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Commemorative Efforts Outside of those at Former Camp Complexes: Northeast Poland's "Non-Lieux" and "Lieux de Mémoire"

Between 26 and 27 August 1941, 1,400 Jews from Tykocin were shot in a nearby forest by occupying German forces.¹ On 12 July, 1941, 3,000 Jewish men were killed by the occupying German forces at Białystok's "Pietrasze, a field outside the town."² Two days before that, Jewish residents of the town of Jedwabne had been burned to death in a local barn as part of a pogrom.³ Those killings, and

¹ "Tykocin," *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed 26 June 2015, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Tykocin>).

² "We Remember Jewish Białystok," last modified 9 August 2015, accessed 26 June 2015, <http://www.zchor.org/bialystok/bialystok.htm>.

³ S. Weiss, "The Speech of Prof. Shevach Weiss, the Ambassador of Israel to Poland," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*. vol. 14: Focusing on Jews in the Polish Borderlands (2001): xxi. Weiss declines in his address to give a number for those murdered in the 10 July pogrom in Jedwabne. In the context of the broader controversy ignited by Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* around the Jedwabne pogrom, the number of Jewish people killed on the 10 July 1941 is particularly controversial. Estimates range from 300 or 400 people (the number of bodies found in the IPN's "partial exhumation of 2001") to the 1,600 people indicated in the "account of the Jedwabne massacre [...] deposited by Szmul Wasersztejn with the Białystok Voivodeship Jewish Historical Commission in April 1945" and used by Gross in *Neighbors*. See A. Cienciala, "The Jedwabne Massacre: Update and Review," *The Polish Review* 48, no. 1 (2003): 53.

the series of mass graves that they left behind, are examples of what the activist for Holocaust commemoration in Eastern Europe, Patrick Desbois, has termed the “Holocaust by bullets.”⁴ The term refers to a feature of the Holocaust that was particularly pervasive in Eastern Europe (including Poland’s easternmost provinces): the mass executions of Jews outside of the confines of concentration and death camps.⁵ Many Jewish residents of the Białystok and Łomża regions⁶ were deported to concentration camps and death camps during the period of German occupation. It remains the case, though, that smaller, decentralized sites of execution were particularly prevalent in this northeastern area of Poland.⁷ Commemoration of these sites faces challenges shaped both by the

⁴ P. Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 million Jews* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2009).

⁵ P. Desbois, “Yahad – In Unum’s Research of Mass Grave Sites of Holocaust Victims,” in *Killing Sites: Research and Remembrance*, ed. T. Lutz, D. Silberklang, P. Trojański, J. Wetzel and M. Bistrovic (Berlin: Metropol, 2015), 87.

⁶ The Białystok voivodeship was, in 1975, split into the Białystok and Łomża voivodeships. In 1999, the two were recombined as the Podlaskie voivodeship. A “voivodeship” or “województwo” (in Polish) is a regional administrative unit. In this article, I refer to the area in question as the “Podlaskie region” to call attention to the general geographic space under discussion, rather than to the official administrative unit.

⁷ “Execution Sites of Jewish Victims Investigated by Yahad-In Unum,” Yahad-In Unum, accessed 3 June 2015, <http://yahadmap.org/#map/>. Although now marked by sites of mass graves, the region is one that had a history of flourishing multiculturalism. There has been a great deal of debate, in respect to the regions affected by the “Holocaust by bullets,” as well as in regard to Poland as a whole, over the correct balance between commemorating the gravesites while also keeping alive the memory of Jewish life. For approaches to questions that range from advocating the active commemoration of the sites of mass graves as imperative for the sake of those buried there, to advocating for active commemoration for the sake of its educative purposes, to decrying of the degree to which the history of Jewish life in Poland has been forgotten, see Michael Schudrich, “Jewish Law and Exhumation” and Meilech Binder, “Cemeteries and Mass Graves Are at Risk,” in *Killing Sites*, 79–84 and 109–17 respectively. See also, Katrin Steffen, “Disputed Memory: Jewish Past, Polish Remembrance,” *Osteuropa* (2008). For the debate in the broader Polish context, see the discussions surrounding the balance between speaking to the centuries of Jewish life in Poland and to the experience of the Holocaust that arose

history of the Holocaust in the region and by the nature of the physical spaces where these mass graves are located. The issue of mass graves is one that has not been thoroughly researched. In fact, it was only in 2014 that the first major conference to discuss research on mass graves was held in Eastern Europe. The conference brought together people and organizations dedicated to marking, commemorating, and protecting sites of mass graves based on such diverse reasons as anthropological, educational, and religious. Whether speaking from education-based impulses to recognize the life and loss of former Jewish communities in the area, or religious-based missions to ensure respect for places of the dead, delegates made clear the importance of mass graves being well-treated and recognized as places of commemoration.⁸ Whether commemorative efforts take the form of “aesthetic [or] cognitive commemoration,”⁹ those efforts may stand as proof against the memory of the sites of mass graves eroding. For, as this article will discuss, the sites of mass graves are particularly prone to slipping from communal memory.

Scholars debate over whether sites of mass graves are, in fact, always places of “non-memory” or, to employ the term stem-

with the creation of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in David G. Roskies, “Polin: A Light Unto the Nations,” *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter 2015), accessed 9 October 2015, <http://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/1435/polin-a-light-unto-the-nations/>. In this article, I focus on commemoration of the sites of mass graves in the Podlaskie region in large part because there remains a great deal of research to be done on this topic.

⁸ While motivations for wishing to see sites commemorated often overlap, there are distinct approaches. For a more education-inspired approach, see Dieter Pohl’s and Andrej Angrick’s essays in *Killing Sites*, 31–46 and 47–60 respectively. For an approach that stems from religious concerns, see the essay by Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, in the same volume (*ibid.*, 79–84.)

⁹ Historians Christhard Hoffmann and Matt Erlin draw a distinction between such forms of commemoration as memorials and educative programs. See C. Hoffmann and M. Erlin, “The Dilemmas of Commemoration,” *German Politics & Society* 17, no. 3 52 (1999): 5.

ming from the work of Pierre Nora, “non-lieux de mémoire.”¹⁰ In the present examination of the commemoration of sites of mass graves, “non-lieux de mémoire” refers to those places that will not figure in the memory or consciousness of the towns that border them.¹¹ Nora, a historian and theoretician of memory, differentiates between spontaneous “environments of memory” (*milieux de mémoire*) and those places in which memory has lost that spontaneous aspect and has to be consciously reconstructed (*lieux de mémoire*).¹² He contends that even those places where memory has been *reconstructed* may nevertheless remain places of memory. In the debate over how to commemorate the sites of mass graves, Nora’s terms help examine the challenges facing commemoration of those sites and as a framework for the goals of commemorative efforts in the region. Nora makes the point that “*milieux de mémoire*” are all but lost.¹³ It seems possible, though, to see elements of “*milieux de mémoire*” in the commemorative function of the Auschwitz site. There, a community of survivors for whom memory of the camp is not a reconstruction have led commemorative efforts on the site and still visit it. In that place, the spontaneity of memory seems to connect, in a limited sense, with the idea of an environment of memory. The point is relevant because

¹⁰ A term employed by Claude Lanzmann, the director of the film *Shoah*, and referenced in a presentation by Roma Sendyka (Lecture to UBC Witnessing Auschwitz Seminar, Kraków, Poland, 25 May 2015). My thanks to Dr. Sendyka for calling my attention to Daniel Libeskind’s language of “voids” and Aleida Assman’s “phantom sites” that has been applied to the sites of mass graves, as well as Georges Didi-Huberman’s language, which expresses the opposite, i.e., sites “in spite of all.”

¹¹ Used in a broader context, “non-lieux de mémoire” could refer to those spaces that are not held in a more widely-defined collective memory to be places for commemoration. The focus of this article is, however, the extent to which the physical spaces left behind by the “Holocaust by bullets” are treated as places for commemoration. It is in that context that the status of the sites in the memories of the towns that border them becomes particularly important.

¹² P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (Spring 1989): 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*

those characteristics are much less tenable when it comes to the commemoration of northeastern Poland's mass graves. Not only were there few Jewish survivors from the region but, of the survivors, few remained in the region. The result is that commemorative efforts often fall to the non-Jewish populations of the areas close to the sites. In that context, whether a site of a mass grave becomes an active part of a town's series of commemorative activities (thus moving into the realm of a "lieu de mémoire"), or remains a "non-lieu de mémoire," depends to a great degree on decisions made within the town. As other articles in this volume have highlighted, narratives (based on an authors' own sense of a site) can function to create "places of memory" for their readers or audience; these articles have illuminated how the existence of those "places of memory" in texts about a region or place can highlight the frequent absence of active commemoration at a local level that would create "lieux de mémoire" of the physical sites.¹⁴ The Podlaskie region seems particularly prone to such narrative or commemorative absences. In the remainder of this article, I will examine the forces that pull sites of mass graves towards remaining "non-lieux de mémoire" and analyze how those forces intersect with narratives that draw their readers' attention to the once present Jewish communities and the processes of their disappearance.

While commemoration from within local communities is key to the status of a site as either a "lieu de mémoire" or a "non-lieu de mémoire," ground-up commemoration also faces particular challenges that are informed by prewar Christian-Jewish relations, the region's wartime history of Soviet and German occupation, and the borderless nature of the killing sites that those periods left be-

¹⁴ I am particularly grateful to Bożena Karwowska for sharing with me her thoughts on the interplay between spaces created by narratives and those of the physical place.

hind.¹⁵ The task left for individuals and organizations at work in this area is to create a “pull” toward commemoration and constructing places of memory, something that will counteract forces that encourage the sites of mass graves to remain “non-lieux de mémoire.”

The decimation of the Podlaskie Jewish population has left little opportunity for the region’s sites of mass graves to become a part of anything approaching the spontaneous and unreconstructed memory of a “milieu de mémoire.” Over ninety percent of the region’s Jewish citizens were killed in the Holocaust. Accounts from the time suggest that those Jews who escaped executions carried out in their towns and who could have acted as carriers of memory were often able to escape only as far as Białystok. There, they lived a precarious existence as “illegals” in the Białystok ghetto, vulnerable (as were the ghetto’s other residents) to shootings or deportations.¹⁶ Of the approximately 350,000 Jewish people in the Białystok region before the war,¹⁷ only about 760 survivors remained in Białystok by the summer of 1945.¹⁸

The number of Jewish residents of the region continued to drop after the war. In his book *Bialystok to Birkenau*, Michel Mielnicki,

¹⁵ The importance of recognizing the region’s history of occupation by both the Soviet and German forces for understanding the history of the Holocaust in the region has been brought to the foreground by Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*. Published in 2010, *Bloodlands* emphasizes the violence seen in the areas caught between Soviet and German forces and has served to highlight the place of the region on the broader map of the Holocaust. See also J. S. Kopstein and J. Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities: Local Political Milieus and the Persecution of Jews in Occupied Poland,” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 3 (2011). Kopstein and Wittenberg analyze the relationship of prewar levels of Jewish-Christian integration, and study the occupation of areas east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line by both Soviet and German forces, with the pogroms carried out following German occupation of the region in 1941.

¹⁶ F. Nowak, *My Star: Memoirs of a Holocaust Survivor* (Toronto: Polish Canadian Publishing Fund, 1996), 82.

¹⁷ “We Remember Jewish Białystok,” last modified 17 August 2014, accessed 25 June 2015, <http://www.zchor.org/bialystok/bialystok.htm>.

¹⁸ L. Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 68.

a Holocaust survivor and former resident of Wasilków (a town about eight kilometers from Białystok), writes of trying to return to his hometown in the hope of finding his brother and sister, only to be “advised that a returning Jew ventured into Wasilków at his peril.”¹⁹ Mielnicki speaks too of the lack of a desire or pull to return to the region, in addition to an active push away from it as experienced by his sister. He writes: “far quicker than I, [Lenka] heard about the renewal of anti-Semitic violence in Poland. She knew our mother and father were dead. [...] So, what was there for her to go back to?”²⁰ The decision of Jewish survivors to leave the area was not limited to those whose experiences or memories were shaped by extremely negative relations with non-Jews in the region. Unlike Michel Mielnicki, who makes a point of dedicating his book to those “murdered by fascist Poles” along with those murdered by “German Nazis,” Holocaust survivor and memoirist Felicja Nowak dedicates her memoir, in part, to the Polish Christian family who saved her life. In the course of her memoir, *My Star*, Nowak points to many non-Jewish Poles who took on the risk of facilitating her concealment outside of the Białystok ghetto. She also points, however, to a postwar climate in which some of her rescuers did not want their deeds to be publicly commemorated for fear of reprisals.²¹ This fear suggests the presence, after the war, of attitudes that would not have encouraged Jewish survivors to remain in the area.²² Indicative of another pull away from the

¹⁹ M. Mielnicki and J. Munro, *Bialystok to Birkenau – The Holocaust Journey of Michel Mielnicki as told to John Munro* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2000), 220.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

²¹ F. Nowak, *My Star*, 6.

²² It is worth considering here that the proportionately large number of Jewish to non-Jewish Poles in this region could have posed a challenge for those asked to provide shelter and hide multiple neighbors. Felicja Nowak, for instance, discusses friends of her family who wished to hide her, but did not feel that they had the resources to do so. Such people’s actions remain separate from those of people who after the war chose to target those who had hidden Jews. One can also argue that their actions (or lack thereof), do not pose the same challenges to commemoration.

region for Jewish survivors facing a decimated Jewish community, Nowak's own reason for leaving the Białystok area in 1944 was to join her uncle's family that had survived the war in Moscow.²³

Mielnicki and Nowak are only two examples of people who chose not to remain in their former homes; nonetheless, they point to a phenomenon visible on a wider scale in the postwar population statistics for the region. Collected Jewish Community Records for the years 1944–1947 indicate that while in the summer of 1945 there were approximately 760 Jews living in the Białystok region, by the end of 1945, that number had fallen to 661 people.²⁴ The significant barriers faced by Jews in the region and the continually decreasing numbers of Jews in the region after the war substantiates the point that, in many cases, it would be the descendants of non-Jewish people living in the region, not the descendants of former Jewish residents, who live in the territory where the mass graves are located and who may be familiar with the sites.

As a result of the nearly extinct Jewish community after the war, the few who could actively portray the sites of mass graves as “places of memory” did not remain in the region to foster such a sense of space. The case of Felicja Nowak, for example, is telling. In describing her visit to Białystok's Pietrasze and relating how she “bowed” and “laid down [her] bouquet of flowers” in the place where her father had been shot, she reminds her readers that the site is a place for commemoration. Specifically, she reminds her readers that it is a place for the commemoration of those who

²³ F. Nowak, *My Star*, 153.

²⁴ L. Dobroszycki, *Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland*, 68, 76. Population numbers for the period are difficult to ascertain with certainty given the large numbers of people relocating in the direct aftermath of the Holocaust and of the war. Furthermore, many Jews would likely have been wary of identifying themselves as such in the postwar years. That being said, there seems to be a general consensus among records and among scholars that the population statistics listed are in the correct order of magnitude. See also “Białystok,” *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed 26 June 2015, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Białystok>.

were killed there “only because they were Jews.”²⁵ Although her text emphasizes for her audience (both residents of the region and others) that sites of mass graves are sites for commemoration, it also points to the broader challenges of commemoration in the region: Nowak’s visit to Pietrasze was made as she prepared for her emigration from Poland in 1971. As a result of the decimation of the region’s Jewish population, no extensive community remained for which the sites of mass graves were *automatically* places of commemoration. Instead, the role of determining which sites would become places of commemoration was left to the local non-Jewish communities.²⁶

The discussion of sites of mass graves brought to light in widely-popular works about the region raises the question of whether locally-based commemorative efforts are important in the context of those sites that remain somewhat or widely known today. The answer may be found in attitudes toward avoiding highly visible commemorative efforts without signs of local support among individuals and organizations planning to memorialize sites in the Podlaskie region. While the concerns of those indi-

²⁵ F. Nowak, *My Star*, 169.

²⁶ As other contributions to this volume attest, a narrative such as Felicja Nowak’s can serve to create a “lieu de mémoire” of its own in the minds of its readers even where one is not as firmly engrained in the treatment of the site itself. Although not memoirs, Władysław Pasikowski’s film *Pokłosie* and Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s play *Nasza klasa*, like the memoir of Felicja Nowak, simultaneously create “lieux de mémoire” in the minds of their audiences and point to the challenges to the formation of “lieux de mémoire” at the sites of mass graves themselves. As artistic representations of pogroms and of the spaces they leave behind, both works highlight their authors’ sense that those spaces are ones for commemoration while, at the same time, pointing to the forces that would exert a pull against active commemoration of those sites. It is on that latter issue of the forces that would encourage sites to remain “non-lieux de mémoire” that the subsequent paragraphs will focus. Pasikowski’s film is available on DVD. Słobodzianek’s play is available as *Our Class*, trans. Catherine Grosvenor, Version by Ryan Craig ed. (London: Oberon Books, 2012). Quotes included in this essay are taken from this English translation.

viduals and organizations vary, the point remains. Karen Kaplan, an individual sponsor of a monument outside of the town of Rajgród,²⁷ addressed the reluctance of much of her family to erect a memorial there in a speech given in May 2015. Kaplan explained her family's reluctance as stemming from a fear that such a visible assertion of the Jewish heritage of the town and of its loss could provoke anti-Semitism among the now entirely non-Jewish population.²⁸ Similarly, while the organization *Yahad-In Unum* is "dedicated to systematically identifying and documenting the sites of Jewish mass executions," recommendations made by the organization's founder reflect a similar reluctance to engage in anything but "[discreet]" commemoration without signs of local dedication to commemoration. In a presentation on "Yahad – In Unum's Research of Mass Grave Sites of Holocaust Victims" founder Patrick Desbois explained, "We also recommend that the work of protecting and commemorating be done as discreetly as possible. If there were to be a public announcement of the protection of thousands of mass graves of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, the remains of victims that are lying in various private and public places may be desacralized, so that the territory's owner would avoid any perceived trouble."²⁹ Regardless of whether those concerns about the results of vocal commemorative efforts are justified in every case, one can certainly find examples from the region to suggest that a site becoming widely known does not preclude it from remaining a "non-lieux de mémoire"³⁰ more locally. First published in 2000,

²⁷ The monument was intended to commemorate the murder of around one hundred members of the town's Jewish community, including that of Kaplan's father's family. Karen Kaplan, "Descendants of Rajgród," Presentation to the UBC Witnessing Auschwitz Seminar in Michałowo, Poland on 28 May 2015.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ P. Desbois, "Yahad – In Unum's Research," 95.

³⁰ As discussed previously, I use "non-lieu de mémoire" in the sense of a site that has not been incorporated into a town's broader commemoration of the war years.

Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*³¹ argued that it had been people who lived in the town, rather than the German occupying forces, who carried out the murder of the town's Jewish citizens in the July 1941 pogrom.³² In the series of disputes that followed the publication of the book, the mass grave of the town's Jews became a center of attention. However, Marta Kurkowska, Fellow of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, reports that despite (or perhaps because of) that additional focus on the site, the years following the publication of *Neighbors* saw little ongoing support from local officials for memorial services on the site.³³ The memorial erected on the site has also been subjected to vandalism. The example of Jedwabne suggests that the mere awareness of a mass grave site, whether locally or internationally, does not guarantee the creation of a secure or consistently recognized place of memory.

It is important also to acknowledge that just because a site of mass graves may be known only to locals does not render those sites automatically (or permanently) "non-lieux de mémoire." What it does mean, however, is that the local community determines how clearly the sites are marked as gravesites and how much those memorials become a part of war commemorations. According to Katrin Steffen, however, "the non-Jewish members of Polish society failed to take on this role."³⁴ She underscores that there were too few Jewish people remaining after the Holocaust to act as "bearers of collective memory [...]" and thus compensate for the passing

³¹ J. T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). The original Polish version was published in 2000.

³² *Ibid.*, 16.

³³ M. Kurkowska, "Jedwabne and Wizna: Monuments and Memory in the Łomża Region," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*. vol. 20: Making Holocaust Memory (2008): 256.

³⁴ K. Steffen, "Disputed Memory," 206.

of the generation that experienced the events first hand." On the other hand, Agnieszka Nieradko of the Rabbinical Commission in Poland holds that "local communities have kept the memory alive for seventy years about the fate of their Jewish neighbors."³⁵ Referring to the Rabbinical Commission's work to find and preserve Holocaust graves, Nieradko suggests that those "local communities [...] should be the starting point for [...] [the Rabbinical Commission's] work."³⁶ Taking Steffen's and Nieradko's statements together could suggest that, even in the case of those gravesites that have been left as "non-lieux de mémoire," memory of the communities killed there remains, even when it is not expressed through spatial commemoration. More broadly, though, the disconnect between Steffen's and Nieradko's interpretations of the state of memory of Jews in Poland points to the fact that levels of commemoration vary from one community to the next. That acknowledgement sheds a different light on how the term "non-lieux de mémoire" is applied. Roma Sendyka, for example, includes in her explanation of "non-lieux de mémoire" a description of these places as sites with "past[s] known only to locals,"³⁷ reflecting the fact that, generally, those sites that are actively commemorated are those known to a wider group. It seems worth noting, however, that the difference between a site of mass graves remaining a "non-lieu de mémoire" or becoming a "lieu de mémoire" is not dependent on participants in commemorative efforts beyond those people from the community by which the gravesite is situated. Considering a "lieu de mémoire" to be a place where active (though not spontaneous) commemoration occurs, one could use the concepts of "non-lieux de mémoire" and "lieux de mémoire" to differentiate between

³⁵ A. Nieradko, "Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland," in *Killing Sites*, 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ R. Sendyka, abstract for "Prism: Understanding a Non-Memory Place," The University of Chicago Center in Paris, Panel Discussion, <https://centerinparis.uchicago.edu/page/panel-2-abstracts>.

those sites that are not a central part of a town's consciousness³⁸ and those that are.

By way of example, we can look at one of Podlaskie's small towns where the memorial to that town's murdered Jewish population had remained peripheral to the town's memorial services until recently. At the urging of a local school principal, its care was taken up by her students and since that time, it has become a more integrated part of the town's memorial services, moving the site from the terrain of a "non-lieu de mémoire" to something approximating a "lieu de mémoire" in the town's consciousness.³⁹

Although commemoration from within local communities is vital, ground-up commemoration faces particular challenges, or what can be thought of as forces that would dissuade local populations from working to commemorate more actively the graves of their former Jewish neighbors. Scholars of Polish history and memory posit that the outbreak of the Second World War and the results of the Yalta Agreement robbed Poland of its national independence and lead to an emphasis in Polish national memory of the war as a "national catastrophe."⁴⁰ Such an emphasis has left little room for memory of the Holocaust as a Jewish catastrophe. Furthermore, during the communist period, propaganda dedicated to portraying those killed during the war as anti-fascist martyrs,

³⁸ By "central," I mean in the sense of being commemorated at least to the degree of other memorialized, non-Holocaust related events in the town.

³⁹ M. Kurkowska, "Jedwabne and Wizna," 257. The town referenced here is Jedwabne. Note that I have previously used Jedwabne as an example of a place in which earlier attempts at commemoration through more official channels had garnered little support; this is in contrast to the recent success of a local principal, who has sought to make commemoration of the former Jewish residents of the town a more integrated part of the collective memory of future Jedwabne generations.

⁴⁰ K. Struve, "Rites of Violence? The Pogroms of Summer 1941," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*. vol. 24: Jews and Their Neighbours in Eastern Europe Since 1750 (2012): 264. See also, M. Kurkowska, "Jedwabne and Wizna" and Deidre Berger, "Protecting Memory: Preserving and Memorializing the Holocaust Mass Graves of Eastern Europe," in *Killing Sites*.

also served to ignore the anti-Jewish, rather than solely anti-Polish, efforts of the Nazi German occupiers, leading to a common perception of the camps as first and foremost a “Polish tragedy.” There are examples throughout Poland of memorials to Polish citizens killed during the Holocaust, which ignore the religious identity of the victims, i.e., memorials that make no mention of the victims’ Jewishness and which speak of the victims as “political and war prisoners.”⁴¹ With the fall of Communism came a return to a more open acknowledgment of the religious affiliations and identities of Nazi victims.⁴² While such an opening holds the potential for the pluralization of memory, the taking up of the memory of Jewish losses by the non-Jewish Polish community as part of their history remains complicated in many areas, including the Podlaskie region. The relationship between the region’s Jewish and Christian communities had been a historically complex one. Even before the Holocaust, when members of Jewish communities had figured prominently in the region, they had been regarded by many as separate from the Christian-Polish communities. Despite shared participation in some cultural endeavors, economic competition and language barriers between those members of the Jewish community who spoke predominantly Yiddish and Russian, and Polish-speaking Christians exacerbated the separation between the communities and their memories.⁴³

⁴¹ Wording taken from a plaque erected during the communist period to commemorate the almost entirely Jewish victims of Monowitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz (“Memorial Sites for the Buna/Monowitz Concentration Camp,” Wollheim Memorial, http://www.wollheim-memorial.de/en/gedenkorte_fuer_das_kz_bunamonowitz). See also Felicja Nowak’s discussion of the memorial standing in Białystok’s Pietrasze in 1971 that bore the inscription “no indication that [...] [those who were murdered there] were killed only because they were Jews” (F. Nowak, *My Star*, 169).

⁴² K. Steffen, “Disputed Memory,” 199.

⁴³ “The Processes of Collective Memory in Białystok,” Lecture to UBC Witnessing Auschwitz Seminar in Białystok, Poland on 27 May 2015. See also Kopstein and Wittenberg, “Deadly Communities,” 4.

The particular history of the Holocaust in the Podlaskie region also appears to encourage the suppression of both the story of a distinct, Jewish tragedy, and its commemoration. A national survey conducted in 1998 showed that adults (then described as “young Poles”) worried “that Polish suffering during the Second World war might not be sufficiently acknowledged if Jewish suffering is highlighted.”⁴⁴ The emphasis on the war as an attack on the Polish nation maybe all the stronger, and the pull to commemorate the particular fate of the Jews commensurately weaker, in the area of eastern Poland which was attacked and occupied by both the Soviets and the Germans. The Podlaskie region falls within the area of “double occupation,” the area of Poland east of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Line.⁴⁵ In that region, non-Jewish Poles, though not targeted for extermination to the same extent as Jewish Poles, were subject to the violence perpetrated by both the Soviet and the German occupiers. Memory of the hardships of the two occupations can encourage a regional memory in which “Polish Jews [...] and their suffering would hold only a marginal significance in the tales of wartime martyrdom,” as Marta Kurkowska describes “official memory” in the context of the Podlaskie region.⁴⁶ Such regional memory can, as a result, leave little room for active commemoration of the hardships faced by a community seen by many as the “Other.”

Even beyond the issue of a limited pull to recognize the losses of the Jewish communities in the region, the period of double occupation also encouraged outbreaks of local violence against Jewish populations that have, in some instances, created a push against speaking about former fellow townspeople who were Jewish. In

⁴⁴ J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, “The Development of Holocaust Education in Post-Communist Poland,” *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 20: Making Holocaust Memory (2008): 277.

⁴⁵ T. Snyder, *Bloodlands* (London: The Bodley Head, 2010), 190.

⁴⁶ M. Kurkowska, “Jedwabne and Wizna,” 249.

the context of double occupation, some members of the non-Jewish Polish community developed the belief (a belief encouraged by the German occupiers⁴⁷) that the Jewish population of the region had collaborated with the Soviet occupiers. The issue of the alleged Jewish-Soviet collaboration is a particularly fraught one. Certainly, there were some Jews who collaborated with the Soviets. Michel Mielnicki provides one such example in his memoir (discussed earlier in this article) when he speaks of his father's work with the NKVD.⁴⁸ Speaking more broadly, political scientists Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg acknowledge "the initially warm welcome that some Jews gave to the Soviets" in 1939.⁴⁹ Yet what Kopstein and Wittenberg also emphasize is that the degree to which perceptions of Jewish-Soviet collaboration were tied to pre-existing anti-Semitic tropes of "Judeo-Bolshevism" renders generalizations problematic.⁵⁰ Collaboration and the allegations of collaboration are relevant to our discussion for the role that they played in facilitating the scapegoating of Jews for the Soviet invasion and for Soviet violence against local populations. Enmity for Jewish residents of the region grew as a result of jealousy relating to the improved position of some Jews under the Soviets (relative only, Kopstein and Wittenberg remind us, to "the earlier inferior status" of Jews⁵¹) and a reinforced sense of Jews as the "Other" (stemming from the perception of Jews as part of a Jewish-Bolshevik alliance).

In some areas, what resulted were pogroms encouraged by the German occupying forces and carried out by locals against their Jewish neighbors.⁵² Writing about the children of Jedwabne,

⁴⁷ T. Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 194.

⁴⁸ M. Mielnicki and J. Munro, *Bialystok to Birkenau*, 84.

⁴⁹ J. S. Kopstein and J. Wittenberg, "Deadly Communities," 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Those areas included the examples of Jedwabne and Radziłów discussed by Jan T. Gross in *Neighbors*. See also Jeffrey Kopstein and Jason Wittenberg's "Deadly

Kurkowska suggests that “the trauma of individual and private memory of those who knew what really happened” would not “reach them,” meaning the future non-Jewish generations in Jedwabne.⁵³ Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s play *Nasza klasa* (*Our Class*) brings those issues to the fore through his imaginings of postwar conversations in which those involved in the pogroms “decided on [...] what was [to be] secret and what was sacred.”⁵⁴ Similarly Władysław Pasikowski’s 2012 film *Pokłosie* (*Aftermath*) unmasks local violence (rather than the violence of an external aggressor) against a Jewish community as a force that leads to the silencing of commemorative efforts.⁵⁵

While the history of the “Holocaust by bullets” poses challenges to commemorative efforts, so too do the spaces it has left behind.⁵⁶ Memory, Pierre Nora writes, “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, [...] images, and objects.”⁵⁷ Though “lieux de mémoire” only fill in for real memory,⁵⁸ even the process of sites that are “non-lieux de mémoire” becoming “lieux de mémoire” would likely be assisted by the existence of concrete and readily demarcated places for memorials or for memorial services. Instead, what the “Holocaust by bullets” has left behind are mass graves with borders that can be difficult to identify. Writing about obstacles to protection

Communities” for a discussion of why pogroms occurred in some communities and not in others. While Kopstein and Wittenberg suggest that, statistically speaking, the degree of political integration of Jewish and non-Jewish communities may have been the deciding factor for the occurrence, or not, of pogroms, they emphasize the prominent role played by allegations of collaboration in the scapegoating of the Jews, as well as in the works of subsequent nationalist historians who wrote on the region (*ibid.*).

⁵³ M. Kurkowska, “Jedwabne and Wizna,” 249.

⁵⁴ T. Słobodzianek, *Our Class*, 150.

⁵⁵ *Pokłosie*, dir. Władysław Pasikowski (Poland, 2012). Pasikowski’s film, like Słobodzianek’s *Nasza klasa*, is based on the issues raised by Gross’s *Neighbors*.

⁵⁶ P. Desbois, “Yahad – In Unum’s Research,” 87.

⁵⁷ P. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

and memorialization, Deidre Berger, Director of the American Jewish Committee in Berlin, writes of the challenges associated with establishing the borders of sites years or even decades after the fact. She writes: “determining the perimeters of sites and establishing boundaries proved to be a considerable challenge after so many years of neglect.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Roma Sendyka recognizes the challenge of knowing that you are in a place for commemoration when the borders of that space are unclear. In particular, she uses the example of the territory of the concentration camp Płaszów, which is now being used as a park, and extends this example to similar spaces across Eastern Europe.⁶⁰ If one cannot see the borders of the commemorative site, it is perhaps harder to feel oneself to be in such a site. The same issue applies to the mass graves of the Podlaskie region, contributing to the likelihood of them remaining “non-lieux de mémoire.”⁶¹

It is not only the undefined borders of mass gravesites that render the sites less likely to create a pull to more active commemoration. The porousness of those boundaries also creates the potential for concerns over land use. Those concerns can translate into active pushes against seeing the sites more firmly established in the communal mindset as graves and, therefore, as sacred places of commemoration. As regards some of the barriers to active commemoration of the sites of mass graves, I have already mentioned Patrick Desbois, who speaks of what he sees as a widespread preference among owners of land where mass graves are located to “[desacralize]” the land and, thus, “avoid any perceived trouble.”⁶² Similarly, Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, references the potential and perceived “inconvenien[ce]” of a mass grave

⁵⁹ D. Berger, “Protecting Memory: Preserving and Memorializing the Holocaust Mass Graves of Eastern Europe,” 101.

⁶⁰ R. Sendyka, Lecture to UBC Witnessing Auschwitz Seminar.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² P. Desbois, “Yahad – In Unum’s Research,” 95.

found in “someone’s field” currently used, for instance, for agricultural purposes.⁶³ On a broader scale, similar concerns were voiced in response to Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*, which emphasizes the ubiquity of mass graves all across Eastern Europe. Many expressed fear that to emphasize the nature of the land as a graveyard would be to undermine its current uses.

In the context of historical and spatial forces that encourage people to keep the sites of mass graves on the periphery of commemorative efforts, the task of organizations and individuals at work in the region rest in an attempt to construct a meaningful pull to remember those mass graves and the communities of people buried within them. The unreconstructed memory “borne by [a] living societ[y]” that one would associate with a “milieu de mémoire” is unattainable in the context of the region’s decimated Jewish population.⁶⁴ There is no form of commemoration to fill the void left behind by a lost population. The goal, rather, would be to see those sites that have been marked, but not actively commemorated, become a more central part of a town’s consciousness. In discussing “lieux de mémoire,” Nora makes the point that they require a certain “commemorative vigilance” and that, particularly in the case of the memory of minorities, “history would [otherwise] soon sweep them away.”⁶⁵ The range of work done by organizations in the region points to the different ways in which one might seek to create a greater pull towards commemoration and “commemorative vigilance” at a local level. In the very first years after the end of the war, Noe Grüss, one of the founders of the Central Jewish Historical Commission (CŽKH), expressed a desire for what Christhard Hoffmann and Matt Erlin termed “cognitive commemoration”⁶⁶ that was to be attained through the erection of a memo-

⁶³ M. Schudrich, “Jewish Law and Exhumation,” *ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁴ P. Nora, “Between Memory and History,” 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁶ C. Hoffmann and M. Erlin, “The Dilemmas of Commemoration,” 5.

rial “not [...] made of marble or stone, but [...] one in people’s hearts and memory.”⁶⁷ Groups currently at work in the region, such as Michałowo’s Multicultural Center, and those such as Yahad-In Unum and the Lo-Tishkach European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative that are primarily concerned with finding and marking gravesites, include education in their mandates. A recent study on Holocaust education in Poland by the director of Holocaust Studies at the Jagiellonian University⁶⁸ also points to the way in which aesthetic and cognitive commemoration (to use Hoffman and Erlin’s term) can function together. The author of the study writes: “Informal education, frequently conducted by NGOs, reaches a larger audience particularly in towns where Holocaust memorials are located.”⁶⁹ In those instances, the work of memorial-based and education-based commemorative efforts come together to try to create a pull towards greater “commemorative vigilance.”

To the extent that there is still some spontaneity to the commemorative aspect at Auschwitz, there too it will likely pass along with the survivors. At the site of the Auschwitz Camp Complex, though, the educative and research aspects of the Museum are already acting to ensure that the site remains a place of memory and to foster long-term “commemorative vigilance.” However, in Podlaskie (the region under discussion in this article), the creation of “commemorative vigilance” faces distinct challenges. Religious miscorrelation between the murdered Jewish population and those who remain to remember them highlights the scale of the decimation of Jewish communities and points to the importance of commemoration from within local, non-Jewish communities⁷⁰; at

⁶⁷ Noe Grüss as quoted in Natalia Aleksion, “The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland 1944–1947,” *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*. vol. 20: Making Holocaust Memory (2008): 77.

⁶⁸ J. Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, “The Development of Holocaust Education in Post-Communist Poland,” *ibid.*: 271–304.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

⁷⁰ R. Sendyka, Lecture to UBC Witnessing Auschwitz Seminar.

the same time, the history of the double occupation and the borderless nature of the sites of mass graves function to lessen the pull to commemorate no-longer existing Jewish communities within the local communities of today. These challenges are only partly mediated by narratives and artistic representations that work to assert their vision of the region as one marked by places for commemoration. It is in this light that the efforts of individuals and organizations (both local and not) who work toward commemoration in the region can be viewed. Importantly, they too form a part of a broader effort to reconstruct a pull toward commemoration. In creating a pull to remember, they encourage the “commemorative vigilance” required to prevent the erosion of memory of the sites, and of the individuals and communities whose loss they mark.

Miejsca i nie miejsca pamięci w północno wschodniej Polsce.

Gesty pamięci, upamiętnianie i materialne ślady masowych zabójstw ludności żydowskiej

Streszczenie

Autorka analizuje sposoby upamiętniania masowych mordów ludności pochodzenia żydowskiego w okresie Zagłady na terenach Podlasia, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem okresu sprzed masowej wywózki do obozów zagłady. Interesują ją przede wszystkim akcje *Einsatzgruppen*, a także – w niektórych przypadkach – lokalnych kolaborantów, skierowane przeciwko społeczności żydowskiej. Autorka dowodzi, że upamiętnienie Zagłady i masowych zabójstw na tym terenie napotyka na szczególne trudności wynikające ze skomplikowanej sytuacji politycznej związanej z podwójną okupacją: niemiecką i sowiecką.

Słowa kluczowe: miejsca, nie-miejsca, upamiętnianie, Zagłada, społeczność żydowska, Podlasie