



On saving memory

The Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław, Poland

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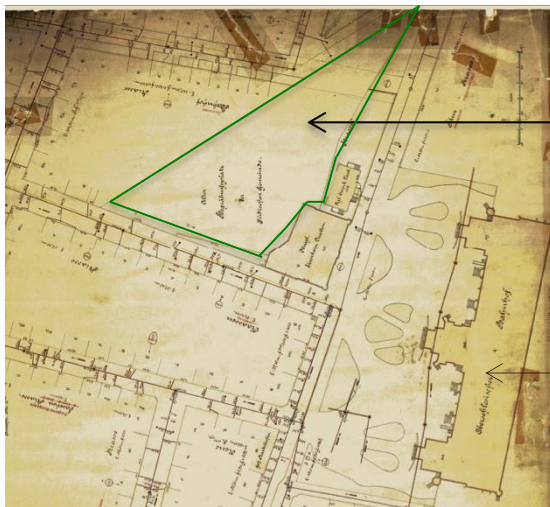
Historical context

Before the war, Wroclaw, then German Breslau, was home to a diverse and prosperous, Jewish community – the third largest in Germany, which was subsequently decimated during the Holocaust. With the post-war border and population shifts, cultural continuity was disrupted. Breslau became Polish Wroclaw, and in line with Poland's communist policies, the pre-war cultural heritage was wiped away or neglected.

As a result, Breslau Jews in the contemporary history of the city and the consciousness of its Polish citizens was practically non-existent. Only a few examples of Jewish material heritage are left in Wroclaw, including the White Stork Synagogue, several buildings designed by Jewish architects and two cemeteries.

Evidence of another important historical Jewish site located next to the city main railway station, the **Cemetery on Gwarna Street**, formerly known as Claassenstraß, survived in archival documents and maps. The cemetery operated for almost one hundred years since its founding in 1761 and was a burial place for over four thousand members of the Jewish community of Breslau, including Rabbis Abraham and Salomon Tikin and the philanthropist Jonas Fränkel.

Originally, the cemetery occupied a 1.92-hectare plot of land, but its boundaries changed in 20th century, mainly in 1908 and 1937 when the Jewish community sold part of the cemetery to the city for urban development purposes. In the Nazi era, the property was confiscated in 1943 and then completely destroyed during the siege of the city in the final months of WWII.



← Cemetery original surface: 1,92 ha

← Main train station

Today, there are barely any material traces of the cemetery left above ground. The landscape has changed completely – several blocs of flats, tennis court, sports hall and garages were built in the post-war decades of communist Poland on parts of this area without any consideration of its historical importance.

Map - drawing based on a pre-war German map of Breslau

Original borders (green line) of the Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wroclaw (former Claassenstraße) with reconstruction of existing buildings and landscape elements.

Legend

Plots cut off from original cemetery area:

A: in 1908 (for purposes of construction of Bahnhof Straße)

B: in 1937 (square renamed from Fränkelplatz, after Jewish philanthropist Jonas Fränkel, to Fontaneplatz, after Theodor Fontane, German novelist and poet).

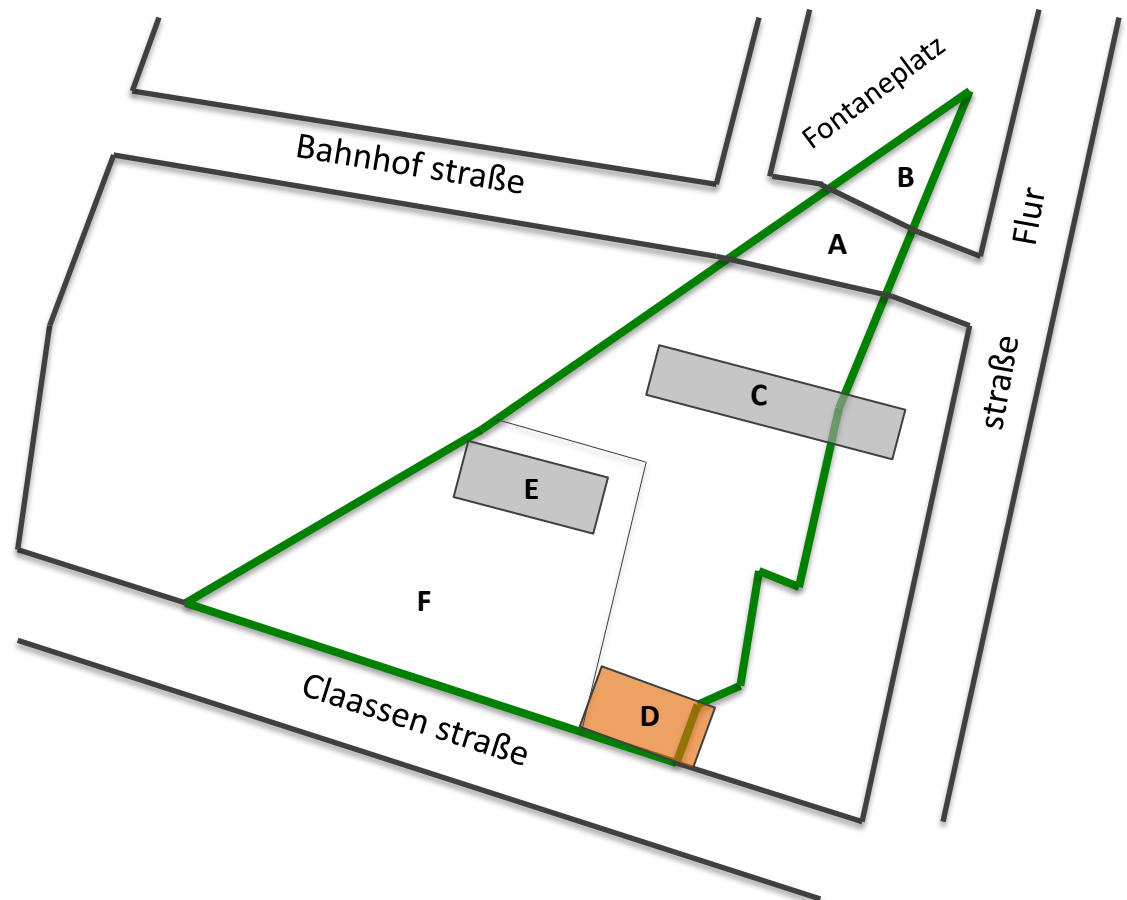
In both cases there had been exhumation and transfer of remains to another part of the cemetery.

C: Blocks of flats

D: Current hotel construction site

E: Sports hall

F: Sports field



A few remaining traces of the Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street:

- partially preserved cemetery fence from 1908
- tailored stones spread in the area – maybe Matzevot
- More photo material related to the cemetery can be found under the link:
https://dolny-slask.org.pl/508930,Wroclaw,Cmentarz_zydowski_ul_Gwarna_dawny.html



Facts overview*:

- In 2012 a private person purchased part of the ground which originally, before WWII, belonged to the Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street, Wrocław. Communist-era garages standing on this ground were demolished and an archaeological inquiry of the area was launched in 2013 in order to analyse if there were any traces of the former cemetery (human remains). The ground was in preparation for resale to a hotel investor.
- The archaeological report from 2013 stated that the property was deemed as being “clear” of any remains of a cemetery or other historical artifact. The same year in July a pile of soil with human bones was found on the outskirts of Wrocław and reported by by-passers to the police. A TVN24 reporter (private TV station in Poland) filmed the scene: <https://www.tvn24.pl/wroclaw,44/spacerowicze-odkryli-halde-pelna-kosci-i-czaszek,339604.html>
According to J. Kichler these may have been bones removed from Gwarna Street. J. Kichler explains in his article in Midrasz magazine that one of the internet comments to the TVN24 video report indicated that the bones came from the former Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street.
- In 2015 a hotel investor (authorised to launch Best Western hotel) purchased the ground, then obtained construction permit from the city authorities and started construction works at the beginning of 2017. The fragment of the cemetery where the hotel construction began in 2017 is in a shape of rectangle. The plot measures 38 x 18 meters and constitutes roughly 3,6% of the cemetery’s original parameters.
- In February 2017 human remains were unearthed on the construction site. A second archaeological investigation was ordered after the intervention of a member of the local Jewish Community, and was launched in 2017.
- The second archaeological study uncovered new findings.

* Source: lectures by Jerzy Kichler on May 31 and June 8, 2017, Wrocław and his article “*Agonia Cmentarza*” published in Midrasz, Polish language magazine, Nr 4(198) July/ August 2017.

- This time archaeologists uncovered bones placed into 108 wooden boxes measuring 40 x 60 cm and 2 sarcophagi, all of which are remains presumably exhumed in either 1908 or 1937, when the Jewish community sold parts of the cemetery to the city.
- Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich authorized exhumation of the remains under the supervision of the member of Jewish Community of Wroclaw, Jerzy Kichler.



May 2017

- Research work lead by archaeologist, PhD Aleksander Limisiewicz lasted for 3 months, from March till May 2017.
- A team of archaeologists and students of the University of Wroclaw, analysed the ground, collected, cleaned and classified all findings and artifacts.



Archaeological study unveiled many historical layers of the cemetery area:

next to artifacts, such as buttons of German uniforms and NSDAP badges with a swastika and glass vials from a nearby pre-war hospital, one hundred human remains were uncovered along with more than thirty fragments of stone Matzevot and a fragment of a Hebrew text encased in a clump of hard soil.



We presume (a hypothesis) that the Third Reich soldiers were buried on Gwarna Street over Jewish graves during and/ or at the end of World War II (*Festung Breslau*, 1945).



Fragment of a Hebrew prayer book

Most probably the page fragment found during excavations belonged to a prayer book.

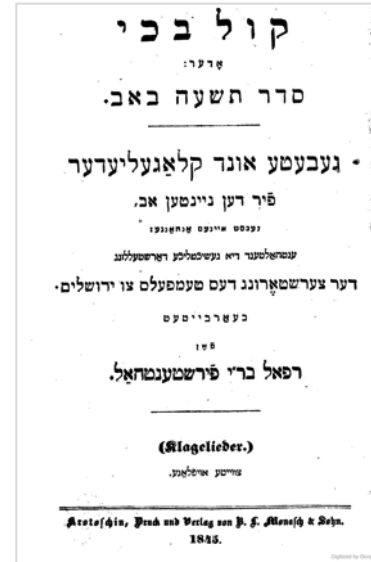
We have identified the verse as the **Kina** (קינה) **for Tisha B'Av** - liturgical poetry, lamentation, read for Tisha B'Av, Jewish holiday commemorating the anniversary of the destruction of the First and Second Temple of Jerusalem (verse identification by PhD Wojciech Tworek, Jewish Studies Faculty, University of Wrocław, Poland).

Eleazar Kalir (approx. 570 CE – 640 CE) is believed to have authored the Kinot (קינות) – Book of Lamentations.

Letters visible on the fragment that allowed for identification of the source.

פְּבִרוֹךְ שְׁמִינִי. סְחִי וּמְאוֹם תְּשִׁימֵנִי: שְׁבַר
מְשֹׁשׁ שְׂמַח מְשֹׁרְרִים. וְרוֹדְפֵי קְלוֹ מְנַשְׂרִים.
לְאֵבֶד הַנְּשֹׂאֲרִים: עַל אֵלֶּה עֲשָׂקוּנִי בְּחַרוּפֵיהֶם.
וְהַגְדִּילִי שְׁאוֹן גְּדוּפֵיהֶם. פָּצוּ עָלֵינוּ פִּיהֶם:
פָּצוּ פִּעְרוּ פֶה מִבְּאֵר שְׁחַרְתָּ. וְאָפְרוּ עָלַי
בְּתוֹכְחַת. פָּתַר וּפָחַת: פָּנֵי פֶּאֶר חֶפֶת מְעוֹנֵי.
הִקְמִיר וְהִקִּים מְעֵנִי. פָּלְגֵי מַיִם תִּרְדַּע עֵינָי:

אונער אונגעהאָרואַם וואָר שולד דאָראַן! זקנים. יונג אונד אלט אין צאהלרײַ.
כער מענגע וואָרדען דער פֿערניכטונג פֿרײַז גענעכען, צום שפּאַטט דער פֿאַלקער
זײַט זײַטשפּרױזן זענען. אײַר זעללע זײַטשפּרױזן זענען זײַט



Preserved verse*:

פָּצוּ פְּעוּרוֹ פֶּה מִבְּאֵר שַׁחַת וְאִטְרוּ עָלַי בְּתוֹכַחַת פֶּחַד וּפְחַת

פ Their mouths gaped wider than the wellsprings of the netherworld. / They engulfed me with harsh reproof! / “Panic and pitfalls!”

Entire stanza from the Kina*:

עַל אֵלֶּה עֲשָׂקוּנוּ בְּחֲרוּפֵיהֶם / וְהִגְדִּילוּ שְׂאוֹן גְּדוּפֵיהֶם / פָּצוּ עָלֵינוּ
פִּיהֶם:
פָּצוּ פְּעוּרוֹ פֶּה מִבְּאֵר שַׁחַת / וְאִטְרוּ עָלַי בְּתוֹכַחַת / פֶּחַד וּפְחַת:
פָּנֵי פֶּאֶר חֶפֶת מְעוֹנֵי / הַקְּמִיל וְהַקִּים מְעֵנִי / פְּלִגֵּי-מַיִם תִּרְדַּ עֵינָי:
נִפְלָה עֲטוּרַת עֹז מִשְׁעָנָם / וְצַר בְּשִׁבְעָה דְרָכִים עִנָּם / וְהִתְדוּ אֶת-עוֹנָם:

ע Over and above all this, they tortured me with their scandalous talk, / and multiplied their blasphemous harangues. / “They shouted against us.”
פ Their mouths gaped wider than the wellsprings of the netherworld. / They engulfed me with harsh reproof! / “Panic and pitfalls!”
פ The glorious face of my canopied abode, / withered with the rise of my oppressor. / “My eyes shed torrents of water.”
Fallen is the crown of strength, their support,
as the enemy pained them along seven paths.
“They confessed their sins.”

* English translation from *The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot, The Complete Tisha B'Av Service with Commentary by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, OU Press, 2010

Conclusions

The city officials showed little concern for the outcomes of the debunked 2013 archeological excavations – the hotel investment has moved on. Nor does the city seem concerned with the fate of the site in the future. This from the 2016 European Capital of Culture, which has built its post-1989 reputation on the recognition of the importance of its multicultural heritage to shaping civic identity.

The Jewish community has not made a public statement on the matter, and itself has yet to determine where the remains removed during the most recent excavations will find their final resting place.



www.wroclaw.pl / Biznes / Aktualności / Obok Dworca Głównego PKP powstanie nowy hotel

Obok Dworca Głównego PKP powstanie nowy hotel

16.12.2016, autor: Jarek Ratajczak



Best Western Premier Wrocław City Center - wizualizacja

wizualizacja: inwestor • Obok Dworca Głównego PKP powstanie nowy hotel

Naprzeciwko Dworca Wrocław Główny, u zbiegu ulic Gwarnej i Piłsudskiego, powstanie nowy czterogwiazdkowy hotel – Best Western Premier City Centre.