

**Dealing with mass graves of Holocaust victims - guidelines**  
**from the Zapomniane Foundation**

The near total annihilation of European Jewry that took place during World War II is primarily associated with Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka and other death camps. Meanwhile the territory of Poland is dotted with forgotten Jewish war graves of both individuals and groups. These are the graves of Jews, who were not sent to death camps, but were murdered next to their homes in three subsequent phases of the Holocaust: when the ghettos still existed, during Operation Reinhardt, and afterwards. These Jews lay buried in unmarked graves scattered in the woods, roadside ditches, cultivated fields and any other myriad of places. In most cases, their number and exact location are unknown to researchers and the victim's relatives, though they are usually still remembered by the last living witnesses and their local communities.

In Judaism, both the spiritual and the physical are considered sacred. The soul is the source of holiness, while the body is the vessel that carries holiness within it. According to Jewish tradition and law, the human body remains holy even after death until the day of resurrection. Thus, both the soul and the body remain holy forever. This is why the bones of those who have passed away remain holy. Tradition holds that the soul and body are considered connected despite death, so if the bones are disturbed here on earth, the peace of the soul in heaven is also disturbed. Because bones are sacred, they must be treated with the utmost respect. The bodies of the deceased must be buried in the ground (which excludes both cremation and leaving them above ground) and remain undisturbed. This is why exhumation is strictly forbidden in Judaism, except in special and extraordinary circumstances.

Information about the existence of an unmarked Jewish burial site should always be reported to the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries and the Zapomniane Foundation who combine many years of experience in the field work and non invasive methodology of researching grave sites with an expertise in securing the graves according to the Jewish tradition.

The Holocaust burials are very often located in unexpected places such as ploughing fields, city parks, private gardens, etc. Thus, they are threatened with destruction and desecration. Therefore, the priority is to determine the location of a grave. At the beginning of each route, which aims to locate the graves of Holocaust victims, are people and their memories. Bystanders of the genocide are still alive, and these are the last moments to meet them. Reaching

out to individuals or groups of people who can indicate the approximate location of the grave and narrow down the area of our search is a prerequisite for conducting further research.

The presence of Holocaust victims' graves in Jewish cemeteries is a separate issue. The history of these graves is very diverse. Jews imprisoned in ghettos who died from starvation or diseases spreading in closed districts were buried in cemeteries. From September 1939 onwards, Jewish cemeteries also served as sites of mass and individual executions. In most cases, Jewish war graves in cemeteries remain unmarked, and their location is unknown. It might seem that the mere presence of a war grave in a cemetery would guarantee its safety, even if its exact location is unknown. However, their fate is linked to the legal situation and the state of preservation of Jewish cemeteries in Poland. In 2017, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage tasked the National Heritage Institute with implementing a programme to identify and mark Jewish cemeteries in Poland. At the initial stage of the project, an inventory of the cemeteries was carried out. It was established that 45% of Jewish cemeteries remain unfenced, 27% are fenced, of which only 15% are fenced within their historical boundaries, and the fences of the remaining 12% run along incorrect boundaries. This almost always means that the cemetery existing today is smaller than it was on 1 September 1939, and some of the graves remain outside the contemporary fence and are at risk of destruction or have already been destroyed. Almost a quarter of the necropolis (28%) has been permanently transformed and is not protected under either the act on cemeteries and burial of the deceased or the act on the relationship of the state to Jewish religious communities. Pre-war burials and unidentified graves of Holocaust victims remain at risk of destruction and desecration.

Another important aspect of the research is determining the identity of the victims. The vast majority of Jews murdered during the Shoah remain anonymous. For that reason it is crucial to collect as many personal details about each victim as possible. This contributes to the restoration of their identity and humanity. And again, achieving this goal requires human memory. All the advanced technologies we have access to would be of no use if it weren't for a witness who would designate the area of research. Often a person who knows the location of the grave can also provide information about the dead: who they were, what their names were, what they were like when they were alive.

Simultaneously to interviewing witnesses, an archival query should be initiated. The archival resources contain data both about the location of burial sites and the identity of the victims. The query should include both Polish archives (Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Institute of National Remembrance, State Archives etc.) and foreign archives (Yad Vashem, USHMM

etc), genealogical websites and last but not least resources collected by local historians, culture centres and libraries.

Eventually, the grave should be secured and commemorated by erecting a tombstone and placing an information board about the circumstances of their death. It is worth emphasizing that this is about a tombstone, not a monument or a commemorative plaque. This way we restore humanity to the victims of the Holocaust who were deprived of it even after death, because they were deprived of a burial. The erection of a tombstone should be accompanied by a ceremony attended by local authorities, representatives of the clergy, youth and residents of the town. Its aim is not only to pay tribute to the murdered, but also to include the newly marked grave in the local landscape. In this way, the place of the grave gains new importance, receives a specific material shape, and the story of the life and death of the people buried there has a chance to become part of local history.

After the war, initiatives were launched to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust at presumed or actual burial sites. These were organised by Jewish committees established by survivors, individual survivors for whom commemorating the murdered members of their community was their last duty before leaving Poland, as well as by the authorities at various levels at the time. The experience of the Rabbinical Commission and the Zapomniane Foundation shows that, at that time, little importance was attached to determining the exact location of the graves and that the guidelines of Jewish law were not taken into account at all. Practical considerations guided the choice of locations for the memorials: the monument had to be visible and accessible to visitors. Consequently, these structures are often located far from the burial site, or even on top of graves. Therefore, the contemporary initiators of the renovation of these already deteriorating monuments should consult with the Rabbinical Commission regarding the scope and type of renovation work.

Agnieszka Nieradko, Zapomniane Foundation