphasized that this was the ambition of the design team, stating that “the memorial complex is being created with the goal of remembering the victims of the National Socialist regime and to safeguard the historical authenticity of the site”.<sup>6</sup> Viewing the monument in light of these comments, an issue arises with the ‘authenticity’ of the ‘historical truth’ that is being represented. In his study on Holocaust icons, Oren Baruch Stier reminds us that “Holocaust symbols must convey a degree of historical authenticity if they are to be used to communicate the truth of the events they are intended to represent”.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the memorial *Gates of Memory* and the Trostenets memorial complex, the historical truth is not being reflected in its entirety.

The main problem lies in establishing whether Maly Trostenets was a concentration camp, extermination camp, or a death camp. Although many people were murdered in and around the camp complex and camp prisoners faced the constant threat of being beaten, shot or hanged by the SS and other guarding personnel, the main function of the camp was to provide and supervise forced labor. The camp was created in 1942 by Eduard Strauch, a commander of the Sicherheitspolizei in Minsk (KdS Minsk).<sup>8</sup> It was primarily used as an agricultural center for the KdS

<sup>5</sup> Requiem Meeting: The Gates of Memory, The Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, 22 June 2015, [http://president.gov.by/en/news\\_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/](http://president.gov.by/en/news_en/view/requiem-meeting-the-gates-of-memory-11617/).

<sup>6</sup> Anna Aksënova, Gedenkstätte Trostenez, in *Der Vernichtungsort Trostenez in Der Europäischen Erinnerung; Materialien Zur Internationalen Konferenz Vom 21.-24. März in Minsk*, Minsk 2013, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory*, New Brunswick 2015, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde; Die Deutsche Wirtschafts- Und Vernichtungspolitik in*

in Minsk and comprised a number of barracks, workshops for labor, and a manor house.<sup>9</sup> The majority of people who were killed at Maly Trostenets, were killed at one of the execution sites in the nearby forests directly after their deportation and never set foot on the camp premises. Although there are some similarities between Maly Trostenets and other entities in the Nazi camp system, in contrast to the majority of the concentration camps (KLs) in the Reich and occupied territories it was not under the authority of the *Inspektor der Konzentrationslager* (IKL). Instead, it was run by the SS Minsk. The inscription on the monument, “Kl. Trostenets”, does not refer, in this case, to the camp itself, but to a sign that hung near the entrance of Maly Trostenets during the war bearing the German name of the village, *Klein* (small) *Trostenets*. Neither are the uniforms of the people depicted on the monument backed by historical reality: the inmates of Trostenets did not wear the striped pyjamas worn by concentration camp prisoners. Although these two aspects of the monuments are not authentic, they nevertheless do draw a direct line to the symbolism of the commemoration of the Holocaust. Why is it, then, that this type of Holocaust symbolism has been employed at the memorial site? Where does this idea come from and what is the function of this specific symbolism at the former camp?

The symbolism of the memorial site, constructing Maly Trostenets as a concentration or extermination camp, articulates, first and foremost, a legacy of the Soviet framing of all Nazi camps as *lager smerti* (death camp). It was not only camps under the authority of the SS that were regarded as death camps but also camps under the control of the Wehrmacht where many people died. Consequently, the fate of people persecuted as Jews was not differentiated from the fate of other persecuted groups. On the other hand, the misconceptions of the function of Maly Trostenets

Weißrußland, 1941 Bis 1945, Hamburg 1999, 708.

<sup>9</sup> Urteil in Der Strafsache Gegen Georg Heuser, 21 May 1963, 73, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Gk. 07.01, Bd. 1 (original in the archive of the Landesgericht Koblenz, 9 Js 716/59).

seem to result from the different understandings of the Holocaust pertaining in Eastern and in Western Europe. The French Catholic priest, Father Patrick Desbois, begins his *Holocaust by Bullets* with a quote from a Red Army nurse: “Where we come from, the Nazis machine-gun the Jews but in the west they kill them in camps.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, while the vast majority of Western European Jews was deported to concentration and extermination camps in occupied Eastern Europe (such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek), many Eastern European Jews were shot by Einsatzgruppen or other Nazi killing units in forests, dunes, or in fields close to where they had lived. This is what Desbois frames as “the Holocaust by bullets”, supplementing the traditional (Western) association of the Holocaust with concentration and/or extermination camps. Maly Trostenets was a place where these two dimensions of the Holocaust crossed paths: both Belarusian Jews and deported Western European Jews were killed in the Holocaust by bullets in the forests around Minsk in the vicinity of Maly Trostenets. But, as Mary Fulbrook rightly states, “the enormity of the Holocaust is often summarized in one word: ‘Auschwitz’”.<sup>11</sup> This understanding of the Holocaust as the mass murder of Jews in camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau has accordingly been applied to Maly Trostenets.

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There is, however, another dimension to Maly Trostenets being framed as a death camp, even though it did not serve such a function. In his speech at the opening of the new memorial complex, President Lukashenko spoke of the countries who share the pain that the Belarusians feel about Maly Trostenets. In 2013, the project director of the memorial also claimed that the memorial site is a “part of a shared European memory culture and it remembers the National Socialist genocidal policies towards

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10 Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, New York 2008, xv.

11 Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice*, Oxford 2018, vii.

the civilian population of Europe”.<sup>12</sup> The idea of Maly Trostenets being a key site in the European memory of the Holocaust is important for Belarus, which is the most isolated country in Europe and has been ruled by Lukashenko since 1994. Owing to sanctions imposed by the European Union, whose primary aim is to bring about the abolition of the death penalty and to change the undemocratic climate in the country, Belarus is heavily reliant on Russia. However, since the occupation of Crimea in 2014, this political direction has changed. President Lukashenko has started speaking in Belarusian in public (previously, he would only speak Russian) and has acted as a negotiator in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia by hosting two summits in 2014 and 2015. With this move towards Europe, there is a need to become part of a European history as well. As James E. Young writes in *Textures of Memory*, “By creating common spaces for memory, monuments propagate the illusion of common memory. [...] By creating a sense of a shared past, such institutions as national memorial days, for example, foster the sense of a common present and even a sense of shared national destiny.”<sup>13</sup> This sense of a shared future, achieved through the praxis of commemoration and a shared space of remembrance, is also at stake in Maly Trostenets.

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Despite the willingness to bring the memory of the Great Patriotic War and a shared European memory of the Holocaust together, there are still some significant contradictions left to overcome. The Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Minsk, renovated and reopened in 2014, did incorporate the history of the Holocaust and the fate of the Belarusian Jews into the main exhibition whereas previously the topic was almost absent from the museum. However, the part of the exhibition dedicated to Maly Trostenets does not mention the fact that the majority of its victims were Jewish. The sign on the entrance to the new memorial

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12 Aksënova, *Gedenkstätte Trostenez*, 46.

13 James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven 1993, 6.



complex reproduces this logic too by failing to address the identity of the victims of the Holocaust. It says: “The Trascianec camp is a Nazi center for the extermination of Minsk residents and residents of other Belarusian towns and villages, members of anti-fascist underground struggle, the partisan movement, the Red Army prisoners of war, civilians deported from Europe.”<sup>14</sup>

Although the new memorial at Maly Trostenets tries to incorporate the history of this site into the European history of the Holocaust, some aspects remain unacknowledged. In particular, the use of Holocaust symbolism and the framing of the main monument as an attempt at an authentic representation of the past give rise to expectations that all victim groups killed at the site will be represented; but this is not the case. Regardless of the strong focus on the shared European past and, thus, on the Holocaust, the main reason why the majority of people were killed at Maly Trostenets – simply for being Jewish – remains absent. Even though contemporary Belarus allows more space than there was in the Soviet Union to commemorate Jewish victims, it seems the new memorial complex at Maly Trostenets does not yet overcome the Soviet legacy of the concealment of the Holocaust.

Anne-Lise Bobeldijk (University of Amsterdam/NIOD Institute)

<sup>14</sup> The name on the English part of the plaque is a Belarusian transliteration, which is only a recent development as this would previously have been mainly in Russian. Because of this and because most of the sources I have used are in Russian, I use the Russian transliteration (Library of Congress) of Maly Trostenets.



Entrance sign at the Trostenets Memorial Complex, 2017. Photo by Anne-Lise Bobeldijk.

Gates of Memory, Trostenets Memorial Complex, September 2017. Photo by Anne-Lise Bobeldijk.



Indication sign at the Trostenets Memorial Complex, September 2017. Photo by Anne-Lise Bobeldijk.



# 05 PONAR AND THE WILL TO REMEMBER: HOLOCAUST COMMEMORATIONS IN SOVIET LITHUANIA

Approximately 208,000 Jews lived in Lithuania at the beginning of 1941. On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and Lithuania was completely occupied within a week. The mass murder of Jews began within days of the invasion. Lithuanian Jews were shot and their bodies left in more than 200 pits near their homes, in forests, at Jewish cemeteries and in fields. Very few Jews from the once populous Lithuanian Jewish communities survived the war and the Holocaust. After the war, survivors immediately began to congregate and organize themselves. Many of the attempts to commemorate the extermination of the Jews centered on Ponar (Ponary/Paneriai), located in the vicinity of Vilnius, where from 1941 to 1944 around 80,000 people were systematically exterminated by the Nazis and their Lithuanian auxiliaries, making it one of the largest mass murder sites in Lithuania. The vast majority of victims were civilians, most of them Jews, with smaller numbers of Russian, Polish, Roma and Lithuanian victims.<sup>1</sup>

In the aftermath of the war, survivors took differing approaches to remembering and commemorating the experiences of their family members and other representatives of the Jewish community during the Holocaust. Usually, though, these efforts took the form of work to protect and mark the mass murder sites. As soon as Vilnius was liberated from the Nazis, various experiences of Jewish survival came to light – from those who survived through evacuation to the Soviet Union or service in the Red Army, to those who survived the ghettos in

<sup>1</sup> Акт о злодеяниях совершенных немецко – фашистскими захватчиками в местности Понары [1944]. LYA, f. K-1. Ap. 58. B. 20037/3. T. 3. L. 211.

# 05

Lithuania. For the latter, the situation was clear: they knew that none of their relatives had survived. This is true, for instance, in the case of Vitka Kempner, who said: “I didn’t go find out whether anyone in my family was still alive. I knew there was nothing to look for.”<sup>2</sup> Those who spent the war as evacuees did not have the experience of living in the ghetto and thus could not easily discern what had happened to their loved ones, so they looked for acquaintances who could tell them of their fate. The Jewish Religious Community in Vilnius was established in October 1944 while the Jewish Museum opened its doors in July 1944. Both organizations focused on the preservation of Ponar as a mass murder site and burial ground.

Meeting in Ponar,  
1944. Courtesy of  
Yad Vashem.



<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Dina Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow: The Life and Times of Abba Kovner*, Stanford 2009, 178.

The Stalinist authorities made a department at the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, established at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, responsible for Jewish religious life. Council officials equated the Jewish “religiousness” with “nationalism”, believing that Judaism represented bourgeois nationalist elements who wanted to enter synagogues and transform them into centers of Jewish communal life. For this reason, the council found it unacceptable that the community should speak in the name of the entire people. All welfare activities, contacts with foreign organizations and initiatives to raise funds were considered undesirable, as were initiatives to erect monuments to victims of the Holocaust and attempts to publicize the general idea that the extermination of Jews was unique among Nazi crimes.<sup>3</sup> Against the background of this policy, the will to remember and honor the dead drove Jewish communities to initiate commemorative practices. Mass murder sites were visited and attempts were made to unveil memorials, with the efforts relating to Ponar epitomizing this process.

The first commemorative gathering at the site took place in August 1944, shortly after the liberation of Vilnius from the Nazis and military hostilities continued in Lithuania. With the permission of the local Soviet government, the representatives of the Vilnius society staged an event at Ponar, attended by a large assembly of mourners. Kaddish and prayers were performed and heartbreaking testimonies were shared. Those who gathered at Ponar that year sought not only to commemorate the dead, but also more information about the fate of their own family members. In advance of the ceremony, Mikhail Sobol wrote: “I will go to Ponar today. There will be a meeting there. Pits have been exhumed containing 12,000 and 10,000 people, and many recognize [the corpses of] their family members.”<sup>4</sup> Between 15 and 26 August 1944 the Special Commission for

3 Regina Laukaitytė, Žydų religinis gyvenimas Lietuvoje 1944-1956 m., in *Lituanistica* 58 (2012) 4/90, 295-308.

4 Michailas. Sobolis, Vilnius, 1944-ųjų liepa ir rugpjūtis. – Žydų muziejus, Vilnius, 1994, 180.

Investigating Nazi Crimes was active at Ponar, determining the location of mass graves and performing exhumations. Survivors hoped to be able to identify exhumed corpses and several of the bodies unearthed by the Commission were indeed identified by relatives.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, one aspect of the memorial service angered many survivors, namely the fact that representatives of the Lithuanian civil government had given eulogies for the Poles and Russians buried at the site, whereas Jews – who had been the overwhelming majority of those murdered in Ponar – were not mentioned even once during preparations for the commemoration. This expression of state anti-Semitism was for some survivors a reason enough not to attend the event. In his diary, the Jewish partisan Abba Kovner wrote: “We decided together with Sutzkever [poet and Jewish partisan Avraom Sutzkever] not to go to Ponar today.”<sup>6</sup>

The following years also saw commemorations initiated by religious community leaders taking place at Ponar with the permission of officials from Soviet Religious Affairs. Vilnius Jews organized trips to visit the graves in Ponar in summer during the Tisha B’Av Jewish holiday.<sup>7</sup> On that day, community members would travel from the synagogue to pray in Ponar. The authorities granted permission to hold such an assembly for the final time in 1947.<sup>8</sup> That year marked a turning point between tolerant support of Jewish identity and the emerging systemic and openly anti-Semitic attitude of the government.

5 Заявление Потанина Константина в Государственную Чрезвычайную комиссию ЦК партии. 1944 08 13. ГАРФ. Ф. 7021. Оп. 94. Д. 1. Л. 93-95.

6 Quoted in Porat, *The Fall of a Sparrow*, 180.

7 Tisha B’Av is an annual day of fasting in Judaism, commemorating the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Tisha B’Av, the ninth day of the month of Av on the Jewish calendar, falls in July or August. This specific day to commemorate the Holocaust was chosen only by Lithuanian Jews and demonstrates a local Litvak type of consciousness and behavior based on local rules for commemorating the dead. See Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union*, Jerusalem, 2018, 60.

8 LCVA [Lithuanian Central State Archives] f. R-181 ap. 1 b. 10 Complaints and Correspondence on Issues of Religious Cults (for the year 1946); Ibid. f. R-181 ap. 1 b. 17 Complaints and Correspondence (for the year 1947).

In 1945 already, the Jewish religious community attempted to establish Ponar as a special location worthy of commemoration. In October that year, representatives of the community contacted the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus, requesting his help in preserving and memorializing the site of mass murder at Ponar along with other sites in Lithuania. The issue seemed particularly urgent because the sites had been gradually built over by roads and used as pastures for livestock, rendering them undistinguishable as locations for mass murder and mass grave.<sup>9</sup> However, officials rejected a request to preserve Ponar as a site of Jewish death. The following explanation was given, clearly expressing doubt in Jewish sovereignty over the site: “The locations where the Germans carried out mass murders are not limited to what are described as cemeteries. These are locations with political significance, guarding against the successors to German fascism on the international level as well as against gangs of Nazi Lithuanians in our land. Therefore, the preservation of sites such as Ponar and others is not exclusively a matter of religious affiliation, but the duty of local executive organs.”<sup>10</sup> However, local and national government authorities made no efforts to preserve the graves at Ponar. This is evidenced by persistent requests put forward by the executive board of the Vilnius Jewish community to allow them to protect the graves and erect a monument at Ponar and other sites.<sup>11</sup>

Employees of the postwar Jewish Museum in Vilnius also petitioned the Council of Ministers “to erect a memorial plaque at the gate leading to the mass execution site, and to erect a commemorative monument

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. f. R-181 ap. 1 b. 6 l. 121 Complaints and Correspondence (for the year 1945).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. l. 125-127.

<sup>11</sup> LYA LKP [Lithuanian Special Archives, branch of Lithuanian Communist Party] f. 1771 ap. 10 b. 553 l. 106-108 Letters and Reports from Art Affairs Council, Cultural Educational Agency Affairs Committee, People's Creativity, Theater, Conservatories, Museums and Other Institutions on the Work of Cultural Educational Art Agencies; LCVA f. R-181 ap. 1 b. 26 l. 77 Complaints and Correspondence (for the year 1948).

to honor the victims' memory both ideologically and artistically.”<sup>12</sup> They proposed a state-funded competition for a memorial design. Anticipating a negative answer from government officials, museum staff also suggested that the memorial could be financed by donations from the members of the Jewish community. Ultimately, the latter option was implemented.<sup>13</sup>

The monument was erected in May 1948 and was to be officially unveiled on 15 August the same year.<sup>14</sup> Its design immediately drew criticism from the authorities because it was considered too religious in both its symbolism and the inscriptions framing the monument. It featured a biblical verse and a Russian text establishing Jews as the main victims of Ponar.<sup>15</sup> The reluctance of representatives of the Jewish community to acquiesce to official demands to change the inscription on the monument to a purely secular one led the authorities to take the matter into their own hands. The monument was ultimately taken down,<sup>16</sup> with a new obelisk, decorated with a five-pointed star and the standard inscription in Lithuanian and Russian, “to the victims of fascist terror, 1941-1944”, erected on the plinth of the former statue in the early 1960s.

The “overly religious” message and symbolism of the 1948 monument was not the only reason for it never being officially unveiled. 1948 was the year in which Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign got underway, compelling many Jews to leave the country. Between 1948 and 1956, numerous Jewish survivors reclaimed their prewar Polish citizenship, giving them the right to repatriate to Poland. Those who stayed hid their Jewish identity. As a result, the Jewish community in Lithuania and,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> LYA [Lithuanian Special Archives] f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 30, l. 221. Finding by LSSR MGB on statue erected by the Jewish community at Ponar, April 15 1949.

<sup>14</sup> On Tisha B'Av that year.

<sup>15</sup> LYA f. K-1, ap. 10, b. 62 l. 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Some survivors say the monument was destroyed or even blown up.

more specifically, in Vilnius, significantly dwindled in numbers and their religious and communal activities were performed in secret. This does not mean, however, that commemorations at and visits to Ponar stopped, but they did become less organized and took on a lower profile as they were performed individually or by small groups. Such activities continued to take place throughout the 1950s and 1960s, usually on 9 May, the official Liberation Day holiday, during the latter decade. Žana Ranaitė-Čarnienė writes: “I used to remember my dear parents, brother, relatives and acquaintances outside of the synagogue. Often I travelled alone to Ponar. The tall old pine trees, the witnesses to the terrible massacres there, rustled in the wind as if they were moaning in agony over the innocent victims.”<sup>17</sup>

It was only in the 1970s that Ponar once again became a symbol of Jewish resistance to official state policies and the politics of memory surrounding the Holocaust. Following the large-scale commemorations that took place at Babi Yar in Ukraine, Rumbula in Latvia and Vilnius in Lithuania in 1971, which coincided with the struggle for the right of Jews to leave the Soviet Union, a similar event occurred at Ponar in 1972. Eitanas Finkelšteinas, a participant at that event and later an active member of the Helsinki Group (the Lithuanian dissident organization), together with several friends, organized a commemoration at Ponar on Tisha B'Av. The group read a prayer, laid down a large six-pointed star made of yellow flowers and sang a few songs. The claim to sovereignty over Ponar as a site of Jewish suffering and death met with a decisive response from the authorities. The leaders of the event were arrested and their cameras confiscated. Thereafter, all Jewish commemorations at the site took place under the banner of services intended to honor victims of the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet name for World War II.

<sup>17</sup> Žana Ranaitė-Čarnienė, *Neįtikėtina tiesa*. Švyturys, Vilnius 1994, 171.

A new wave of commemorations at Ponar began when the Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis was established in the 1980s. Sąjūdis, literally ‘Movement’, was the political organization that led the struggle for Lithuanian independence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was then that two important Jewish organizations were established: Tkuma and the Lithuanian Cultural Foundation’s Jewish Culture Association, the latter forming the basis for the Lithuanian Jewish Community. Although they were based on different administrative structures and pursued divergent agendas, both organizations took the initiative in maintaining the sites of mass murder in Lithuania, including Ponar. The main difference in the policies of these organizations lay in their conformity to state policy. The Association continued to organize events in May when victims of fascism killed in the Great Patriotic War were commemorated in Lithuania and the Soviet Union, while Tkuma would hold their annual March of the Living in the autumn, in remembrance of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto.<sup>18</sup> At their first meeting, held in 1988, the organization openly displayed Jewish symbols, with the participants carrying a Star of David that they then placed at the edge of burial pits.

Following the wave of *Aliyah*, the emigration to Israel in 1990, the already small Jewish population of Lithuania dwindled further. It was in this context that a member of Tkuma, Hirsh Belitsky, came up with the idea that those leaving could leave a symbolic mark at the graves of their relatives by way of a farewell. He suggested that the families emigrating to Israel should plant an oak at the site. The initiative was publicized in the newspaper *Etzleinu*, striking a chord with many readers. In an acknowledgement letter one family wrote: “We were preparing to leave but felt some sort of dissatisfaction, and then, all of a sudden, we read in

<sup>18</sup> September 23 was the day of the liquidation of the Vilnius ghetto. The Day of Remembrance of the Lithuanian Jewish Victims of Genocide was listed on the official list of state holidays by order of the Presidium of the Supreme Council (Reconstituent Seimas 1990-1992) of Lithuania on October 31, 1990. Since 1994 it has been commemorated annually.



Etzleinu about planting a small oak tree in remembrance. This was when we realized what the feeling of dissatisfaction was all about. After all, until then, everything we had done had been for ourselves: we studied the language, we bought things for the trip. But to plant a tree means to leave something behind after you're gone. To plant a small oak at Ponar, where our departed brothers and sisters rest, means to be together invisibly, wherever we might be..."<sup>19</sup> This act made it possible to establish and maintain a connection between the dead and the living, even in the absence of the latter.

Commemorations organized by Jews took place at Ponar throughout the entire period from 1944 until the 1990s, despite the ruling authorities discouraging such acts and creating significant barriers. Throughout the various physical transformations of Ponar, the site remained one of the most significant and most symbolic for Jews, both for preserving the memory of those murdered and for freely expressing one's values, identities and resistance to state policies.

*Milda Jakulytė-Vasil (University of Amsterdam)*

<sup>19</sup> *Etzleinu* was the newspaper published by the Tkuma Jewish national revival educational association. The letter was quoted in *Etzleinu* (1990) 7, 19.



The First monument at Ponar, 1948. Courtesy of the Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum.



Commemoration in Ponar in September 1988. Courtesy of Grigori Alpern.



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