

Shalom Zagłębie. House of assembly on fire

We invite you to read the first text by Michał Nowakowski in the “Shalom Zagłębie. In the footsteps of Jews from Zagłębie Dąbrowskie” series. The article is devoted to the burning of the Będzin synagogue in the night of 8 and 9 September 1939, and its author is our correspondent from Będzin, volunteer of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and translator, enthusiast of Jewish history and culture.

The history of the Będzin synagogue started in 1856 when a wooden temple was built. Due to its very bad state, a magnificent synagogue with a two-tower façade was built in its place in 1881. Located near the Czarna Przemsza River, at the foothill of Góra Zamkowa (Castle Hill), it impressed with its size, subtle architectural details, an admirable bema, and an impressive forged door. When you look at old photographs you get the impression that the synagogue was in no way inferior to the medieval castle towering over the city and the centuries-old Church of the Holy Trinity located a little further behind. In order to restore the synagogue's splendour, renovation works were carried out in 1921, while the interior polychromes were renewed between 1925 and 1926.

For decades, the synagogue in Będzin served the local Jewish population, which in this city of the Zagłębie region was very large and numbered as much as 80 percent in 1900 and still an impressive 60 percent in 1939, just before the outbreak of World War II, which was to bring the Jews of Będzin and Poland the terrible Holocaust.

The most tragic episode in the history of Będzin's Jews took place with the aggression of Nazi Germany on Poland in September 1939. The German blitzkrieg caused the falling of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie into the hands of the Third Reich already in the first days of the war. Only a few days

after the Germans took over Będzin there were murders committed on the local Jews. The apogee of those days was the burning of the synagogue on the night of 8 and 9 September. During that time there were around one hundred Jews praying inside the temple. The Germans surrounded the building and would not let out from the interior the people who had been praying, killing instantly anyone that made their way out. Only thanks to the help given to a group of a dozen or so Jews by priest Mieczysław Zawadzki (1894-1975), who opened the gate of the Holy Trinity Church and led them to Castle Hill, anyone managed to get out of the hell prepared for the Jews by the Nazis. For his brave act he was awarded post mortem with the medal of the Righteous Among the Nations. The operation against Będzin's Jewish population was commanded by Udo Gustav Wilhelm Egon von Woysch – a German general, Commander of the SS and the Police in Upper Silesia who had previously “become famous” in Germany for his participation in the Night of the Long Knives. He was the commander of the Einsatzgruppe zur besonderen Verwendung (Eng. Special Purpose Operational Group). It was this group that was responsible for the pacification of the Polish part of Upper Silesia and pogroms of the Jews.

The Jewish quarter located at the foothill of Castle Hill burnt along with the synagogue. Jews escaping from the raging fire from their homes in Plebańska Kościelna, and Kołtątaja streets were murdered by the Nazis. From this area, only the mikvah, located on the banks of the Czarna Przemsza River, managed to survive, however it was regrettably demolished shortly after the war. However, from the synagogue itself, a nineteenth century Torah scroll has been preserved, probably taken out of the burning temple, and then hidden in one of the tenement houses. Currently, the scroll is located in the Mizrachi synagogue in Będzin.

The Jews who had perished as a result of the burning of the Będzin synagogue were buried in the cemetery in Czeladź at Będzińska Street.

Today, near the place where the magnificent synagogue once stood, there is a granite obelisk in the shape of the phylacteries – boxes with Torah paragraphs tied by Jews to the forehead and shoulder during prayer. There are inscriptions on the monument in Hebrew and Polish: *„In memory of Jews – citizens of the city of Będzin and the surrounding region murdered by the Nazis during World War II. The Society of Friends of Będzin founded this monument on the site*

of the synagogue burned by the occupants on the night of 8-9 September, 1939. Let it be a symbol of remembrance of these tragic years of lawlessness, cruelty, and violence. May it also become a symbol of the rebirth and reconciliation of free nations living in peace and brotherhood."

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