

Shalom Zagłębie. September 1939 – The Beginning of the End of the Synagogues of Zagłębie

We invite you to read the second text by Michał Nowakowski from the „Shalom Zagłębie. In the footsteps of the Jews of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie” series. This next article is devoted to the destruction of Zagłębie synagogues by the Germans in September 1939. The author is our correspondent from Będzin, a volunteer of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and a translator, passionate about Jewish history and culture.

When the territories of Zagłębie Dąbrowskie (Dąbrowa Basin) were occupied by the Germans in September 1939 as a result of Nazi aggression against Poland in the first days of the war, the fate of the synagogues of the large Jewish community of this region was sealed. Although in the General Governorate which was established in October 1939, the same sad destiny affected many local Jewish temples during the war – demolished, burned, devastated, desecrated, transformed into warehouses and stables for horses by the German aggressor – it was in areas annexed to the Third Reich (formally on October 8), where the Germans immediately in September began to methodically liquidate the synagogues. Their goal was to deprive Jews of the opportunity to practice their religion by destroying places related to their faith and culture. It was also an expression of their criminal, racist, and anti-Semitic policy. The Zagłębie synagogues were treated in a similar way as it was done in the first days of the war in the occupied areas of the Polish part of Upper Silesia. For example, in Katowice the very impressive Great Synagogue was burned down, and in Mysłowice the local two-tower synagogue built in the Moorish style was burned down as well.

In Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, the Germans repeated the same barbaric procedure. Already on

September 9 in Sosnowiec, where before the outbreak of World War II Jews made up around 20 percent of the population, residents of Dekerta Street and its surroundings, inhabited to a large extent by the Jewish population, heard a terrifying detonation at around 7 p.m. It was the Germans who first set fire to and then blew up the temple located there – the Great Synagogue, built in the years 1894-96. They decided to erase this place of worship from the city's map.

Pious Jews, whom the Nazis ordered to clean up the temple's rubble, collected bricks from the destroyed synagogue as mementos and they would light Hanukkah candles on these surviving crumbs. Today, there is no trace of this three-storey brick building with a decorative entrance and intricate details. The area where the impressive synagogue had once stood, was until recently occupied by a market hall, and now it houses a store of one of well-known chains. According to the testimony of Abraham Krakowski, the nearby beth midrash was not destroyed at that time.

In 1907, a synagogue was built in the old Sosnowiec district of Sielec, at Narutowicza Street (formerly Waryński Street). During the war, the Nazis devastated its interior, while the synagogue from 1916, which had once stood at Wiejska Street (now M.T. Kierocińskiej), in the Stary Sosnowiec district, was destroyed by the Nazis and today no trace of it remains. The synagogue, built in 1922 and once located at Floriańska Street in the Pogoń district of Sosnowiec, was robbed and devastated by the German occupant in September 1939. The building was demolished after the war. Today there is an empty place which is covered with plants and litter.

In another Sosnowiec district – Modrzejów, where a large Jewish community had lived for centuries and which until 1915 was an independent town, called „Jewish”, the first wooden synagogue was built in the beginning of the 18th century. Unfortunately, this building burned down about 100 years later. In the 1860s, another synagogue was built, and another stone temple was built in the 1880s. To this day, one can find and see the remains of the last Jewish temple in Modrzejów at Bóźnicza Street. Fragments of its brick walls are hidden in densely growing greenery. The circumstances of its destruction are unclear. The same goes for the synagogue from the 1860s. The only information which I was able to find is the testimony of Lejzor Herman. He mentions the destruction of synagogues in Modrzejów by the Germans as early as

September 1939, right after the Germans entered it, which took place on 5 September.

It should be noted at this point that the Sosnowiec synagogues are not commemorated in any way, which is all the more surprising that the numerous Jewish communities of Sosnowiec were repeatedly honoured with monuments, commemorative plaques, street names, or otherwise. Following the example of the neighbouring Czeladź or Będzin, it would be worth placing information boards that would familiarise people with the history of the synagogues in the Zagłębie's capital where many thousands of Jews once used to live.

The most tragic episode in the history of Będzin's Jews (before the war, 60 percent of its population were Jews) took place when the Germans entered the city in the first days of September. On the night of September 8-9, the Nazis set fire to the monumental synagogue located at the foot of the Castle Hill (Góra Zamkowa). Around one hundred Jews were praying inside the temple at that time. Those who escaped from the burning temple were killed by the Germans on the spot. Only thanks to the help given to a group of a dozen or so Jews by priest Mieczysław Zawadzki (1894-1975) some people were saved from the hell that the Nazis prepared for the Jews. Father Zawadzki opened the gate of the Holy Trinity Church and led the Jews to the Castle Hill. He was posthumously awarded the Righteous Among the Nations' medal for his heroic deed. At that time, a lot of Jews who tried to escape from their houses set on fire and located in the streets near the synagogue were killed. To complete the tragic picture of those events, the Germans groundlessly accused the Jews themselves as well as Poles of setting the temple on fire, as a result of which dozens of innocent people lost their lives at the hands of Nazi butchers. The synagogue was commemorated with a granite obelisk and an information board.

Jews, inhabiting 5 percent of Zagłębie's oldest city – Czeladź, built their temple in the former Milowicka Street, which is now Katowicka Street. The synagogue had a neo-Romanesque character. The eastern wall was decorated with two arched windows located on the sides, in the centre there was a triforium, and below it a rose window. The synagogue was located on land belonging to the Bikur Cholim organisation, which provided assistance to poor and ill people. The above-described events from Będzin testified to the monstrous bestiality of the German aggressor, while in Czeladź the Nazis rose to the heights of despicableness. The Nazis feared that

setting the synagogue on fire could cause an uncontrolled spread of fire onto the surrounding wooden buildings ... And so, at the end of 1939, or according to other sources in 1940, the Germans forced the Jews themselves to demolish the synagogue under their rifles! For the Jews of Czeladź who were ordered to destroy their temple, it was a terrible experience. With their heads down and tears in their eyes, they started to demolish a building so dear to them. In his testimony, Aron Gelbard recalls that memorable day: „Jews who built synagogues with their own hands and with their own savings were now ordered to demolish them down with their own hands, tear them down brick by brick.” Abraham Green, born in Czeladź, and currently the Chairman of the World Society of Zagłębie Jews, recalls that tragic event: „The synagogue that had stood here was not destroyed by fire. It was ordered by the Nazis to be torn down by the Jews themselves, who had been brought from Milowicka and Staszica Streets, rifles aimed at them. I lived here in this house opposite and saw my brothers working on the demolition. First, the Jews stood there and cried, and then they started working. Then they prayed to God for forgiveness.”

The only thing left of the Czeladź synagogue is an empty square, where a granite obelisk has been standing since 1995, very similar to the obelisk erected in Będzin in 1993 on the site of the synagogue. While standing in this empty area, you have the irresistible impression that something is missing in this place, that there is a huge, unhealed rupture in the city's tissue.

The synagogue located in the next city of Zagłębie, namely in Dąbrowa Górnicza, was built between 1912 and 1916, at the intersection of the former Okrzei and Szopena streets (currently 32 Fryderyka Chopina Street). During the times of the Polish People's Republic, this part of the city was totally rebuilt. The Nazis set fire and devastated the synagogue during World War II, and then created a warehouse in its remains. After the war, the Protestant community wanted to take over the abandoned building with the intention of creating their church there. The Jewish community did not agree to this use of the former Judaic temple. In later years, it housed a garage and a beverage warehouse. The building was demolished in the late 1970s or early 1980s.

The synagogue at 41 Marszałkowska Street in Zawiercie has survived to this day. The street along with other streets in this area was surrounded by a wall during the occupation and incorporated

into the ghetto created by the Nazis. The synagogue was built in 1880 by Jews who constituted 17 percent of the city's pre-war population. The one-storey building was built of brick. It had arched windows, a rose window, and a roof with a gentle slope. The Germans devastated the synagogue during World War II. After the war, the temple building was rebuilt several times, losing its original look. For many years it housed various stores. Today, the former temple of the Zawiercie Jews is in a very poor condition and is standing abandoned.

The synagogue in Sławków (before the war, 12 percent of the inhabitants of Sławków were Jews) was built in 1896 at 10 Biskupia Street. It was a one-storey red-brick building. The eastern part of the temple housed the main prayer room, and the western one the vestibule with the kehillah office. Above it there was the women's gallery. The Sławków synagogue was devastated during World War II by the Germans, who then made a warehouse out of it. After the war, the building was rebuilt into a community centre. Today, on the wall of the former synagogue, you can see a granite plaque commemorating it with an inscription in Polish and Hebrew.

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Sources: Wirtualny Sztetl, Dziennik Zachodni, PolishJews.org, Wikipedia

Photo: Michał Nowakowski

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