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Jewish Sites of Memory in Europe: Local, National and Transnational Memory (Sofia, Keltz – Kielce and Varshe – Warszawa – Warsaw)

Abstract

The term "Jewish sites of memory" that I have made the subject of my paper refers to sites connected with Jewish culture and the Jewish past, but I also try to describe their special status both in the context of Jewish tradition and from the point of view of the present day.

I analyse all three cities mentioned in the title: Sofia, Keltz – Kielce, and Varshe – Warsaw, as well as the sites of memory within them, as illustrations of this term's semantic scope while also asking about the contemporary (after Shoah) status of Jewish sites of memory in these three urban contexts, and in the two national discourses: Bulgarian and Polish.

Keywords: sites of memory, Jewish tradition, local, national, transnational, Sofia, Keltz – Kielce, Varshe – Warsaw.

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Introduction

The term "sites of memory", which Pierre Nora introduced into the humanities in the 1980s, is popular to this day and is usually invoked in the meaning defined by this French scholar. As a reminder: it designates a place as well as events, people and things that, in Nora's approach, serve to describe (or understand) a particular national history/identity/memory (Nora, 1996–1998).

The term "Jewish sites of memory" that I have made the subject of my paper refers to sites connected with Jewish culture and the Jewish past, but I will also try to describe their special status both in the context of Jewish tradition and from the point of view of the present day.

The first site of memory recorded in the first book of the Chumash, i.e. in Bereishis,[1] is the place where Abram was circumcised,[2] the place of the covenant with HaShem[3] after which Abram became Abraham:

ונמלתם את בשר ערלתכם והיה לאות ברית ביני וביניכם[4]

The place where the foreskin used to be becomes a place of confirming the validity of words, of sealing an oath. Further on, Bereishis/Genesis (Genesis 24:2) describes the journey of Eliezer, Abraham's servant, to the land of his ancestors, to Haran, on a mission to find a bride for Isaac. Abraham makes Eliezer swear an oath, and for this purpose he tells him to place his hand – according to Rashi's interpretation – at the site of circumcision, which in the text of the Torah is euphemistically referred to as ירך – thigh/loins (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015, pp. 110–111).[5]

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[1] I would like to thank Rabbi Itzchak Chaim Rapoport for correcting the Hebrew quotes in my article. Chumash, from the Hebrew word for fifth, refers to the five books, part of the Tanakh – the Hebrew Bible. The name of the first book, Genesis, is Bereishis in Hebrew in Ashkenazi pronunciation, or Bereshit in the Sephardic pronunciation followed in Israel, which comes from the first words: "In the beginning…" (Unterman, 1994, pp. 47, 63, 284–285).

[2] I cite Jewish names in the version proposed by the English edition of the Torah (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015).

[3] HaShem, or "the name", is used in the Jewish tradition in place of the name of G-d, because it is forbidden to mention His name in vain (Karesh & Hurvitz, 2005, pp. 179–180).

[4] I quote the Hebrew original and its English translation from the same English edition (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015, pp. 74–75): "You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you".

[5] The same expression is used for the descendants of Jacob, those who "came from his loins" (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015, pp. 110–111, 260), and it is how progeny are

The important thing, however, is that the circumcision took place in the land of Canaan, i.e. the land where Abraham buried his wife Sarah, where he himself was buried by his sons Isaac and Ishmael, and which is promised in the covenant to the descendants of Abraham. A site of memory – the place of the circumcision – thus becomes a multidimensional sphere of the sacred because it takes place in the land of Canaan. The deed (circumcision) and the place (the Promised Land – the land of Canaan) become one unified site of memory.

Similarly, the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, or the Akedah (עקדת יצחק), and his miraculous rescue is a deed combined with a physical place. It thus also contains the multidimensionality of a Jewish site of memory, all the more so since Mount Moriah later became the site of the Temple containing the memory of the deed and the place through the presence of the Shekhinah[6], or dwelling of G-d. Abraham gives this place the name[7] יקוק יראה The Akedah becomes a site of memory invoked in the morning prayer in Jewish prayer books.[8]

It would seem that there is quite an unexpected site of memory in the Book of Bamidbar/Numbers, i.e. the fourth book of the Torah, namely the copper fire pans filled with fire and incense which were used in the rebellion led by one of the Levites, Korach (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015, pp. 826–829). And although Korach defied Moses and was punished (together with his followers) because they all died swallowed by the earth, which opened up beneath them, the rebels' copper fire pans left at the site of the fire were used to plate the altar, because they were sacred and could not be removed.

Cited in *Pirkei Avot*, Simeon ben Azzai (who lived in the 1st–2nd centuries CE) taught that one should despise no one and disdain "nothing, for there

described, i.e. as those coming from the loins of their fathers (Rabbi Nosson Scherman, 2015, pp. 292–293).

[6] Shekhinah (שְׁכִינָה) is a "dwelling" or "settling" of G'd presence in a place (Unterman, 1994, p. 267).

[7] יקוק יראה HaShem will see (Pecaric, 2005, p. 20) or HaShem is looking (Spitzer, 1926, p. 25). In fact this phrase contains three time perspectives: present, past and future.

[8] Cabalists in particular, from the times of the *Zohar* until the times of Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria Ashkenazi, who was also known as the Arizal (1534–1572), attach great importance to the daily recitation of the Akedah, i.e. the excerpt from the Torah about Abraham's covenant with HaShem, which is included in most Jewish prayer books. However, not all communities recite these pesukim in public; in such cases, it is invoked individually, also as part of the "silent prayer" Mussaf during the feast of Rosh Hashanah (Rabbi Nosson Scherman & Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, 2023, p. 22).

is no one who does not have his hour and there is nothing that does not have its place":

הוא היה אומר אל תהי בז לכל אדם ואל תהי מפליג לכל דבר שאין לך אדם שאין לו שעה ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום[9]

According to the mystical interpretation expounded by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745–1812) in his treatise *Tanya*,[10] every person, every animal, every plant, and even every stone, every object, even earth and water have a soul that only the completely righteous – *tzaddikim* – can see (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 2021, pp. 284, 292).[11] It is the task of every Jew to elevate an object to a higher level, which can be achieved through an event in which a table, for example, plays a special role, during a circumcision ceremony, and later during a bar mitzvah, i.e. a ceremony after which a Jewish boy becomes equal to adult men, as confirmed by him being called to read the

[9] The whole English translation of this mishnah (passage) reads: "He used to say: Do not be scornful of any person, and do not be disdainful of anything, for you have no person without his hour and no thing without its place" (Rabbi Nosson Scherman & Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, 2023, p. 565).

[10] *Tanya* is a collection of sayings, or a collection of thoughts, its literal translation being "it has been taught" (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 2021, p. a.136). Before it was published in 1797 in Volhynia, in Slavuta, and in 1799 in Żółkiew (today: Zhovkva in Ukraine), this work was cited as *kuntresim*, i.e. an academic work, a pamphlet, a treatise. Its full title, *Likkutei Amarim: Tanya*, means "Collection of Sayings: It Has Been Taught". The first English translation of *Tanya* was published in the 1970s, while the first texts analysing the treatise appeared in the 1960s. I would like to thank Mr Hersh Gorman from the Hasidic bookshop in Golders Green, London, for his many valuable remarks on the work of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and on the studies discussing it. Many thanks to Rebbetzin Dina Stambler from the Chabad of Warsaw for making me aware of what Jewish sites of memory are. For more about Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and the Habad movement, see the book by Wojciech Tworek (2020), and the Anthology of Rabbi Nissan Dovid Dubov and Rabbi Naftoli Hertz Pewzner (2022).

[11] "…This same thought was expressed by the Arizal when he said that even in completely inanimate matter, such as stones or earth or water, there is a soul and spiritual life-force – that is, the enclothing of the 'Letters of speech' of the Ten Utterances which give life and existence to inanimate matter that it might arise out of the naught and nothingness which preceded the Six Days of Creation. … Now, although the name *even* (stone) is not mentioned in the Ten Utterances recorded in the Torah, nevertheless, life-force flows to the stone through combinations and substitutions of the letters which are transposed in the 'two hundred and thirty-one gates', either in direct or reverse order, as is explained in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, until the combination of the name *even* descends from the Ten Utterances, and is derived from them, and this is the life-force of the stone" (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, 2021, pp. 292–295).

Torah. All of these events require the recitation of a blessing, which is why the participating object is elevated to an increasingly higher level of sacredness, and this level may not be diminished.

Anything (just as it was in Nora's concept) can thus be a Jewish site of memory: an actual site, an event, a person, an object. In the French scholar's idea, the glue holding various sites of memory together and giving them meaning is the fact of being French, or, as Austrian historian Moritz Csáky has put it, "an imagined national context" (Csáky, 2013, p. 38). However, very differently from Nora, in the Jewish religious tradition a site of memory encompasses everything at once: the protagonist of an event, the event, the physical place, and HaShem who created this space-time continuum. A site of memory in the Jewish religious tradition is thus a sphere of the sacred, and does not exist without it, while also, in accordance with Csáky's concept, its character is performative and dynamic, or, one might say, processual (Csáky, 2013, pp. 30–46).[12]

The Austrian historian's concept fits in very well with the Habsburg tradition (multinational and multireligious as it was), and as such effectively reflects the multifaceted nature of borderland cultures. The transnational and cross-border concept of culture proposed by him (Csáky, 2013, pp. 30–46) is a good context for the purpose of this article to describe Jewish sites of memory and their function in the contemporary dynamic environment.

This is the understanding of a site of memory on which I am therefore basing my paper. I treat all three cities mentioned in the title – Sofia, Keltz – Kielce and Varshe – Warsaw as illustrations of this term's semantic scope while also asking about the contemporary (post-Shoah) status of Jewish sites of memory in these three urban contexts.

Knowledge Construction

The research on the three cities in question was conducted in the years 2023–2025, and included analyses of press materials (Sofia, Kielce, Warsaw), audio and visual elements (*2016 rok – "NOMADA" Paweł Althamer*, 2016), legal documents (Land and Mortgage Register entries – for the White Building and for the plot on which it stands at 6 Twarda Sreet) and literature of the subject as well as one-on-one in-depth interviews conducted with leading actors, i.e. interviewees representing public benefit organisations (Jan Kar-

[12] According to Csáky, Eastern European culture is mixed, hybrid and ambiguous in character, it is a space of constant exchange, which is a consequence of the region's linguistic heterogeneity (Csáky, 2013, pp. 30–46).

ski Association in Kielce), NGOs (Nowa Przestrzeń Sztuki [New Space for Art] Foundation in Kielce; Shalom Association in Sofia – Сдружение Шалом София, Ogród Warszawa. Stowarzyszenie na rzecz Krajobrazu Kulturowego w Warszawie [Garden Warsaw. Association for Cultural Landscape in Warsaw]), official bodies (Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw; Warsaw Heritage Conservation Officer), museums (Kielce Historical Museum), the Polish and international research community and, finally, ordinary members of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw (petition: https://www.petycjeonline.com/pomo_nam_uratowa_biay_budynek#form; *Pomóż nam uratować biały budynek!*, n.d.) and in Sofia. The people interviewed represented diverse communities, organisations, state and nongovernmental entities, which enabled me to compare different points of view regarding all the sites of memory I investigated in Sofia, Kielce and Warsaw, and thus to determine those entities' attitude towards a broader issue: the commemoration of Jewish heritage in three cities and two diverse cultural and national communities. These free-flowing, unstructured interviews also enabled me to determine the actual placement of Jewish heritage in Polish and Bulgarian discourse. The confrontation of these two narratives and their approach to Jewish sites of memory (Jewish heritage) is particularly important given the disparate contexts of Bulgarian and Polish recent history.

Sites of memory were chosen as the analytical key for several reasons. The paper discusses Jewish sites of memory, hence the necessity to describe them within the perspective of the Jewish tradition, with which the wider humanities audience may not be very familiar. The choice of the Polish and Bulgarian exemplifications and their juxtaposition is deliberate, as it enables the presentation and analysis of differently shaped memories of Jewish heritage in the two cultures. The differences between the Polish and Bulgarian memory result from different historical and cultural traditions as well as the difference in the size of the Jewish community in the two state organisms[13] and, finally, the difference in the position of Jewish heritage in the current Polish and Bulgarian discourses.

[13] According to the 1931 census, at that time Jews accounted for 8.6% of Poland's population; in Bulgaria they numbered about 50,000, or 1% (Ognyanova, 2020, pp. 87–106). According to the most recent census, from 2021, there are around 17,000 people in Poland who self-identify as Jewish or both Polish and Jewish. According to the census from 2009, there are 1,400 Jews living in Bulgaria at present, where this figure includes ethnic Jews and their non-Jewish families, wives, husbands. The actual number of Jews in Bulgaria is much smaller. At Chabad Sofia, I was told that the current (2024) number of Jews in Bulgaria is estimated at about 500 (Anonymized interview, September 21, 2024).

It is this last issue – the place of Jewish tradition, history and culture, but also the Jewish narrative on Jewish tradition in the Polish and Bulgarian discourse – that is the focus of my paper.

I consider the term "site of memory", already well grounded in the humanities for some time, in a broad approach referring to the concept of its originator, Pierre Nora (1996–1998).[14] However, due to the role attributed to hybrid context, Moritz Csáky's concept (Csáky, 2013, pp. 30–46) is more functional for my understanding of sites of memory. A hybrid context is common to the Habsburg tradition discussed by Csáky and the Ottoman tradition from which Bulgarian culture grew as well as Polish culture rooted in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The multiethnic and multireligious character of these cultural phenomena contributed to the development of tolerance towards diversity, but nevertheless did not prevent pogroms or acceptance of deportations in confrontation with "national values" such as the desire to extend the borders of one's own country.

The choice of these particular three places – Sofia, Keltz/Kielce and Varshe/Warsaw – is also an emotional one. Sofia is a city where I spent many years, first studying, then working at Sofia University in the years 1996–1998, and later visiting to conduct research. Kielce is my native city, it is where I used to live, went to primary school and graduated from secondary school. Warsaw is the place of my university education, my work at the University of Warsaw and the Polish Academy of Sciences, it is where I've been living for over 40 years. I consider all of these cities to be extraordinary in every way. My position as a researcher, author of the article, and co-organiser of the petition in defence of the White Building (Warsaw) is a kind of double identity, but it is also something that enables the researcher to influence social reality. I think it would be a shame not to take advantage of this opportunity. My article thus reflects an evolution from the viewpoint of an activist to understanding a wider perspective.[15]

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[14] The term "sites of memory" that Pierre Nora introduced into humanities research (Szpociński, 1983, pp. 129–146) has gained great popularity. It is impossible to cite all the vast literature of the subject that refers to sites of memory. A very thorough overview of works devoted to sites of memory (including in the former Yugoslavia) is provided by Marzena Maciulewicz in her doctoral dissertation, defended on 12 March 2020 at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw, entitled *Divided Cities: A Case Study of Mitrovica* (Maciulewicz, 2020).

[15] I would like to thank Professor Piotr Kulas, a sociologist from the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at the University of Warsaw, for his help in understanding the sociological perspective in research on sites of memory and heritage studies.

The introduction of two Yiddish scripts for the name of my native city (Keltz / קעלץ / Kielce) and even three versions of the name of Poland's capital (Varshe / וואַרשע / Warszawa / Warsaw) stems from their historical significance, equally strongly (although differently) important for both Polish and Jewish tradition and history.

Sofia

The first case I'd like to consider is Sofia. I want to present three plaques commemorating the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews. In 2000 in Israel, all three of them were taken down from Jerusalem's Bulgarian Forest "after protests by Bulgarian Jews and their descendants who were uncomfortable with lionizing someone who oversaw the murder of Jews during the Holocaust" (Klein, 2023). The first one was dedicated to Tsar Boris III (1894–1943) and his wife Tsarina Joanna (1907–2000) for their role in saving the Bulgarian Jews:



Figure 1. The first plaque, dedicated to Tsar Boris III and his wife Tsarina Joanna. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2024)

The other two plaques had a different focus. The second one was dedicated to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and particularly its exceptional representatives: Stefan – Exarch of Bulgaria (1878–1957), Cyril – Metropolitan of

Plovdiv (1901–1971), Neophyte of Vidin (1868–1971), and Sofroniy of Tarnovo (1888–1961) as well as lawyer and Bulgarian parliament deputy speaker Dimitur Peshev (1894–1973):



Figure 2. The second plaque, dedicated to Exarch Stefan, Metropolitan Cyril, Metropolitan Neophyte, Metropolitan Sofroniy, and Dimitar Peshev. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2024)

The third plaque was devoted to a special event in the history of the Shoah: the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews by the whole of Bulgarian society. In this case, many different social and professional groups were listed: doctors, lawyers, clergymen, intellectuals and ordinary citizens as well as (again) the tsar's family[16]:

[16] The third plaque features a description in Hebrew and in Bulgarian: "По инициатива на Националния комитет за защита на историческата истина в България и със средствата и благородното начинание на Столичната община и родолюбиви граждани на столицата бяха възстановени в точно копие тези плочи, издигнати в Българската гора край Иерусалим от човеколюбиви благодетели и от българските евреи в света като признателност за тяхното спасяване през 1943 година от България и българския народ. Никой не може да заличи историческата памет както за спасяването, така и за признателността на спасените". English translation (J.S. and J.D.): "At the initiative of the National Committee for the Protection of Historical Truth in Bulgaria, thanks to the funds and noble initiative of the Capital City's Community and



Figure 3. The third plaque, dedicated to the whole of Bulgarian society. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2024)

The decision to remove the three plaques from the "Bulgarian forest" in Jerusalem, made by a special committee headed by an Israeli Supreme Court judge, was motivated by Tsar Boris III's (1894–1943) responsibility for the introduction of the Law for the Protection of the Nation (Законът за защита на нацията) and for the deportation of Jews from Vardar Macedonia, from northern Greece, and from the city of Pirot (Serbia). Tsar Boris III was involved in building an authoritarian state, which started to be perceived as fascist after the Law for the Protection of the Bulgarian Nation was signed by him on 21 January 1941.[17]

the capital's patriotic citizens, the plaques in the Bulgaria Forest in Jerusalem, put up by philanthropic benefactors and Bulgarian Jews from around the world as recognition for their rescue in 1943 by Bulgaria and the Bulgarian nation, have been reproduced in an exact copy. No one can erase the historical memory of the rescue nor of the gratitude of those rescued".

[17] The Law for the Protection of the Bulgarian Nation [Закон за защтита на нацията] was passed by the Bulgarian parliament on 24 December 1940, Tsar Boris III signed it on 21 January 1941, and on 23 January it was published in the Journal of Laws (Държавен вестник, 1941, No. 16 – Nedeleva, 2013, p. 153).

Bulgaria as a Fascist State

For Bulgarian scholars, there is still nothing obvious about acknowledging that Bulgaria was a fascist state. The obstacle here is the legacy of the official discourse from the times of communist Bulgaria. On 4 January 1924 the Bulgarian parliament passed the State Protection Law (Закон за защита на държавата – ЗЗД), which came into force at the end of January 1924,[18] remained in force until October 1944, and was the government's response to the June and September 1923 revolts. Most historians consider the insurgency in June to have been a spontaneous rebellion in defence of the democratically elected government of Aleksandur Stamboliyski (1879–1923), formed by the peasant party (Bulgarian Agrarian National Union, БЗНС). The revolt in September, which contemporary historians often call the September Uprising (unlike the June events), was supported by the Comintern. After it was suppressed, the State Protection Law (Законът за защита на държавата, ЗЗД) came into force, largely restricting citizens' rights and delegalising leftist political parties and organisations. Based on this law (from 16 March 1925), denunciation of one's family members became legal (Bozhilov et al., 1993; Milkova, 1976). After the coup of 19 May 1934, when the Zveno group (Звено, meaning "link") came into power, all political parties were banned. Bulgaria became a police authoritarian state (Nedev, 2007).

The antisemitic Law for the Protection of the Nation (Законът за защита на нацията), introduced by the government of Bogdan Filov (1883–1945), was in force between 23 January 1941 and 27 November 1944. Prepared at the initiative of PM Filov, but also in collaboration with Interior Minister Petar Gabrovski (1898–1945) and Aleksandur Belev (1900–1944), who later became chairman of the Commissariat for Jewish Affairs (Комисарство за еврейските въпроси), the Law for the Protection of the Nation was the result of the conference in Craiova in 1940. The Treaty of Craiova was signed on 7 September 1940 between Bulgaria and Romania, and ratified on 13 September 1940 by Tsar of Bulgaria Boris III and King of Romania Michael I. It was possible thanks to the support of Hitler, who wanted to restore the 1912 Bulgaria – Romania border. Under this treaty, Bulgaria received Southern Dobruja (lost to Romania after the Second Balkan War in 1913) in exchange for introducing antisemitic laws similar to the Nuremberg Laws (Nedeleva, 2013, pp. 144–148; Paunovski, 2000, pp. 36–38; Rusin, 2015, pp. 255–268). Along-

[18] The State Protection Law (Закон за защита на държавата – ЗЗД) was passed by the Bulgarian parliament on 4 January 1924. It was in force from 23 January 1924 to October 1944 and was amended many times (Bozhilov et al., 1993; Milkova, 1976).

side Bulgaria and Nazi Germany, the Craiova treaty was signed by the Soviet Union, Italy, and also Britain. The Law for the Protection of the Nation was inspired by the Nuremberg Laws, but additionally introduced the Bulgarian criterion of how to define Jews: not by blood, but by confession first, and then by parentage like the Nuremberg Laws (Nedeleva, 2013, p. 151). It introduced a number of restrictions for Jews, e.g. they were forbidden to move around, marry or have extramarital relationships with Bulgarians, obtain Bulgarian citizenship, and hold public office.[19] However, if a Jew had converted to Christianity before 1 September 1939, they were treated as a Bulgarian (Nedeleva, 2013, pp. 148–254). The law was signed by Tsar Boris III despite the protests of the parliamentary opposition and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as well as a letter of protest signed by 21 Bulgarian writers (including Elisaveta Bagryana (1893–1991) and Elin Pelin (1877–1949).

Even though Bulgarian Jews were saved from deportation thanks to the Bulgarian Synod's persistent official condemnation of all the anti-Jewish laws passed by the Bulgarian parliament, they were expelled from cities to the provinces, stripped of their rights and ruthlessly exploited economically. That is why some Bulgarian scholars reject the view that the Jewish population had been "rescued", since the anti-Jewish laws adopted by the parliament stripped Jews of their property and forced them into hard physical labour (Avramov, 2012; Rusin, 2015, pp. 255–268).

After the Belev-Daneker agreement was signed on 22 February 1943, the Bulgarian army and police took part in deportations of Jews from Macedonia and Thrace to extermination camps (Nedeleva, 2013, pp. 156, 306–330). For this reason, the period when the Law for the Protection of the Nation was in force may justifiably be described as the fascist period in the history of the Bulgarian state (Cohen, 2003, pp. 169–250; Kolomonos & Veskoviḱ-Vangeli, 1986; Matkovski, 1983). With the Law for the Protection of the Nation, Bulgaria introduced a fascist doctrine (Nedeleva, 2013, p. 151).

[19] The Law for the Protection of the Bulgarian Nation (Закон за защтита на нацията) introduced many prohibitions for people of Jewish descent: "…забраняват на лицата от еврейски произход да бъдат приемани за български поданици, да бъдат избираеми, да заемат държавни, общински и други служби, да встъпват в брак или извънбрачно съжителство с лица от български произход". Translation: "…it is forbidden to issue permits for persons of Jewish origin to receive Bulgarian citizenship, they are divested of their civil, voting rights, the right to hold state, local and other civil service posts, [persons of Jewish origin] are not allowed to enter into marriage or be in an extramarital relationship with persons of Bulgarian descent" (Nedeleva, 2013, pp. 148–254).

Today's Situation

Today copies of all three plaques are on display in the centre of Sofia, in a very prestigious and significant place, at the northern wall of Saint Sophia Orthodox Church. On the other, southern side of this church is the Monument to the Unknown Soldier. It was designed in the years 1931–1936 by famous Bulgarian sculptor Andrey Nikolov (1878–1959) and unveiled at a very significant time for Bulgaria, in 1941 – the year that Dobruja, Macedonia and Western Thrace came under Bulgarian administration.[20] The monument was destroyed in the British and American bombings of Sofia in 1944, then rebuilt in changed form by the architect Nikola Nikolov (1924–1996) and sculptor Luben Dimitrov (1904–2000) at the initiative of the communist authorities, to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state. It was officially unveiled on 22 September 1981 (*Entsiklopediia*, 1980, pp. 222–225, 289–291; Ivanova, 2020).

The original, pre-World War II Monument to the Unknown Soldier featured four bas-reliefs of sorrowful women symbolising lost territories: Dobruja, (Western) Thrace, Macedonia and Pomoravie (Yanev, 2016). The present monument has no such elements, but it is a special site nonetheless, housing the remains of unknown Bulgarian soldiers killed in various places of historical significance to Bulgarians. Every year, 3 March observances commemorating the end of Ottoman rule are held at the monument, and also commemorations of the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano that envisaged the emergence of a great Bulgaria, today referred to as "San Stefano Bulgaria", which was in fact supposed to be a Russian protectorate in the Balkans.[21]

The copies of the three plaques dedicated to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews are found at the northern side of Saint Sophia Orthodox Church. This is precisely where Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and the city authorities celebrated the 80th anniversary of the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews in 2023 (Klein, 2023) and the 81st anniversary in 2024.

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[20] Dobruja came under Bulgarian administration after the Treaty of Craiova (7 September 1940). The Bulgarian army entered the area of Macedonia (Aegean – Greek and Vardar – Yugoslavian) and Thrace on 19 and 20 April 1941 (Znamierowska-Rakk, 2002, p. 75).

[21] The treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire signed in San Stefano on 3 March 1878 was not accepted by the European powers of the time, and was the reason why the Congress of Berlin was organised. The treaty's decisions, including the borders of Bulgaria (which was meant to encompass Macedonian lands as well as parts of Albanian and Serb lands), were questioned, which gave rise to a Bulgarian sites of memory: San Stefano Bulgaria.



Figure 4. Plaque dedicated to the genocide of Macedonian and Thracian Jews. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2024)

However, Alexander Oscar, the president of the Shalom Association, and members of its Executive Board always lay flower in a different place, under the plaque and monument dedicated to the genocide of Macedonian and Thracian Jews in Saint Kliment Ohridski Park, in front of the university, which was also the case in 2023[22], 2024, and 2025 (E. Anavi, interview, September 14, 2023).[23] The plaque funded by the Shalom Association has a completely different inscription:

[22] Alexander Oscar, the president of the Shalom Association, told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that "…Nobody from the community would have taken part in an event honoring the imaginary role of King Boris in rescuing the Bulgarian Jews and presenting a distorted history of the Holocaust …" (Klein, 2023).

[23] In 2025 there was only one commemoration in Saint Kliment Ohridski Park, in front of the University of Sofia, prepared by the Shalom Association (E. Anavi, interview, June 16, 2025).



Figure 5. The Sofia copy of the monument dedicated to the genocide of Macedonian and Thracian Jews. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2024).

> Salvation Monument. Thanks to the efforts of members of parliament, leading figures of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, community activists, intellectuals and others, the deportation of over 48,000 Bulgarian Jews to Nazi death camps was prevented in spring 1943, and they were saved from physical extermination. We bow our heads before this unique rescue and lament the more than 11,000 Jews from northern Greece and parts of the former Yugoslavia who fell under Bulgarian administration and were deported to the death camp in Treblinka.[24]

The decision to place a copy of the plaque dedicated to Tsar Boris III at the northern end of Saint Sophia Church makes the tsar and the events with

[24] In Bulgarian: "Паметник на спасението. Благодарение на усилията на депутати, водещи фигури в Българската православна църква, общественици, интелектуалци и др. през пролетта на 1943 година беше предотвратена депортацията на повече от 48 000 български евреи в нацистките лагери на смъртта и те бяха спасени от физическо унищожение. Ние се прекланяме пред това уникално спасение и скърбим за онези повече от 11 000 евреи от Северна Гърция и части от бивша Югославия намиращи се под българска администрация, които бяха депортирани в лагера на смъртта Треблинка". English translation J.S. & J.D.



Figure 6. The original monument dedicated to the genocide of Macedonian and Thracian Jews, in Tel Aviv. Photo by Eli Anavi

which he is credited (saving the Bulgarian Jews) a part of all major state celebrations, and is the effect of a change in the official Bulgarian narrative in recent years. There is no room in this narrative for the extermination of Jews from Yugoslav Macedonia and Greek Western Thrace (which Bulgaria officially admitted in 2013 and for which it made an apology), nor for any settling of accounts with the fascist period in Bulgarian history. It has to be said, though, that that admission and apology was essentially invalidated by the memorable ceremony in Skopje in 2018 intended as a joint commemoration (with Macedonian PM Zoran Zaev) of the deportation of 11,343 Jews from Macedonia and Thrace to death camps, mainly to Treblinka in the General Governorate – in the former territory of Poland. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov represented Bulgaria at this commemoration. After a speech containing absolutely no conciliatory tones, he was asked by reporters about expressions of contrition, and replied that there was nothing to apologise for (Dimitrov & Marusic, 2018). By reinstating copies of the three plaques that were taken down in Israel, two of which refer to the special contribution of Tsar Boris III

and his family to rescuing the Bulgarian Jews, the official Bulgarian narrative has nullified the act of apology from 2013.[25]

The noticeable surge of nationalist sentiments in Bulgaria has thus inscribed a site of memory related to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews into the national Bulgarian memory. This site of memory is now meant to serve not the commemoration of an exceptional deed, but the strengthening of national pride, which has been undermined by historical facts which confirm that during the Bulgarian administration, Jews from Macedonia and Thrace were sent to Treblinka to die, and which also reveal an ugly side of its image to a society considering itself a collective hero. The official narrative, built in communist times and undergoing a nationalist revival today, underlines that the Bulgarians saved their Jews, and no Bulgarian soldier fought on the front lines of World War II (even though Bulgaria was a member of the Tripartite Pact, also known as the Berlin Pact, from 1 March 1941). Strangely enough, among the many people I asked about the location of the plaques commemorating the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews in the centre of Sofia (near the building of the Bulgarian parliament), almost no one knew where they were, or they confused the two sites – the plaque, funded by the Shalom Association, commemorating the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews and the genocide of Macedonian and Thracian Jews, and the copies of the three plaques dedicated to the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews, found at the northern side of Saint Sophia Orthodox Church.

Today 7 September is celebrated as a victory of the Bulgarian foreign service, who helped return Southern Dobruja to Bulgaria in a "peaceful way", without shedding the blood of Bulgarian soldiers, and as an important step in the process of the national reunification of the Bulgarian nation. The next step was entering Macedonia and Thrace behind the German troops in the spring of 1941 (Znamierowska-Rakk, 2002, p. 75).

No one except just a few researchers links the Treaty of Craiova signed on 7 September 1940 with an exchange of populations, which was part of the agreement between Bulgaria and Romania,[26] nor with the Law for the Protection of the Nation (Законът за защита на нацията) that resulted in the de-

[25] In 2020, Macedonian-Bulgarian talks on school textbooks were broken off as well (they were resumed in 2024). Bulgaria ceased to recognise the Macedonian language, calling it Bulgarian, and Macedonian identity, calling Macedonians Bulgarians.

[26] Among other things, the 7 September 1940 treaty signed in Craiova provided for the forced relocation of the Bulgarian population from the northern part of Dobruja (Tułcha/Tulcea and Constanța) to Bulgaria, and of the Romanian population from the southern part of Dobruja (Silistra Province and Dobrich) to Romania (Biliarski, 2010; *Kraĭovski dogovor ot 7 septemvri 1940 g.*, 1940).

portation of Jews from Macedonia and Thrace. Alongside the aforementioned handful of scholars, the only organisation making an effort to process this difficult part of Bulgaria's newest history is the Shalom Association.

קעלץ – Keltz

Kielce's Great Synagogue

The Kielce synagogue was opened in 1903 and was a unique building. According to the opinions of researchers Eleonora Bergman and Piotr Świerczyński (Bergman, 2004, pp. 48, 136; Świerczyński, 2022, pp. 50–56), it represented the neo-Moorish style. Turned into a warehouse and a prison for Jews awaiting deportation to death camps during World War II, it was burned down near the end of the war, after which it was taken over by the State Archive. The archive was housed there from November 1955 until autumn 2011. The building of Kielce's Great Synagogue (as it was called in its glory days) was ultimately remodelled in the spirit of socialist realism in the years 1957–1958, with neoclassical and neo-Renaissance elements (Świerczyński, 2022, pp. 85–107).

The previous mayor of Kielce, Wojciech Lubawski, planned to turn the former synagogue into a centre of encounters of cultures and religions, but this ambitious plan came to nothing when world-famous architect Peter Zumthor, who was to design the centre, withdrew from the project.[27]

In 2021 Kielce town councillor Dariusz Jerzy Kisiel proposed that a Museum of the History of Kielce Jews be set up there. The design by Kielce native Aleksandra Dzienniak, which won recognition from the Kraków branch of the Association of Polish Architects, envisaged a House of Tolerance and Garden of Freedom and Island of Understanding (Świerczyński, 2022, p. 109). This project has already been finished and was opened on 24 April 2024 in front of the synagogue, on a site separating the two carriageways of the extremely busy street (Kowalczyk, 2024).

The Jan Karski Association, with which I spoke in September 2023, hoped to raise enough funds to renovate the building. The city of Kielce became the owner of the building of the former synagogue at 17 Warszawska Street in

[27] Peter Zumthor proposed that the Kielce synagogue be turned into a theatre. Mayor Lubawski wanted to open a Puppet Palace there. According to the initiators of these ideas, the synagogue in Kielce had lost its value because it had been converted after World War II (*Kielce: Władza miasta rezygnują ze współpracy z Peterem Zumthorem*, 2011; *Peter Zumthor wróci do projektu przebudowy dawnej synagogi w Kielcach*, 2016; *W kieleckiej synagodze powstanie centrum historyczno-edukacyjne*, 2024).



Figure 7. The Garden of Freedom and Island of Understanding in front of Kielce's former Great Synagogue in IX Wieków Kielc [Nine Centuries of Kielce] Avenue. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2025)

2024. On 18 July 2024, a notarial deed was officially signed. A historical and educational centre will be built in the facility, which has been provided as a donation by the State Treasury. The building will be created as a House of Understanding (Dom Zrozumienia), and will be part of the Kielce Historical Museum. After the renovation the permanent exhibition will be dedicated to the history of Jews in Kielce, in the context of other minorities in the region. During my last visit to Kielce in May 2025, I was told by staff at the Kielce Historical Museum that Minister of Culture Hanna Wróblewska had committed to financing the renovation of the Synagogue.

The case of the Kielce synagogue is a sombre story (like all Jewish sites of memory related to the Shoah), but there is also hope that this experience may be beneficial in educational terms. On the other hand, though, the unique architecture of the building has disappeared for ever. The building was burned down by the Germans at the end of World War II, but as Świerczyński underlines, there is no confirmation of this deed in any documents (Świerczyński, 2022, p. 89).



Figure 8. The image of Kielce Great Synagogue after WWII. Photo made available thanks to Piotr Świerczyński

It was possible to rebuild the Great Synagogue in Kielce after War World II, but the communist city authorities decided not to do so; instead, they transformed it in the socialist-realist style:



Figure 9. The former Kielce Synagogue after being remodelled in the spirit of socialist realism. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2008)

After the Kielce Pogrom in 1946, Kielce started to be a "safe communist" town, without a Jewish religious population. The synagogue was no longer necessary.

However, Kielce does not have solely good examples of Jewish sites of memory being incorporated into the city's history and thus becoming a local site as well as a site open to other identity and remembrance contexts.

Zagajski's House of Prayer in Kielce

The House of Prayer at 3 Słowackiego Street in the centre of Kielce, built there in 1922 at the initiative of and with funding from Kielce entrepreneur Herszel Zagajski (1865–1937)[28] (Maurer, 2009; Urbański, 1989, p. 24), currently stands in a different part of the city.

Zagajski's House of Prayer, destroyed during World War II, was turned into a warehouse and after the war served as one throughout the communist period. Janusz Sujecki, an expert on Warsaw and its history, was the first to describe preserved fragments of polychrome [29] in Zagajski's House of Prayer in Kielce (Sujecki, 2002, pp. 31–32):

During my stay in Kielce in September 2023, I learned at the Jan Karski Association that Zagajski's House of Prayer had been dismantled and moved from its original location in the city centre (3 Słowackiego Street[30] is a very prestigious location in Kielce), as this was the only way of saving the building and the value it represented (P. Świerczyński, interview, 21 September 2023). In May 2025, I found out from Dorota Tworek from the New Space for Art Foundation that in 2012 the property at 3 Słowackiego St. had been purchased

[28] Herszel Zagajski was the son of industrialist and philanthropist Abraham Zagajski, who moved to Kielce from Chmielnik. Among other properties, the Zagajski family owned a quarry near Kielce and tenements within the area delineated by 12 Hipoteczna St. (today: 3 Słowackiego St.) and Bazarowa Street (today: 4 Śniadeckich St.) in Kielce, where Herszel Zagajski funded the House of Prayer. He also funded a Jewish old people's home and an orphanage (Myśliński, 2014; Urbański, 1989).

[29] As Janusz Sujecki stated in his article (Sujecki, 2002, p. 31), Zagajski's House of Prayer was listed in Krzysztof Urbański's brochure (Urbański, 1989, p. 24) as well as in the catalogue prepared by Eleonora Bergman and Jan Jagielski (Bergman & Jagielski, 1996, p. 57). The residents of the tenement house at 3 Słowackiego Street in Kielce, which was close to Zagajski's House of Prayer, knew about the polychrome. According to Sujecki, the heritage conservation studio in Kielce probably also knew about it, but no one wrote about it (Sujecki, 2002, p. 31).

[30] Today 3 Słowackiego Street, but according to data from 1926, the section where Herszel Zagajski's House of Prayer stood was marked as lying between Wolności Square and Prosta Street, at 12 Hipoteczna Street (Myśliński, 2014, p. 44).



Figure 10. Zagajski's House of Prayer after World War II. Photo by Janusz Sujecki from the monthly *Spotkania z Zabytkami* (8) 2002. With the consent of the Hereditas Foundation



Figure 11. Zagajski's House of Prayer. Fragments of polychrome murals: view of the northern wall of the prayer hall. Zodiac signs: Virgo, Leo, Cancer, Gemini, Taurus and Aries. Photo by Janusz Sujecki from the monthly *Spotkania z Zabytkami* (8) 2002. With the consent of the Hereditas Foundation



Figure 12. Zagajski's House of Prayer. Fragments of polychrome murals: fragment of the western wall of the prayer hall. Zodiac signs: Pisces, connected with the month Adar, and Aquarius, the symbol of the month Shevat. Photo by Janusz Sujecki from the monthly *Spotkania z Zabytkami* (8) 2002. With the consent of the Hereditas Foundation

from the city of Kielce by the Dorbut company, together with the tenements and the House of Prayer, which was being used as a warehouse at the time. The new owners did not know that this was a historic building, otherwise they may not have bought it at all (D. Tworek, T. Tworek, interview, May 26, 2025; P. Świerczyński, interview, 26 May 2025).[31] In 2014 the foundation purchased a new location from the city, in Pakosz district, near the Jewish Cemetery, and in 2016 financed the relocation of Zagajski's House of Prayer to 15 Boczna St. After the reconstruction in 2016, only the best-preserved and not mouldy fragments of the polychrome decoration from the original House of Prayer were moved to the new location. The rest was reconstructed. It was possible to relocate the original balustrade and late 19th-century steel supports of the women's gallery. At the entrance to the women's gallery, some of the bricks from the original House of Prayer have been used as well (Płaska, 2016).

Zagajski's House of Prayer is thus still a place for prayer, but it also serves as the Beit haMidrash Site of Remembrance and Reflection, and stands a chance of becoming a meeting place for Jews from all over the world. The visitors to the relocated House of Prayer are mainly Hasidim from the United States and Europe, who come to pray there (D. Tworek, T. Tworek, interview, 26 May 2025). Since Kielce has no operating synagogue, once again (like before the

[31] The current Kielce Heritage Conservation Officer, Krzysztof Myśliński, was only able to save the façade of the historical tenement at 3 Słowackiego St. from demolition. At some point, a plaque will probably be added, with the information that the property at 3 Słowackiego St. was once home to Herszel Zagajski's House of Prayer.

war), the House of Prayer is being called the Small Synagogue, as if in contrast to the Great Synagogue that no longer fulfils its original function. Next to Zagajski's House of Prayer in the new location there is also the *ohel* of Rabbi Mordechaj Kuzmirer Motele Twerski (?–1917), which miraculously survived the Nazi occupation.[32]

On 8 September 2016 in front of the relocating Zagajski's House of Prayer, Paweł Althamer and Jewish artists invited by him from around the world organised a performance entitled *NOMADA* as part of the Eighth Art in Public Space Exhibition ("Sztuka w Przestrzeni Publicznej") (*2016 rok – "NOMADA" Paweł Althamer*, 2016). The event featured Jim Costanzo, a New York-based artist who deals with issues of racial, gender and class intolerance, a screening of the film *Cienie* [Shadows] made during a workshop that was part of the event, and an animation by Robert Manowski titled *Kosmogonia Bruno Schulza* [Bruno Schulz's Cosmogony]. However, this was a one-off project. The performance would have drawn a bigger audience of Kielce residents if it had taken place at the House of Prayer's former location at 3 Słowackiego St., and might even have found a permanent slot among the city's artistic events. For such a scenario to become even remotely possible would require not only funding but also more imagination from many people: the Kielce municipal authorities, the heirs of the Zagajski family and, finally, the Jewish community in Poland and around the world.

Zagajski's House of Prayer could become a meeting place.[33] The New Space for Art Foundation keeps in touch with the Jewish community, which is interested in building a pilgrim house at the other side of the cemetery, as a place for resting and contemplation for tourist groups from all over the world wishing to visit Zagajski's House of Prayer and Zaddik Kuzmirer Twerski's *ohel* (D. Tworek, T. Tworek, interview, 26 May 2025).[34] The foundation's activities contribute to promoting the place as well as helping create new con-

[32] Rabbi Kuzmirer Twerski, *aka* the Zaddik of Chęciny, came from a prominent family: he was the great-grandson of Mordechai Tversky, *aka* the Maggid of Chernobyl. He was the chief rabbi of Kielce in 1902. Today the *ohel* of Kuzmirer Twerski has as many visitors as Zagajski's House of Prayer.

[33] Unfortunately, Zagajski's House of Prayer in its new location is currently not open for sightseeing. I was only able to view the House of Prayer and the nearby *ohel* of Rabbi Kuzmirer Twerski thanks to the kindness of Dorota and Tomasz Tworek, to whom I am very grateful.

[34] The New Space for Art Foundation is holding talks on building the pilgrim house with Rabbi Pinchas Brown from New York, who already oversees the nearby tomb of Zaddik Kuzmirer Twerski.



Figure 13. Zagajski's House of Prayer in the new location in Pakosz district, near Kielce's Jewish Cemetery, at 15 Boczna St. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2025)



Figure 14. The interior of Zagajski's House of Prayer. Photo by Jolanta Sujecka (2025)

texts for viewing the building, which – without losing its religious function – could also become an important venue for artistic projects.

This horrifying story of the saving of a site of memory is like the stories of those rescued from the Shoah. Torn from the context of its city, from the historical and social fabric, it is like someone who has survived but whose soul has been removed…

The return of Hasidim to this site on the one hand and artistic projects on the other give hope for a new perception of this place.

וואַרשע – Varshe

Warszawa – Warsaw

My example of a Warsaw site of memory is the White Building at 6 Twarda Street. Almost everyone living in Warsaw is familiar with its history, but allow me to recount a few basic facts.

The oldest parts of the building probably date back to the very beginning of the 19th century. After the November Uprising, in 1832 it housed a mikvah for Jewish women, among other things, and later served as housing. In the late 19th century Zalman and Ryfka Nożyk funded the Synagogue (whose roof and external walls were renovated recently) and added an extra floor to the building. One more floor was added at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s to house a clinic for the Jewish Community. The clinic continued operating even in the ghetto. The former doctor's offices feature signs in Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew over the doorways.

Before World War II, the building's residents included the Melchior family. Elja Melchior (Milechjar) was the clinic manager (he lived in the building with his family).

After the war, a Shoah survivors' registration point was set up in the White Building, together with a night shelter and a kosher canteen. When the Synagogue was shut down in 1968, the house of prayer was moved to the White Building precisely.

In 1994, when the building was being renovated, 180 documents were discovered under the floor, over half of them dating back to before World War II. Some of the documents came from the ghetto, and some from 1946 – they were probably used as insulation under the wooden floor, and that is why they survived.[35] Their value (as testimony related to life in the Warsaw Ghetto) was

[35] The documents were discovered by accident by the workers renovating the building. The daughter of Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who lived in the White Building together with



Figure 15. The Nożyk Synagogue and the White Building at 6 Twarda Street in Warsaw. Photo by Bogna Rutkowska-Rochman (2024)

rated very highly by the late Jan Jagielski (1937–2021), who worked in the Jewish Historical Institute's Department of Historical Monument Documentation (Mroczkowska, 2014).

In 1961 the White Building (together with the urban layout of Twarda Street) was entered in the historic monuments register; a new entry was made in 2021, which tells us that a building may be entered in the register but also removed from it (if its registration inconveniences some decision-maker or other).

As stated by urbanist Tomasz Lec the idea to tear down the building and only use some of its fragments is anachronistic to architects and urban planners (Urzykowski, 2012). According to architect Grzegorz Buczek, Grzybowski Square is one of seven historical squares in Warsaw and should be protected by the city's urban development plan (Urzykowski, 2012). The White Building's unique stylistic multi-layered character is an excellent example of Warsaw's dynamically changing architecture. The claim that "the value of a building is defined by the people who are and will continue to be there, whereas Grzybowski Square has lost its old appearance" has not found any confirmation in the opinions of experts – architects and urban planners,[36]

her parents and was five years old at the time, told her father she knew that the building had been part of the Warsaw Ghetto (M. Schudrich, interview, 26 July 2025).

[36] In Polish: „Tym samym, wskazać należy na bardzo duże wartości historyczne budynku jako obiektu intensywnie związanego z żydowską społecznością Warszawy, istotne tym bardziej w kontekście specyfiki miejsca i społeczności – tak dotkliwie doświadczonych w wyniku działań II wojny światowej, po których na terenie Warszawy pozostało już stosunkowo niewiele w pełni autentycznych pozostałości kultury materialnej".

nor in the outlook of many members of the Jewish Religious Community and Warsaw's residents.[37]

Current Situation: The Petition

A petition in defence of the White Building, drawn up by journalist Konstanty Gebert and myself, garnered over 300 signatures. Those supporting the renovation included people representing Polish academia, from many Polish cities, from Europe and around the world.[38] The petition was signed by Jews from the second generation of Shoah survivors, those with ties to the Warsaw community, and the Jewish Diaspora from all over the world, both older people and the very young. However, comments explaining why people were signing the petition were the most interesting in all this. Careful reading shows that, being a part of the family histories of so many people – Warsaw Jews, the White Building is a living site of local memory, a part of Jewish Warsaw. A large number of signatories mentioned a grandfather, aunt, uncle, mother, father or grandmother who had spent a part of their lives in the White Building, before World War II or just after it ended; others mentioned their own youth, the passionate discussions of the 1990s when Jewish life began to revive; the youngest signatories associated this place with learning Hebrew.[39]

At a meeting with Director Michał Krasucki, the Warsaw Heritage Conservation Officer, we became certain that the White Building could be saved (Conservation Officer, 14 June 2024). The decision on the register entry was contested by the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw (Gmina Wyznaniowa Żydowska – GWŻ), but following a ruling of the Provincial Administrative Court dated 18 January 2023 (on the complaint against the Ministry

"It is therefore necessary to point out the very high historical value of the building as one that has been intensively connected with the Jewish community of Warsaw, which is even more important in the context of the uniqueness of the place and the community, both so severely affected by World War II, after which relatively few fully authentic remains of material culture remained in Warsaw" English translation J.D. (Radźwicka-Milczewska & Warchoł, 2014, p. 24).

[37] It was claimed in 2012 that the building was not a historic monument because it had been remodelled multiple times. That is why plans to build a skyscraper in place of the White Building at 6 Twarda St. keep coming back (Urzykowski, 2023).

[38] Link to the petition: https://www.petycjeonline.com/pomo_nam_uratowa_biay_budynek#form (*Pomóż nam uratować biały budynek!*, n.d.).

[39] In the entry written by Matan Shefi, an Israeli living in Warsaw and working at the Polin Museum, we learn about the continuation of a family tradition connected with the White Building: "the building is part of our memory, because my grandfather lived there for a few weeks after the war, [and] because my son went to nursery there".

of Culture and National Heritage's decision), the register entry remained in force and the Jewish Community's appeal was rejected in full (Urzykowski, 2023).[40] It is necessary to withdraw the complaint filed by the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland (Związek Gmin Wyznaniowych Żydowskich – ZGWŻ) from the court and then apply for a register number for the White Building. The White Building is listed in the National Register of Historic Monuments, but does not have a register number precisely because of the ZGWŻ's complaint. Section III of the two Land and Mortgage Register entries – for the White Building and for the plot on which it stands (entry No. WA4M/00388653/0; entry No. WA4M/00123023/0) – includes a warning that there is a prohibition on selling and encumbering these properties. The warning was added on 13 May 2022 on the basis of a ruling issued by the Warsaw-Śródmieście District Court Civil Department I regarding case IC 698/21. It prohibits the Jewish Community from disposing of the White Building in any way, and has not been revoked so far. Since this is a prohibition on selling and encumbering the properties, the Jewish Community cannot take out a mortgage to obtain funding for the White Building's renovation (IC 698/21).

At a General Meeting of the members of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw, which was held on 17 November 2024, the Chair of the Board, Sylwia Kędzierska-Jasik, informed us that the ZGWŻ had applied to the Administrative Court regarding the takeover of the whole White Building. We passed a Resolution on holding a General Meeting of the ZGWŻ, which means that once this General Meeting takes place, we will be able to vote on a motion to withdraw the application from the Administrative Court (GWŻ, interview, 17 November 2024).

We are hoping that when the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw becomes the sole owner of the White Building, the building's renovation will begin, but so far the Board has not called a General Meeting.[41] We have also

[40] The decision on the register entry was contested by the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw once again and the Provincial Administrative Court in Warsaw organised the Session of the court on 15th October 2025 on this issue (J. Jaszuńska-Kobielska – interview 20.11.2025; E. Dorosz-Panek – interview 21.11.2025). Until now (20.11.2025) nobody from the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw informed us what was the decision of the Court. We have received unofficial information that the Court revoked the protection status of the White Building and decided to refer the matter of its register entry for reconsideration (E. Dorosz-Panek – interview 21.11.2025).

[41] During the last meeting of the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw, in which I participated, Chair of the Board Sylwia Kędzierska-Jasik said that the initiative to call a General Meeting of members of the ZGWŻ was off the agenda (GWŻ, interview, 17 July 2025).

applied to the Board to allow us access to documents on the current status of the White Building standing on plot No. 11/1 from the register of historic monuments and the municipal list of historic buildings.

The only response has come from Eliza Dorosz-Panek, a member of the Board, who wrote on Facebook that action should be taken on the matter (E. Dorosz-Panek, interview, 7 July 2025). We have also received only a short reply from the Board that the issue will be discussed at a Board meeting very soon and we will receive the conclusion. On 17 July 2025, I took part in a meeting of the Board, in the part dedicated to the White Building issue.[42] Every member of the community has the right to participate in meetings of the Board. I proposed to organise a meeting with the Warsaw Heritage Conservation Officer. The Board decided that a meeting with Director Michał Krasucki should be organised in the autumn (probably in late October or in November), and that the Board as well as Konstanty Gebert and myself should attend this meeting (GWŻ, interview, 17 July 2025).[43]

However, it seems that the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw does not intend to help us in our efforts to determine the status of the White Building and to try to save it thanks to the heritage conservation officer's intervention. Some members still question the value of the White Building.[44]

This means that the future of this property, so important because of the memory of the Jews of Warsaw, is still in jeopardy.[45]

To conclude, I cannot but compare the White Building to Warsaw's artificial palm tree, i.e. the *Greetings from Jerusalem Avenue* project (erected in 2002), an excellent idea and design by Joanna Rajkowska, situated on the General Charles de Gaulle Roundabout. Rajkowska as the project's author in-

[42] I did not receive any official information (only unofficial) about the meeting, and nobody invited me officially. I decided to come because every member of the community has the right to participate in meetings of the Board. The information about the meeting was not made available anywhere.

[43] On 17 July the response to my presence at the meeting planned for autumn 2025 was overwhelmingly positive.

[44] Some members of the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw think it is not a historical monument and said this openly during the Board meeting (GWŻ, interview, 17 July 2025). There are no art historians, architects or urban planners on the Board.

[45] Rabbi Michael Schudrich had a meeting with Director Michał Krasucki, the Warsaw Heritage Conservation Officer, on 30 June 2025, and received confirmation that money would be found for the renovation of the White Building (M. Schudrich, interview, 17 July 2025).

tended the palm tree to be a reference to Warsaw's multi-million Jewish community that was exterminated during World War II, and a reminder of that community. At the same time, as we read in a project summary on display on the roundabout, this project is a reminder of the spontaneous, dynamic and slightly chaotic development of this cosmopolitan metropolis (which Warsaw was before World War II), and a reminder of its history as it was in reality, without any embellishment for educational purposes.[46]

The White Building has also grown into the urban fabric, since it is being defended by Varsovians who see it as a living illustration of history. Unlike Herszel Zagajski's House of Prayer in Keltz – Kielce, which was dismantled and reassembled elsewhere, the White Building still stands in its proper surroundings, at 6 Twarda Street. It is a Varshe – Warszawa – Warsaw local site of memory, a carrier of social value, a sign of a community that is no more. The fight for its preservation is essentially motivated by the desire to maintain its transnational character, as a sign of local, Varshe – Warszawa history as well as the supranational history of Polish Warsaw's Jews.

Conclusion

The sites of memory I have described here, selecting three illustrations from Poland and Bulgaria, include an event (the three plaques commemorating the Shoah in Sofia), architecture (the Great Synagogue in Keltz – Kielce) and, finally, buildings that elude any clear-cut categorisation. Neither Zagajski's House of Prayer in Keltz – Kielce nor the White Building at 6 Twarda Street in Varshe – Warszawa – Warsaw are examples of "beautiful", unique architecture, i.e. they are not buildings whose aesthetic value redeems them. Both buildings are valuable for the functions they once fulfilled and fulfil today, and due to the simple though significant fact that they are Jewish sites of memory. Zagajski's House of Prayer in Keltz – Kielce was a house of prayer and still is (unfortunately at a different location), but it has also become a relic of the Hasidic culture that has disappeared from the city and from Poland as a result of the Shoah. Today, thanks to the efforts of the New Space for Art Foundation, the Kielce municipal authorities and the international Jewish community, it stands a chance of becoming something more.

[46] Interestingly, the palm tree was placed in the same spot that a Christmas tree was usually put up, and Varsovians accepted this (in a 2003 survey, 75% of Warsaw residents were in favour of leaving the palm tree where it was) (*Pozdrowienia z Alej Jerozolimskich*, n.d.).

The White Building in Varshe – Warsaw is one of the most vibrant sites of memory because it is a carrier of history but also the venue where Jewish book fairs were once organised. Moreover, it is where we celebrate the second day of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and the second day of Pesach. Until recently, the Jewish monthly *Midrasz*[47] had its office in the White Building. Therefore, according to what Polish sociologist Andrzej Szpociński wrote about sites of memory (Szpociński, 1983, pp. 129–146), all four exemplifications that I have described here are the embodiment of values.

We are essentially witnessing a discussion, unfolding before our eyes, on the status of the history of European Jews and its place in national cultures. The three plaques commemorating the Shoah, removed from Israel and recreated in Sofia, together with the accompanying ceremonies, as well as the plaque and monument funded by the Shalom Foundation, document the ongoing discussion on the Holocaust in Bulgaria. The synagogue in Keltz – Kielce, which is to be turned into a House of Understanding, is an example of how we need to continue talking about the history of Jews in Kielce and, more broadly, on cultural diversity in the city, in Poland, and in the world. The White Building is a performative site that is dynamically embedded in its surroundings, and in this sense, its Jewish character has been maintained.

Through the historical Jewish-Polish names of the cities in question, the Jewish sites of memory in Poland discussed here make us aware what the Polish Jewish identity was before the Shoah. Restoring these sites to the history of Polish Jewish cities is like an archaeological discovery that changes our perception of these places and shapes our identity today.

The Jewish sites of memory in Sofia – the Shalom Association plaque and the rival copies of three plaques from Israel – also take part in the city's history and in the discussion on the place of Jewish history in the Bulgarian national discourse. The only thing is, Sofian and – more broadly – Bulgarian (and Balkan) toponyms do not have Jewish variants, but ancient Roman, Greek or medieval Turkish ones.

Jewish religious sites of memory do not serve the purpose of defining Jewishness in an ideological sense, but have always defined the relations between Jews and Ha'Shem. In today's different world, they tell their own stories while also being a reminder of their own Jewish view of the world.[48]

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[47] *Midrasz* was a Jewish monthly established and edited by Konstanty Gebert, than edited by Piotr Paziński (who later became the editor-in-chief) and Bella Szwarcman-Czarnota in the years 1997–2019.

[48] I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for providing important feedback on this article.

Legal Documents

Sąd Rejonowy dla Warszawy Mokotowa w Warszawie, X Wydział Ksiąg Wieczystych, księga wieczystą nr WA4M/00388653/0.
Sąd Rejonowy dla Warszawy Mokotowa w Warszawie, X Wydział Ksiąg Wieczystych, księga wieczystą nr WA4M/00123023/0.
Sąd Rejonowy dla Warszawy Śródmieścia, I Wydział Cywilny, sprawa IC 698/21.

Interviews

P. Świerczyński Organizacja Pożytku Publicznego (OPP) [Public Benefit Organisation], Jan Karski Association in Kielce, interview, September 21, 2023.
E. Anavi (NGO) member of the Shalom Association in Sofia, interview, September 14, 2023; June 16, 2025.
Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, interview, July 17, 2025; July 26, 2025.
Warsaw Heritage Conservation Officer, interview, June 14, 2024.
Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw (GWŻ), interview, November 17, 2024; July 17, 2025.
Anonymized interview (CHABAD Sofia), interview, September 21, 2024.
D. Tworek, T. Tworek from the NGO – Foundation Nowa Przestrzeń Sztuki [New Space for Art] in Kielce, interview, May 26, 2025.
P. Świerczyński from Kielce Historical Museum (Muzeum Historii Kielc), interview, May 26, 2025.
E. Dorosz-Panek member of the Board of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw, interview, July 7, 2025, interview, November 21, 2025.
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Żydowskie miejsca pamięci w Europie: lokalne, narodowe, transnarodowe (Sofia, Keltz – Kielce i Varshe – Warszawa)

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Słowa kluczowe: miejsca pamięci, żydowska tradycja, lokalna, narodowa, transnarodowa, Sofia, Keltz – Kielce, Varshe – Warszawa.

Note

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