

# The wall of the Warsaw Ghetto after the war

**We share a column by Prof. Konrad Zieliński, PhD from the Science and Research Dpt. of WGM, published in *Plus Minus* – the weekend issue of *Rzeczpospolita* – on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the closure of the Warsaw Ghetto.**

When on January 17th, 1945, Red Army units and the 1st Polish Army successively won another quarters of ruined and deserted Warsaw, the area of the former ghetto resembled a stone desert with the building of St. Augustine's Church in the middle. The Germans intended to blow up the temple, but they did not carry out the plan, and the church towering over the ghetto area razed to the ground was probably for some people a visible sign of the Divine providence.

The nearby temple, miraculously extant, did not bother the seekers sifting through the rubble for valuables and other usable things. The Warsaw press often reported on diggers and fences, selling things they have dug on Nowolipki, Gęsia, in Pawlak prison and other places of public executions, that were caught red-handed. The area "behind the wall", even if the ghetto wall had already been physically demolished in many places, was still looked upon as a kind of Eldorado. The situation was similar before the start of the so-called Grossaktion, when many Jews disposed of their most valuable things for a loaf of bread or a sack of potatoes...

## **New Muranów**

The photograph of the church with the debris lying around is one of the most moving symbols of the destruction of the city today, it emphasises the scale of its destruction and makes quite a ghostly impression. This impression is intensified when one realises that several hundred thousand people lived in this small area a few years earlier, most of whom were murdered at the

Treblinka death camp. To this day, earth and construction workers in the former ghetto find glass bottles, metal elements, tiles, charred paper or wood, and also human bones. In Muranów, systematic exhumation works were never carried out, and most of the rubble was not taken away, but only graded.

After the war, new buildings were put up in the ghetto area, some of the streets were changed and the remaining traces of previous buildings were effectively removed. New Muranów, in Bohdan Lacherta's concept, made of concrete rubble, with houses made of unplastered brick, was supposed to refer to the tragedy of the Warsaw Ghetto and commemorate the Jewish inhabitants of the capital city. With time, the architect's idea was abandoned, the blocks were plastered, many socialist realist elements appeared. Muranów became a symbol of the absence of Warsaw Jews. Monument to the Ghetto Heroes was the starting point for monuments and memorial plaques reminding about the war and the fate of the ghetto inhabitants.

### **Monument and politics**

Not everyone is aware of the fact that the monument by Natan Rapoport and Leon Suzin in its composition refers to the preserved fragments of the wall of the Jerusalem temple and the ghetto walls. The monument was erected in 1948, but the first plaque surrounded by red sandstone with inscriptions in Polish, Hebrew and Yiddish was unveiled two years earlier, on the third anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising. Polish Newsreel from 1946 shows clips from the ceremony: official delegations, groups of young people and a few inhabitants make their way among the ravines scattered from the ruins, in the freezing rain, in silence.

The participants of the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in Wrocław visited both monuments in August 1948. The ruins and emptiness left by the hundreds of thousands gassed at the Treblinka death camp were to reinforce the Congress' message. After all, the memory of the war was vivid, and two years earlier – which was not insignificant – Churchill referred to the “iron curtain” during his speech in Fulton. The visit of world-famous artists and thinkers was to be fully exploited in the accelerating “Cold War”.

In the following years, flowers were laid quite regularly at the Monument to Ghetto Heroes, visited by delegations of mainly Jewish organisations and official Israeli delegations (but only until 1967, when Poland broke off diplomatic relations with this country in connection with the so-called six-day war). Foreign delegations, unless they expressed their willingness to put flowers on Zamenhof Streets, were usually not directed to Muranów. Not surprisingly, therefore, Willy Brandt's intention to lay a wreath at the Monument (the Chancellor flew to Warsaw in 1970 to sign an agreement normalizing relations between Poland and FRG), became a source of misunderstanding with the Polish authorities. They demanded the wreath that Brandt will lay at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior be larger than the one placed at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes...

Today's iconic photograph of the Chancellor on his knees has been circulating all over the world, but in Poland, apart from *Fołks Sztyme*, no newspaper has published it in such a way as to make it clear in front of which monument it takes place. Two years after the Zionist campaign, the suffering and sacrifice of the Jewish people should not have been emphasised too much, although Brandt with his gesture from 50 years ago wanted to pay respect to all the victims of the war launched by Germany against Poland. By the way, this gesture was also perceived with some reserve in Germany. Germany of the 1970s were still far from reckoning with their history...

### **Memory restored (?)**

Since the time of the political transformation in Poland, the visit to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes has been on the agenda of many foreign delegations: Bill Clinton paid tribute to the heroes and victims of the ghetto, Barack Obama Did the same in 2011; it is still visited by tourists from around the world, groups of Israeli teens and soldiers, school trips. It seems that, together with the POLIN Museum, it is on the list of "must see" of foreign tourists visiting Warsaw.

The monument is the best known but symbolic image of the ghetto wall. We can also find its traces along the Memorial Route of Jewish Martyrdom and Struggle, in Umschlagplatz, on Sienna and 1łota Streets, and there is an artistic installation at the intersection of Chłodna and Żelazna Streets symbolically commemorating the footbridge connecting two parts of the

ghetto. The Museum of the Warsaw Ghetto is being established in the buildings of the former children's hospital at Sienna and Śliska Streets, located in the area of the so called small ghetto, which will be the most important place to commemorate the life and death of Warsaw Jews. Daffodils given to passers-by on the anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising prove that Warsaw, not only the "official" one, remembers. Similar feelings are evoked by the success of Roman Polanski's *Pianist* or the popularity of the prose of Szczepan Twardoch, whose protagonists live in the capital and hide in its ruins. There are never too many reminders of this tragedy.

**Prof. Konrad Zieliński** – Professor of the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and an employee of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum.

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