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Dąbrowa Białostocka

STILL READING THE ASHES – IN THE FOOTSTEPS
OF DĄBROWA BIAŁOSTOCKA'S JEWS

I couldn't even save
a single life

I couldn't even stop
a single bullet

so I wander around cemeteries
which are not there
I search for words
which are not there
I run

for help not called for
for rescue too late

I want to get there
even if it's too late.¹

¹ Poem by Jerzy Ficowski from the volume *Odczytanie popiołów* (1979) (transl. by J.T.).

A small volume of poems by Jerzy Ficowski inspired me to undertake several years of efforts to restore the memory of the Jewish community of Dąbrowa Białostocka. Regarding the title of this essay, I chose to use a continuous verb form, because I assumed that looking for information about the Jews of Dąbrowa Białostocka would be a long and perhaps unfinishable process.

When I entered the Jewish cemetery for the first time, which at that time was simply a rubbish dump, I understood that it would be necessary to take care of this place – to clean it up and restore its proper character to it. The historic 19th-century necropolis is the only material trace of the Jews of Dąbrowa Białostocka. I realized that although there are no more Jews in Dąbrowa, they are still present through these graves. The *matzevahs* are the witnesses of the past. The living have disappeared, but the dead remain.

The cemetery is surrounded by a solid brick wall, decorated with a commemorative *matzevah* and sealed by a wrought-iron gate, which proves that someone did try to take care of this place. Who was still interested in the Jewish cemetery after so many years? I found out more from a book by Michael Nevins commemorating the *shtetl* in Dąbrowa.² Two Jewish women from here, the sisters Rena and Lilly Schlachter (Szlachter) collected money and asked a school friend, Jan Zarzecki, to organize the construction of a wall around the cemetery. In 1995, they and their families, together with Michael Nevins and others, came to Dąbrowa for a modest ceremony commemorating the town's Jewish inhabitants.

Large Jewish communities had lived in Dąbrowa and the surrounding towns for centuries. World War II and the Holocaust wiped them out; time and people erased the traces of the past. Very few of them survived. I have included the youth of the high school where I work in my projects. Education through activities, work, meetings and projects helps the young people to learn about their local history, brings the past closer, shapes active attitudes in them, and teaches them tolerance and an understanding of the world.

In 2015, at my initiative and with the involvement of students participating in the 'Przywróćmy pamięć' [To bring memory back] project of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, and in cooperation with the Dąbrowa

² M.A. Nevins, *Dąbrowa Białostocka: memorial to a shtetl*, River Valley (NJ) 1982; second edition from 2000 available at https://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/dabrowa_bialostocka/dabrowa_bialostocka.html, accessed 5 June 2021.

Town & Commune Office and the Municipal & Communal Cultural Centre, the cemetery was cleaned, and photographic documentation of 178 preserved *matzevahs* and an interactive map of the cemetery were prepared; these can be found online at ‘Odczytywanie popiołów – Dąbrowa z niepamięci wydobyta’ [Reading the ashes – Dąbrowa recovered from oblivion].³

I was an originator of the project to commemorate the cemetery. The town authorities funded a commemorative plaque on the gate and a sign indicating its location. On 24 May 2016, the plaque was unveiled by the mayor, Mr. Romuald Gromacki, and the aforementioned Michael Nevins, himself a descendant of Dąbrowa’s Jews. The restoration of the cemetery was the first action I undertook together with the students of the Gen. Nikodem Sulik School in Dąbrowa Białostocka as part of our original project ‘Odczytywanie popiołów – śladami dąbrowskich Żydów’ [Reading the ashes – Following in the footsteps of the Jews of Dąbrowa].

An outline of the history of Dąbrowa Białostocka and the history of its Jewish community

The location of the village of Dąbrowa was established by King August II granting it market privileges on 8 March 1713. This may be considered as having granted it certain municipal functions, but unfortunately these did not include full municipal rights. Dąbrowa did not receive them from the Lithuanian treasurer Antoni Tyzenhauz either, even though he contributed greatly to its development. In the years between 1768 and 1775, it became the centre of local administration; a market was laid down there, and several brick houses were built.

In the first half of the eighteenth century, the Jews in Dąbrowa owned a synagogue, a school, a bathhouse and a cemetery. They probably had their own religious community.

As Tomasz Wiśniewski writes in *Bóźnie Białostoczczyzny* [The synagogues of the Białystok region],⁴ the main synagogue was built with funds raised by Rabbi Menachem Mendel. It was a large, brick, one-story building with a gable roof. A characteristic feature was the semicircular windows in the main prayer room. The vestibule with four smaller windows housed the entrance for women to the gallery on the first floor. The synagogue was given to the faithful in 1874,

³ <https://www.dabrowabial.pl/>, accessed 5 June 2021.

⁴ T. Wiśniewski, *Bóźnie Białostoczczyzny*, Białystok 1993, p. 149.

and the Jews of Dąbrowa used it only on Saturdays and important holidays. It was destroyed by the Germans in 1941, and the ruins pulled down after the war.

Dąbrowa's privileges from King August II allowed for weekly markets and four annual fairs, and granted freedom to its Jews. Nevertheless it was a poor town whose livelihood was based on agriculture and crafting; the Christians mainly dealt with the former, while the Jews did the trading and crafting; the latter predominated numerically in the town.⁵ Residents of the surrounding villages flocked to Dąbrowa for the three annual fairs and weekly markets. Here horses, cattle, pigs, grain, fruit and vegetables, dairy products and the handicraft products needed on the farm were traded.

In 1904, there were 1800 inhabitants in Dąbrowa, 78.2 per cent of whom were Jews. This was the highest per centage of Jews in the entire Grodno governorate and one of the highest, if not the highest, in the Russian Empire. The Poles (19.2 per cent), Russians (0.7 per cent) and Tatars (1.7 per cent) living there were clearly in the minority.

In the interwar period, there were two post offices in the commune (*gmina*), which were called Dąbrowa by Grodno (Dąbrowa k. Grodna) and Różanystok by Grodno (Różanystok k. Grodna). On the other hand, the town of Dąbrowa itself, under an ordinance of the Minister of the Interior of 1937, was formally endowed with the adjective *grodzieńska*. In the town there were motor-powered mills, windmills, tile factories, a carding mill, a dye-works, an oil mill, a dairy cooperative, a Jewish People's Bank, a Stefczyk financial office, a post and telegraph office, a police station, a pharmacy and two medical practices. Several social organisations were also active there. However, the town had neither electricity nor running water. The nearest hospital was in Sokółka, the powiat seat, although people more usually went to Grodno, about 20 km away. It was a much larger town than Sokółka, so it offered the opportunity to settle various matters, and also offered agricultural products at more attractive prices. People usually went to Grodno on foot or in a cart. The wealthier people travelled by train or bus.

For Dąbrowa, World War II began with a German bombing. On 1 September 1939, a German plane flew over the town and dropped three bombs, although fortunately they did not cause much damage. The first German troops reached the town on 17 September and stayed there for three days. On 21 September, units of the Red

⁵ Dąbrowa was never a town modelled on the 'Magdeburg law'; it was typical of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the so-called small town (*miasteczko*). See G. Ryzewski, *Powiat sokólski. Dziedzictwo historyczno-kulturowe*, Sokółka 2020, pp. 73–74.

Army entered the area after the Germans abandoned it, as the result of previous agreements between Germany and the USSR. Dąbrowa thus came under Soviet occupation, which resulted in the deportations of Poles and Jews, among others.

On 22 June 1941, German troops re-entering Dąbrowa came under fire from several town residents, and a German officer was killed. As an act of revenge, the Germans set fire to buildings in the town and in nearby Juryzdyka. The buildings were made of timber and thatch, and it was a dry and hot summer, so the straw and wood caught fire easily. People woke from their sleep, ran out of their homes and saved their livestock. Most of their clothes, bedding and household items were burned. Those caught in the aftermath lived in free-standing vaults or with their friends and relatives in the surrounding villages. The stumps of the burnt houses' chimneys remained standing. Up to a dozen families lived in the few brick houses remaining. The vaults adapted for residential purposes were heated with small stoves, the so-called 'goats' (*kozy*). The facilities in Różanystok were commandeered by the Germans for their own needs, including as warehouses for storage.

The Jews of Dąbrowa also found themselves in a tragic situation. Hitler's anti-Semitic policy had excluded them from society in the occupied territories. After the destruction of Dąbrowa, they sought shelter among the ruins of their homes, as well as in the villages of their Christian friends. Hiding a Jew was punishable by death; nevertheless, many Poles took this risk. The fate of Zygmunt Sutuła from Brzozów, who was shot in front of his house for hiding the Boruch brothers was one tragic example of what could happen. It should be added that one of his own neighbours denounced him to the Germans.

The fate of the Jewish community in Dąbrowa was sealed on 2 November 1942, when the Germans deported the remaining local Jews to the extermination camp in Treblinka, where all of them perished. Only those who had emigrated before the war, those who had found refuge in Polish homes, or otherwise survived the war in the East, made it to the end of the conflict.

The information contained in this chapter comes from an article by Tadeusz Ciszkowski published on the website 'Historia Dąbrowy k/Grodna' [The history of Dąbrowa by Grodno].⁶

⁶ T. Ciszkowski, *Historia Dąbrowy k/Grodna*, <https://dabrowabial.pl/pliki/Dabrowa.pdf>, accessed 5 June 2021.

Descendants

The first source of information on Dąbrowa's Jews I found was Michael Nevins's book, which I discovered online. I wrote to the author explaining that I was looking for information about the Jews of Dąbrowa; this is how our acquaintance, which continues to this day, began.

At the mayor's invitation and mine, Dr. Nevins, a descendant of the Niewiadomski and Zabanów (Caban) families, visited Dąbrowa twice in 2016 and 2018. These visits were of an unusual nature, because he met the local authorities, students and residents of the town, which was an important step towards rebuilding relations between the inhabitants of Dąbrowa and their descendants who were returning to their ancestors' *shtetls* after so many years. Unfortunately, unpleasant incidents of a disruptive or even openly anti-Semitic nature also took place. Vulgar inscriptions were written on the mural displaying the *matzevah* and the cemetery wall, and several historic *matzevahs* were desecrated with similar inscriptions. Less drastic incidents included throwing candles and littering the cemetery.

Nevins's book is a memorial of Jewish Dąbrowa, but also one of the most important sources of information about this community more generally. A professional translation of the book into Polish by Elżbieta Smoleńska is available on the above-mentioned website.⁷

Kaddish for Dąbrowa Białostocka by Mark Podwal

Dąbrowa is the subject and inspiration of a series of prints by Mark Podwal, whose mother Devora (Dwora/Dwojra) Epelbaum came from the town. Podwal is not only an outstanding doctor and lecturer in New York, but also a respected and world-renowned graphic artist and painter. Many prestigious galleries and museums around the world have hosted his works. Privately, he was a longtime friend of Prof. Eli Wiesel. Inspired by a visit to his mother's family *shtetl* and Tomasz Wiśniewski's film *Nieobecna rodzina* [Absent family], of which more later, he created a series of eighteen prints, which were published as an album in 2018. The artist came to Dąbrowa for the second time in June 2018 and took part in the promotion of the book and a project (based on a grant from the Forum for Dialogue) to build relations

⁷ M. Nevins, *Dubrowa. Dąbrowa Białostocka. Upamiętnienie sztetla*, transl. E. Smoleńska, <https://dabrowabial.pl/pliki/dubrowa.pdf>, accessed 5 June 2021.

between the descendants of Jews and the inhabitants of the town. The students who were carrying out the project prepared a walk around pre-war Dąbrowa, told the Jewish history of the town, and showed guests and residents the places where the most important Jewish institutions and objects related to religious worship had been located before the Holocaust. *Kaddish for Dąbrowa Białostocka* was exhibited in the Great (Choral) Synagogue in Grodno (May 2017), at the Ludwik Zamenhof Centre in Białystok (August 2017, in cooperation with the Poland-Israel Center for Citizenship Education), and in Łomża (April 2019).

Mark Podwal donated this series of works to the Gen. Nikodem Sulik School in Dąbrowa, although in accordance with the artist's wishes, the work remains in my care.

Kiki Harary, the great-granddaughter
of Rabbi Moshe Gershon Mowshowitz

I found Kiki Harary through a translator, Mr. Krzysztof D. Majus, whose business card I accidentally found at the town hall. The great-granddaughter of Dąbrowa's rabbi lives in Israel with her father Yehuda (Juda), who is now over a hundred years old. He, together with his late brother, were the only ones of their large family to avoid the Holocaust by emigrating to Palestine before the war. We met for the first time in Jerusalem in 2016, when I learned the interesting story of the Mowshowitz family, which was blessed with many well-educated people – intellectuals, rabbis and journalists. It was Kiki Harary who, during her visit to the town of her ancestors in 2018, addressed the assembled residents in Hebrew – a language that no-one had used in Dąbrowa since 1945.

The search for the descendants of Dąbrowa's Jews led to more visits by their families. Some arrived on their own initiative (such as the twelve-member Carp-Krupiński family from Australia); others learned that someone in Dąbrowa was maintaining the cemetery and organising events and commemorations (such as the brothers David and Neil Wilkof, descendants of the Volkov family). I have also received letters from other people whose great-grandparents, grandparents or parents came from this town. The flow of information is aided by the profile I run on Facebook, the English-language version of Tomasz Wiśniewski's film *Absent Family*, and the websites of the Public Museum of the Jews of Białystok and District, as well as the website devoted to the Jews of Dąbrowa mentioned above.

I have met with great understanding and kindness from the oldest inhabitants of the town and the surrounding area, who were very eager to talk about their Jewish schoolmates and neighbours. Based on their accounts, a film was made by Dr. Tomasz Wiśniewski, an outstanding expert and researcher on the history of the Jews of Podlasie. His film *Nieobecna rodzina. Odczytywanie popiołów – śladami dąbrowskich Żydów* [Absent Family: Reading the Ashes – Following in the Footsteps of the Jews of Dąbrowa] premiered on 24 May 2016 during the visit by Michael Nevins and Mark Podwal to their ancestors' hometown.

Inspired by the film and driven by the desire to learn about the town's history, my students Mateusz Czarkowski, Julian Malinowski and Paweł Masłowski made their own film entitled *Odczytywanie popiołów – śladami dąbrowskich Żydów* [Reading the Ashes – Following in the Footsteps of the Jews of Dąbrowa], which told the history of pre-war Jewish Dąbrowa. Waclaw Kułak, a Witness to History, leads the students in the former inhabitants' footsteps, and shows them the locations of the Jewish synagogue, school and bathhouse. In 2018, this film won a distinction in the *Nasi sąsiedzi – Żydzi* [Our neighbours the Jews] National Competition in Chmielnik, and took second place in the Podlaskie voivodeship (the Białystok Branch of the Institute of National Remembrance was one of the competition's partners).

On 5 April 2017 in the Gen. Nikodem Sulik School in Dąbrowa Białostocka, an agreement was signed on cooperation between the school and the Karski Junior High School No. 1 in Grodno, Belarus – a partner in the 'Mosty wielokulturowości. Zrozumieć przeszłość – tworzyć przyszłość' [Bridges of multiculturalism. Understanding the past, creating the future] international project, funded by the PZU Foundation, which represents one of Central and Eastern Europe's largest financial institutions.

Together with Mrs. Jolanta Konstańczuk, we wrote a project aimed at young people from both schools, the aim of which was to integrate them, help them to get to know and work with each other, and shape attitudes of tolerance within them.

During the project, the students learned about the multiculturalism of the Podlasie and Grodno regions, and went on several trips, including to Tykocin, Knyszyn, Bohoniki, Kruszyniany and Grodno; they also met representatives of various cultures and religions, both Jewish and Muslim. Through photo and film competitions, they preserved the richness of their 'little homelands', renovated historic Jewish cemeteries in Dąbrowa and Grodno, and restored *matzevahs*.

I believe that the most important effect of the project was their getting to know each other, developing their linguistic competences, and coming to understand national and religious diversity as a value that enriches life.

For several years I have been a member of the Forum for Dialogue, the oldest organisation in Poland dealing with Polish-Jewish dialogue. The Forum's flagship project is the School of Dialogue (*Szkoła Dialogu*), in which several dozen schools from all over Poland participate each year. We started the project in 2018. Young people participate in workshops conducted by the Forum for Dialogue's mentors, and learn about the history of the Jewish community, as well as its culture, customs and the principles of Judaism. The result of the project was a unique trip in the footsteps of the Jews of Dąbrowa as prepared by the students – exceptional mainly because the descendants of Jewish families, Kiki Harary, Michael Nevins and Mark Podwal, participated in it. The walk around 'pre-war' Dąbrowa engaged the local community: the elderly added some information and talked eagerly about how they remembered the former inhabitants of the town.

The students who devised the project were nominated for the main prize in the category of 'Impact on the local community', and the school won the honorary title of 'School of Dialogue 2018'.

I am very interested not only in the town's Jewish history, but also in Polish-Jewish relations more generally, especially in connection to the Holocaust. During a conversation with my colleague Celina Łazuk-Woroniecka, I found out that she was the granddaughter of a couple who were deemed Righteous Among the Nations: Anna and Stanisław Krzywicki from Dulkowszczyzna near Lipsk. It happened that I had just returned from the Summer School of Teaching about the Holocaust, a seminar organised by the Jagiellonian University's Faculty of European Studies, so I was even more interested in the subject of Poles saving Jews.

This friendly conversation marked the start of these various activities, which have been going on for more than four years now, consisting of restoring the memory of the Righteous in the local community. This includes meetings between young people in Dąbrowa and Lipsk and the children of the Krzywicki family, Józef and Janina, who helped their parents hide the Trachtenberg family of three refugees from the Grodno ghetto. Józef Krzywicki met the descendants of Dąbrowa's Jews during the latter's visit to our town in 2016.

Students, including Krystian Hećmańczuk (a great-grandson of the Righteous), Mateusz Czarkowski and Paweł Masłowski shot a film entitled *Historia mojej rodziny* [The History of My Family] (2019), which won the 'Our neighbours the Jews' National Competition in Chmielnik in 2019. It was also shown at the school on several occasions. The young people had the opportunity to learn about the history of a family that helped their Jewish friends during the occupation.

The screening of the film in Lipsk (on 13 December 2019) was attended by over twenty members of the Krzywicki family and – in my opinion – did much to help commemorate the Righteous. The involvement of the mayor of Lipsk, Lech Łępicki, and the parish priest, Canon Waldemar Sawicki, gives hope that there will also be a memorial plaque in honour of those inhabitants of the area who saved their Jewish neighbours.

During the celebration of the 23rd Day of Judaism in the Catholic Church in Poland (17 January 2020), another screening of the film *The History of My Family* was held, and the invited guests, including representatives of the Jewish communities from Grodno and Lida (Belarus), could watch a fictionalised interview with the daughter of the Righteous, Janina Hećmańczuk, and talk to their granddaughter Celina Łazuk-Woroniecka and great-grandson Krystian Hećmańczuk. Many participants in the ceremony saw the medal and honorary diploma from Yad Vashem for the first time.

It is very important to involve young people in the above-mentioned activities, as in this way they learn history, are given role models, and are encouraged to learn about and research the history of their own families and the people living in their localities. Young people need heroes, and can, for example, find them within their own families.

For four years, I have been organising commemorative activities with the students related to the Day of Judaism in the Catholic Church in Poland. This is the only event of its type in Podlasie. Since my interest in the Jewish past of the town and its vicinity has aroused (and continues to arouse) various emotions, often negative, I hoped that the initiative of the Polish Episcopate of 1997 would find the understanding and acceptance of the community. During the events, through lectures, concerts, film screenings and the guests invited – including Catholic clergy, representatives of Jewish communities from Poland and Belarus, and members of the Białystok Society of Friends of Jewish Culture – I have tried to bring the relationship between Judaism and Christianity closer to the young

people, residents and civic authorities of Dąbrowa. I hope that these events build mutual knowledge and understanding, and help to shape attitudes of tolerance.

The most important element of the commemorative events is the joint prayer in the Jewish cemetery between the followers of these two religions, which are so close to each other. Two years ago, I added a different kind of commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust: young people read aloud the names and surnames of the Jews murdered in Treblinka, and in this way they are restored to the place where they were born, lived, educated, traded: quite simply, they live again.

In October 2019, in cooperation with the WITALIS Association and the 'Young Citizen' Civic Club from Lisew Malborski, represented by the lecturer and teacher Michał Romanowski, as well as young people from the schools in the Żuławy area, we started a project to commemorate the Jewish families from Dąbrowa. After preparing the appropriate stencils, the young people painted the names on the cemetery wall. In this way, through this collaborative work, an important and very significant commemoration of twenty names of Jews from Dąbrowa was created. Each surname is a symbol of a family, so each of them 'captures' several or up to a dozen people.

The exchange of experiences between students from different schools, the development of manual skills, learning local history through activities, and the recollection of the Holocaust as a warning for people today are also important. The mayor of Dąbrowa, Artur Gajlewicz, also participated in the project.

As a teacher I try to participate in seminars and trainings. In this way, I not only deepen my knowledge, but I also learn new methods for working with students, I make friends, and I search for ideas and inspiration.

During the 2nd TOLI (the Olga Lengyel Institute) seminar in Warsaw (June 2019), I had the opportunity to participate in classes conducted by Cheryl Rattner Price, an American artist and one of the originators of the 'Butterflies' project, which is an unusual way of commemorating the youngest victims of the Holocaust.

Each ceramic butterfly tells the story of a Jewish child murdered during the Second World War. The children were helpless, weak, unattended, lost and suffering. While participating in the project during the seminar, I thought that I should organise this type of activity at school, but that the disabled should also be included. On 16 December 2019, in cooperation with the charges of the Occupational Therapy Workshops in Dąbrowa and the students, we painted butterflies – not

only in memory of the murdered children, but also for ourselves, in order better to understand other, often sick and handicapped people. Earlier, with the help of the English teacher Mirella Stupak and the students, we translated short biographies of the children and the sentences on the cards with the biographies of the victims. As we painted the butterflies, we read the information about each child being commemorated. Most often this was done by the school students, because some of the disabled people participating in the project cannot read. The painted butterflies were placed on a specially prepared board. It was a unique experience and truly enlightening for all participants in the project.

The students also participated in the 'Daffodils' project, commemorating the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. We always go beyond the school and the local community with our activities. The young people present films, tell stories, and describe their achievements outside Dąbrowa; we also work with teachers and students from neighbouring schools. We hope that we will encourage young people to learn about the past, and to look for witnesses to history and the traces of the Jewish past.

Thanks to a grant for local activities (2019), I was able to launch the website 'Odczytywanie popiołów – Dąbrowa z niepamięci wydobyta' [Reading the ashes – Dąbrowa recovered from oblivion]. On this website I collect all the information, photos, maps and descriptions of events related to the Jewish past of the town, as well as contemporary ones such as the contacts with the descendants of Dąbrowa's Jews (<https://dabrowabial.pl/index.php>).

For over three years I have been running a Facebook profile called 'Reading the Ashes – Following in the Footsteps of the Jews of Dąbrowa', whose aim is to promote knowledge about the Jewish community of Dąbrowa, report on important events, and to exchange, commemorate and document experiences.

The history of Jewish Dąbrowa is a 'microcosm' of the history of Central and Eastern European Jews. Dąbrowa and all the nearby *shtetls* had a similar past. Have we succeeded in restoring the memory of the past, its people and events? I think this memory will endure. It is continually being supplemented with more information, memories, photos, visits by the descendants, the students' activities, and by education and changes in the local community's perception of 'Jewish matters'.