

Title

Hiding Places. The Architecture of Survival

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Abstract

"Hiding Places. The Architecture of Survival" is an article that summarizes the preliminary stage of my artistic studies on the architecture of hiding places. In the first part of the text, I discuss the historical context in which Jewish hiding places appeared on Polish territory during the Second World War; outline the subject matter of my studies, pointing to a paucity of research on the hiding places, in terms of both Polish and international reflection; and present my key theoretical and methodological inspirations, including, in particular, the interdisciplinary concept of "critical spatial practice" proposed by Jane Rendell. In the second part of the article, I consider the research and theoretical challenges associated with the study of the hiding places today, and suggest that a reflection on their architecture and the stories associated with them accords us an opportunity to critically revisit the complicated Polish-Jewish relations in the 20th and 21st centuries. Finally, I present summary case studies of three hiding places I have researched: the cellar of a house in Siemianowice Śląskie; a bunker at the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw; and the interior of an oak named Józef in Wiśniowa. Drawing on my analysis of archival materials, site visits and interviews, I present the stories of the individual hiding places and the people who inhabited them; analyze the structure and space of the respective facilities, with attention to their functional, sensory and emotional aspects; and trace the links between these secret hideaways and the historical and contemporary local social and architectural landscape. Drawing on the artistic know-how I have developed, I also present proposals for commemoration of the individual hiding places, the implementation of which will constitute my project's final stage.

This article summarizes the preliminary stage of my art study of remnant Jewish hiding places of World War II. I concentrate on oral history, archival material and the site visits preparatory to my main research. I seek to process the art forms and architectural designs I encountered with the aim of plumbing the physical and emotional dimensions of the hiding places as material bearers of memory.

In my field studies of these hiding places I relied on art research know-how which I developed in the course of earlier projects, namely the Nomadic Shtetl Archive and the JAD Project. The Nomadic Shtetl Archive was a mobile structure with reflective walls housing an archive, which I used to traverse historic shtetls. The objective was to collect and archive the architectural

memory of a shtetl through engagement with local residents in excursions, their access to the mobile archive, and in conversation with them. JAD, on the other hand, was a portable art installation reminiscent of the “yad,” a hand-shaped ritual pointer used in Torah reading. Performing the role of an archive, this mobile hand travelled through Będzin, Bytom and Sosnowiec, drawing attention to the erosion of old Jewish architecture. In both projects I addressed myself to the architectural dimension of obliteration. I took stock of my research to date in my doctoral dissertation at the Bartlett School of Architecture.¹

In my studies of hiding places, I apply Jane Rendell’s method of “critical spatial practice,” a synthesis of theoretical spatial research, memory studies, architectural practice and public art, a quintessential interdisciplinary research tool.² I will begin this article with a presentation of the research problem and follow on with an outline of the historical context in which the hiding places emerged, thus zooming in on the realities of the Holocaust. In the second part of the text, I will examine the current state of research on the “architectural matter” of the hideouts, through a detailed presentation of three case studies.

Presentation of the Research Problem

The subject of Jews going into hiding and the assistance they received has appeared in various research contexts of the Holocaust, but we know little about the architecture of hiding places themselves: in part because of their deterioration, but also because researchers have focused on the fate of those in hiding and their rescuers. This article makes no pretense to fill this gap. Rather it is an outline of research on Jewish hiding places in Poland that I am currently conducting. I look at these as examples of what I refer to as “survival architecture,” architectural forms that enabled Jews to survive in extremely adverse conditions. It is important to remember that Jews did not only hide from their Nazi oppressors, but also from “ordinary” people: their neighbors and bystanders, not to mention blackmailers and the “Blue Police.” This is how Karen Bermann analyses Anne Frank’s hiding place: “The hiding place is the container in which this world is generated, and every breach of the seal threatened the integrity of the interior. Danger always existed on the other side of the wall, an infinitely fragile yet significant membrane.”³

I try to reconstruct the spatial dimensions of that tensely stretched membrane between the hideout’s interior and its exterior as I apply the methods of art and architecture to the chosen cases: a hiding place in the cellar of a private house in Siemianowice Śląskie where Chajka Klinger, a Hashomer Hatzair organization activist, stayed; a bunker built inside a grave at the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, the hiding place of Abraham Carmi; and inside the tree trunk of a 650-year-old oak named *Józef* in the village of Wiśniowa in Polish Subcarpathia, in which the Hymi brothers hid.

By definition, a hiding place is a place where a person hides or where something can be hidden safely. Essentially, a hiding place is a counterbalance to a threatening external world, a “life support” location. It is astonishing to see the variety of forms of these hiding places, being vectors of the creativity of people compelled to fight for their very lives.

My research was inspired by and drew on the typology of hiding places proposed by Marta Cobel-Tokarska in her *Bezludna wyspa, nora, grób. Wojenne kryjówki Żydów w okupowanej Polsce* [Desert Island, Burrow, Grave. The Wartime Hiding Places of Jews in Occupied Poland]. Cobel-Tokarska distinguishes between different types of hiding places, taking into account, among other things: the number of people hiding in them; the location of a shelter; the time spent in the hideout; and whether the hiding was solitary or assisted.⁴

In my research I focus mainly on long-term hiding places, i.e. those built to provide shelter for an indefinite time.⁵ They had to have a very well thought out architectural form, which would take into account life support processes in all their complexity: food delivery, waste disposal, ventilation, heating, sound insulation, etc. All of these things had to be provided for, but at the same time the space itself could not be rebuilt in any significant way. Everything had to work as if nothing was happening there (hideouts were often built under the cover of night). For this reason, they were designed with great precision and the construction process was planned with meticulous attention to logistics. This is all the more admirable as hideouts were typically built by people with no specialist skills. Particularly noteworthy is the complex construction work of underground passages such as that under the house in Siemianowice Śląskie, in which the Kobylec family sustained thirty Jews in a hiding place I later describe further.

The Historical Context

According to various estimates, during the Second World War about 50,000 Jews survived hiding on the “Aryan side” in occupied Poland.⁶ Some of those who managed to survive the war on the “Aryan side” did so through assistance from other Jews, as well as the support of non-Jews. The help needed to survive the conflagration of the war (among other things, through provision of food, medicine and “Aryan papers”) came from people of different walks of life informed by divergent interests. As Jacek Leociak rightly points out: “there are no easy or unambiguously edifying stories about help and hiding. Each of them is entangled in a historical context, in a tangled network of give-and-take relationships.”⁷ He nonetheless points out that the people undertaking these heroic deeds were guided primarily by “a sense of duty” or “humanistic values,” such as an “inner imperative.”⁸

According to 2019 data, Yad Vashem, the institute of the Israeli Martyrs’ and Heroes’

Remembrance Authority, have recognized 6,992 Poles as Righteous Among the Nations⁹ for heroically helping Jews survive, despite the repressions they and their families endured.¹⁰ A debate continues to rage around the role of Poles in the Holocaust. The right-wing historiography and politics of memory accentuate the heroic stance of Poles and respond with resentment bordering on hysteria to any attempt to critically re-examine this myth. At the same time efforts are being made to call to account a complex history in which Poles not only played roles as heroic protagonists but also as interpassive observers¹¹ and on occasion even active participants in the Holocaust, by a whole new generation of researchers and scholars, such as Barbara Engelking, Jan T. Gross, Irena Grudzińska-Gross, Jan Grabowski, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, Jacek Leociak, Mirosław Tryczyk, Andrzej Leder and Elżbieta Janicka.¹²

In one of the more shocking examinations of the wartime phenomenon of “Judenjagd” [Hunt for Jews], that focuses on a single district of Dąbrowa Tarnowska, Jan Grabowski describes the respective phases of these macabre “hunts.”¹³ He points out that the first and highly brutal phase followed immediately after displacement operations, and involved driving Jews out of their makeshift hiding places and killing them—most often on the spot—and that this was done by the Germans or their “Blue Police,” or the local population summoned to the operation. The few remaining fugitives would often seek refuge in nearby woodlands.¹⁴ Barbara Engelking has identified local forests as initial hiding places after escape from ghettos, however frequent manhunts made these areas unsafe.¹⁵

Some escapees managed to hide in their area with former “neighbors.” A few who obtained “Aryan papers” lived “out in the open,” under an assumed identity. After the war, Jews continued to be the subject of harassment, and the Kielce Pogrom was not an isolated incident.¹⁶

Informing on Jews had many faces. As Leociak put it, the “prying eyes” of a Polish neighbor, prevalent in memoirs of Holocaust survivors, were exactly the thing Jews had to hide from.¹⁷ This experience resounds in the bitter words of Emanuel Ringelblum, who asks himself: “Was it inevitable that when the death trains rushed from various parts of the country to Treblinka and other places of execution, the Jews, looking their last on this world, should have to see indifference or even gladness on the faces of their neighbors?”¹⁸ Karolina Kobylec, who hid about thirty Jews under the floor of her house in Siemianowice Śląskie, also pointed out the “prying eyes of a neighbor:” “This bunker was here for two years. I cooked and did the washing for everyone. In all of this one had to guard against intruding eyes (...).”¹⁹

The myth of Poles as Righteous Among the Nations was exploited for political purposes not only in the Third Polish Republic, but also in the times of the Polish People’s Republic. Manipulation of this type is exemplified in *The Righteous* (1968), a documentary directed by Ryszard Gontarz,

which presents Jews as selfish and ungrateful, while the Poles who rescued them as selfless and self-sacrificing. The peculiarity of the documentary rests in the fact that it was released in the midst of an antisemitic campaign that resulted in over 13,000 Jewish Poles being forced to leave the country.²⁰

The present-day official state politics of memory pursued by the PiS [Law and Justice] party follows a similar path, instrumentalizing historical research in order to cultivate the myth of heroic Poles. This is exemplified by the beautifully designed Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II, opened in Markowa in 2016. The museum presents the history of the Ulma family,²¹ who saved eight Jews and were subsequently brutally murdered by the Nazis. The exhibition, however, does not do them justice because it omits the history of local blackmailers and other acts of informing on Jews. Unfortunately, the stance the Ulmas took was an exception rather than the rule. The visitor comes out of the exhibition convinced that the average Pole rescued Jews, as the Ulmas did, which is simply not true.²²

The Hiding Places Today

It is only in the context of this complicated and often tragic history that we can understand that hiding places and their surviving vestiges bear witness to something more than a will to “live through” for those in hiding, to more than the sacrifice of those enabling the hiding, or either brotherhood and heroism, about which there is no question. Equally entangled in these spaces are the “politically incorrect” memories of the “prying eyes” and the fear of being informed on or betrayed. At the same time, the hiding places themselves deteriorate and are being gradually forgotten; this process of spatial erasure of the hiding places is well illustrated by the developments in a Warsaw flat at 4 Kopernika Street, where the Jolson family hid during the war. Arranged behind a wardrobe, the hiding place there was open to the public for years. In 2013, however, the current tenants destroyed it, despite the fact that it had been inscribed in the register of historic monuments since 1999. The tenants received suspended prison sentences, which did not change the fact that the hiding place itself was destroyed.

It may sound like a tautology, but these hiding places somehow remain hidden from the gaze of cultural heritage researchers and conservation officers alike to this day. Their architectural forms—typically overlays on the structures of other functional spaces—do not make it easy for cultural heritage conservators to accord them protected status. The development of an appropriate form of commemoration is, by the way, a practical challenge I choose to face.

Currently, I also struggle with a deficit in relevant research and well-documented sources on the hiding places. Most of the hiding places I studied I learned about from other people, often through

informal conversations or other research. In every hiding place I study I perceive a framing narrative structure. The spatial architectural dimension constitutes the outer shell, concealing successive layers of the narrative, which in turn conceal, but also reveal, the deeper layers yielding personal stories and intimate experiences, with their highly distinct saturation, often of a traumatic nature. I imagine these narratives as Chinese nestled boxes: one box encloses another one inside and protects it. Material traces, such as a tree hollow in Wiśniowa or a den in a cemetery, are condensations of memory that can be distilled from them.

The wartime hiding places were designed (under pressure of time, weather conditions and, above all, the extreme risks involved) to mask and keep up appearances. Everything, be it the architecture, the structural solution or the appearance of a room, an attic or an underpass, served a single purpose: that of disappearing. As Karen Bermann writes when analyzing the hiding place of Anne Frank: “This camouflage created a theater of appearance, a highly visible display that also offered invisibility.”²³ I am fascinated by this membrane stretched between visibility and concealment; the secret hideaways were after all visible, but only superficially, as “ordinary” floors, cellars or trees; they could not afford to look “suspicious.”

The tension between the visible and the concealed proceeds here from a peculiar interrelationship of the architectural form and function. A hiding place was normally an overlay on an existing space, which, as a rule, could not change in form, while at the same time drastically changing its functions: a wardrobe ceased to be a place reserved “solely” for hanging articles of clothing in, and became an entryway to a living space, where the fugitives sought to live, and at times even create. People spent months, if not years, in some of these hiding places, for as long as they fulfilled their function.

Bermann points out that, despite the looming danger, Anne Frank at *Het Achterhuis* [The House Behind], was writing a diary, learning French and studying history. The scholar writes that the architectural stability or the static nature of the place—which must have appeared unchanged—actually hid the dynamism of functions and the daily movement of bodies within it. To reflect this paradox, she compares Frank’s hiding place to an ark (either Noah’s or that of the Covenant), calling it a “mobile homeland,” and thus draws our attention to the compounding of vital functions, but also to the accelerated movement of imagination occurring there.²⁴

One extremely interesting illustration of the paradoxical state of motion-in-motionlessness is cited by Justyna Koszarska-Szulc in her analysis of Arthur Sandauer’s translation of a poem entitled *Good!* by Vladimir Mayakovsky; the translator reproduced the work from memory while in hiding.²⁵ After the liquidation of the Sambor ghetto in 1943, Artur Sandauer went into hiding for fourteen months, in a barn loft (masked with an extra curtain wall) on a farm owned by a Ukrainian family,

the Małankiewicz family. This is how Sandauer describes the experience: “What does one do with such enormous amount of time? For how long can one stare up at the roof shingles? As luck would have it, I happened to have memorized Mayakovsky well. I mentioned earlier that it was only sometime later that Małankiewicz got me some writing paper. For the time being I translated from memory and committed all to memory. (...) I did all this while wiggling on straw, continually bitten by fleas: ‘one flea bite to one rhyme’ one would like to say. Unfortunately, this took more time: the ratio was rather millions of fleas bites per rhyme.”²⁶

Case Studies

“In a word, it was a palace”²⁷

Though not a trace remains of the hiding place in Siemianowice Śląskie, its story makes for an extraordinary intercalated narrative, not only so structurally, but also on account of the extraordinary lives of the rescuers and the rescued involved. The place is an example of a long-term hiding place, which had become inextricably linked with the life of Klinger, the heroine of my research and the subject of an architectural performance I gave in the women’s gallery of the Cukerman’s Gate House of Prayer in Będzin.²⁸

Chajka was one of the leaders of the local Hashomer Hatzair group, part of the Jewish Socialist-Zionist youth movement and a co-founder of the Jewish Combat Organization in Będzin. After the deportation of the Będzin Jews, the young activist hid in a series of hideouts and bunkers (first in the village of Dąbrówka and then with the Kobylec family in Michałkowice), keeping a meticulous record throughout of the occupation, war, arrests (she was herself tortured by the Gestapo) and the responses of the underground armed resistance. Full of spirited left-wing resistance, her diaries were collected and published by her son Avihu Ronen. In 1943, she managed to cross the border to Slovakia (smuggling intelligence on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising) and journeyed on to Budapest, Istanbul, Syria and Israel (then Palestine), where she finally settled in Kibbutz Haogen in 1944, and where she took her own life in 1958.²⁹ It was her incredible biography that triggered my interest in the Kobylec’s hiding place.

Among those who survived the Będzin ghetto liquidation of August 1943 was a handful of young Combat Organization activists. They found shelter in the nearby forests, bunkers and with individuals on the “Aryan side.” The Kobylec family home in the Silesian town of Michałkowice (part of today’s Siemianowice Śląskie) became a key safe house for many young members of the Jewish Fighting Organization [Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa, or ŻOB], including Fela Kac, Schmuel Ron, Kasia Szancer and Chajka Klinger.³⁰

The activists established contact with the Kobylec family through Mieczysław Kobylec (a son of Piotr and Karolina Kobylec), who had developed covert relations with Jews in Czeladź and Będzin earlier. Initially, the Kobylecs hid fugitives in the attic of the house, which was a typical semi-detached terrace house (a building specific to the Polish interwar workers' housing estates) on a street leading to the nearby "Michał" colliery. Its location at the periphery of the settlement, at the end of the street, lent it its distinctive seclusion. However, its attic under a pitched roof was not the safest hiding place. We learn from the account of Józef Goldkorn, one of the Jewish survivors hiding there, that Piotr Kobylec decided to build a more secure secret shelter, a bunker dug directly under the kitchen floor: "Since they are already here, we cannot drive them out; but they cannot stay in the attic any longer, that is risky."³¹

We find a description of the hiding place building process in the account of Samuel Ron, who hid with the Kobylecs from 1943 onward: "Assisted by his sons, Piotr dug a kind of a grotto under the house, this without the neighbors noticing anything. From a technical point of view, it was a masterpiece: with wooden bunks attached to one wall, a well camouflaged entrance, and electricity we could use. In a word, it was a palace. But then, there was hardly any oxygen, the place was very humid, and we laid around crammed together shirtless, with nothing to do."³² During my research trip to Siemianowice Śląskie in December 2019, I visited the house where the hiding place had been and talked to Jadwiga Kobylec, Wiktor Kobylec's widow. She pointed out that Piotr Kobylec had employed his miner's skills in designing the bunker. Under the kitchen floor, in a space he first excavated and removed the soil from under the cover of night, he inserted wooden structural supports, which were pillars used for holding up ceilings in the mines. This way he made the hiding place ceiling (or the Kobylec family kitchen floor) stable.

Józef Goldkorn's account also tells us that the living conditions there were good, as far as hiding places go. The amenities included electric light and a proprietary signaling system: "Opening the front door of the house released a signal to the bunker, automatically switching on a warning light there. If it was a member of the household coming in, another signal would be activated from the kitchen, otherwise those in hiding knew they had to remain completely still. The bunker was designed for 10-15 people, but there were times when it housed as many as 30."³³

Today not a trace remains of the hiding place in the house. The family decided to get rid of it in the course of a major renovation project many years ago. Though the back of the house underwent complete refurbishment, the room under which the activists hid did not change much. A petite chest of drawers still stands on the spot where the trapdoor to the hiding place used to be, with a ladder directly below it; just as it did at the time Jews were hiding underneath. The Kobylec family were honored for assisting Jews with the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations in

1964.³⁴

Interior of the house of Jadwiga Kobylec. Location of the former entry to a hideout, which was hidden under a bedside cabinet.

Photo: Natalia Romik.

Though I could not find descriptions of the Siemianowice Śląskie hiding place in Klinger's diaries, I extracted them from available eyewitness testimonies and conversations I had with members of the Kobylec family. On this basis, I worked with stage designer Krystian Banik to create a replica of the hiding place, which will be exhibited in the summer of 2020 in Siemianowice Śląskie and Będzin, as part of the "Babiniec" festival.³⁵ It is a wood and polyurethane structure on a structural steel chassis, complete with wheels. Juxtaposed in the replica is a typical pre-war miner's semi-detached house (with a pitched roof, a hallway and two rooms) and a translucent hiding place below it, appearing as the mirror image of the kitchen space, its underground "reflection." The model will also feature two different colored lamps, representing the warning signal system installed in the hiding place, just as Goldkorn described it. Foldable bunk beds will hang from the hideout walls. Finally, the mobile replica design provides for a pull-out exposition drawer in its lower segment; this will display quotes from Klinger's diaries.



A model of the hideout in Siemianowice Śląskie. Designers: Natalia Romik, Krystian Banik, 2020.

I plan to walk along the streets of Siemianowice Śląskie accompanied by the women I conducted my workshops with at the “Babiniec” festival: pushing the mobile model along, and telling the passers-by about the architecture of one hiding place and the life of Klinger.

Mobility in this case—as in my previous projects (Nomadic Shtetl Archive, Yad, Hurdy Gurdy)—is a kind of a barometer measuring the tensions between the fronts of buildings and their little known heroic past. This performance will serve to: “release” the knowledge that has to date been locked in the archives; and to test a new form of commemoration, created with respect for the privacy of the family currently living in the house.

*In a grave you cannot speak with your hands. But there you could...*³⁶

There is an inconspicuous hole in the ground at the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery at 41 Okopowa Street, which was once a shelter for a group of Jews during the last world war. Even today the hiding place would be completely invisible, were it not for a crude wooden fence surrounding it. During the war, smuggling routes to the “Aryan side” supplying the ghetto with food ran through the cemetery.³⁷ It was also a place where Jews hid. The bunker in question was discovered only a few years ago. It has survived to the present because of its brickwork structure, not at all usual for Jewish graves. Krzysztof Bielawski of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews has written about it, while Jan Jagielski of the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny [Jewish Historical Institute] (ŻIH) and Remigiusz Sosnowski of the Jewish Religious Community in Warsaw have brought tourist groups to it. Israeli tour groups also visited the bunker, guided there by Abraham Carmi, who hid there during the war and currently lives in Israel. Born in 1928 in Leżajsk, Carmi remained in hiding with his mother and uncle between 1939 and 1942, and stayed in numerous hiding places around Warsaw, also in that Okopowa Street bunker.³⁸ As Bielawski points out, this particular cemetery hiding place was probably built by Ajzyk Posner, who used brick material from the then unfinished Mausoleum of Jewish Soldiers nearby for the purpose.³⁹

I interviewed Abraham Carmi in February 2020. It was then that I got to know his life story of being constantly on the move between the various hiding places. He remained in the Okopowa Street bunker between July and September of 1942.⁴⁰ One of the first places he hid was a wardrobe in a flat at 42 Muranowska Street, then just a teenage boy. During the interview, he stressed several times that being a child enabled him to adapt more easily to the available space and to the exigency of continually searching for hiding places. The flexibility and adaptability of children living through the ravages of war are also the qualities that Witold Mędykowski brings out in his *Modes of Survival, Techniques of Hiding, and Relations with the Local Population*.⁴¹

Carmi perceived the cemetery bunker as an interim hiding place: “I need to hide for a few days.

I need to hide for a few hours. I need to hide for a few minutes. I cannot grasp this today.”⁴² It is notable that the bunker was masked by partially broken matzevot placed on its ceiling, which not only protected the hiding place but also allowed light and air to enter in through the gaps between the stones. As Carmi remembers it: “And they put two metal rails on it, and on these rails they put some tubes, and we threw these headstones on top, which included Mrs. Rosenberg’s.”⁴³ When asked about overcrowding in the bunker (at times several people stayed there), he replied adding some comical gesturing that “it was more comfortable than in a grave. In the grave you cannot speak with your hands. But there you could speak with your hands.”⁴⁴



The bunker in Warsaw’s Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery where Abraham Carmi hid between July and September 1942. Photo: Natalia Romik.

Holocaust testimonies that include descriptions of cemetery hiding places are very few. Worth citing here is an account by Lila Szynowłoga, hiding in the vicinity of Chęciny, who describes the overcrowding and the punishing cold. As she writes: “A Polish acquaintance advised us to go to the cemetery, to the poor old man there, to ask if he would receive us. My mommy left me there and paid for me. (...) We sat there in hiding until Christmas—in the dark or by candlelight. The old man served us food when the cemetery was empty. (...) The old beggar cooked for us... We would have died of hunger were it not for that old man. (...) And that is how he kept us alive and hid us for six months, until the liberation.”⁴⁵ As in Carmi’s report, here also there is a motif of masking of the hideout with tombstone covers: “My cousin and the old man knew a [usable] hiding place. They covered it with some tombstones. We bought a sheaf of straw and padded the hiding place with straw, to keep ourselves warm.”⁴⁶

When asked about the form of a commemoration for the hiding place, Abraham Carmi replied that it should be modest, so as to safeguard the hiding place, but not to obscure its interior.⁴⁷ This is perfectly understandable: the crudeness of the structure should not be smothered with overbearing aesthetics, nor should the situation be overly romanticized, as it bears witness to the will to survive of the people who built it and who hid in it. One of the plans that would conclude my research on this bunker is to create its architectural commemoration. The project, currently under development within the SENNA collective, includes the securing of the existing bunker tissue and designing

a minimalist fence. The key element of the concept design is to cover over the hiding place with a 12-centimetre thick sheet of thermochromic glass;⁴⁸ the shading of the glass panel would change with changes in external temperature and light: from dark green to clear.

European Tree of the Year

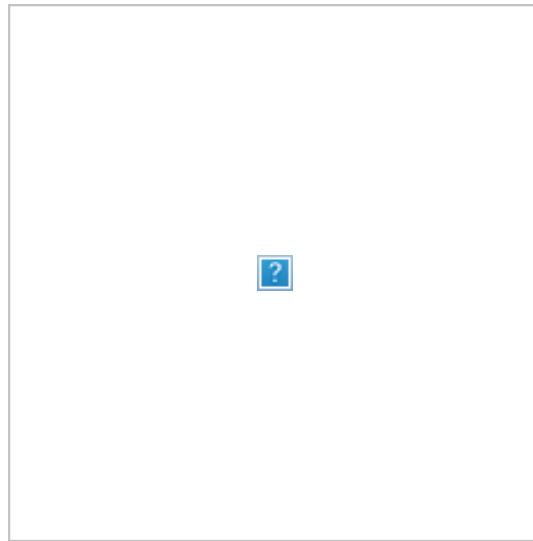
Wiśniowa is a picturesque village in Strzyżów County in Polish Subcarpathia. The place is known for its landmark manor and farm appurtenances, with beginnings dating back to the 16th century. The estate has passed through many hands over centuries; from 1868 to 1944 it was a holding of the Mycielski family, renowned for their patronage of the arts. The Mycielski Manor House was referred to as the “Wiśniowa Barbizon.”⁴⁹ Painter Józef Mehoffer was one of those who came to Wiśniowa for *en plein air* painting. His landscape, depicting a dignified oak tree growing on the estate, won a competition organized in the 1930s by the National Bank of Poland for the graphic design of a 100 złoty note, which came into circulation in 1934.⁵⁰ Currently, the complex houses the County Culture and Tourism Centre, which continues the tradition of organizing outdoor painting events, which still attract artists.



The reverse of a 100 zloty banknote from 1934, designed by Józef Mehoffer. Source: https://pl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:100_zlotych_1934_r._REWERS.jpg.

The idealized artistic life of the pre-war estate stands in stark contrast to the drama the Jewish communities of the Rzeszów region experienced in the nearby shtetls and then in the Frysztak ghetto.⁵¹ As Bielawski suggests, it is likely that two brothers named Hymi escaped from that ghetto or from one of the nearby places of forced labor, and found shelter on the estate. They found their hiding place in the very oak depicted by Mehoffer in the aforementioned painting. According to Jakub Pawłowski of the Ulma Family Museum in Markowa, “It was Rozalia Proszak who suggested this place of refuge to the brothers (...) The hollow in which they hid was enormous. It supposedly had two stories: the lower one serving as the hiding place and the upper one as an observation post.”⁵² Today, *Józef* (a 30m European oak with a trunk circumference of 675cm) is about 650 years old.⁵³ In 2017 it won the prestigious European Tree of the Year contest. The jury took into account not only the aesthetic qualities of the tree, but also the fact that it decorated

a pre-war 100 złoty Polish banknote, and the history of the Hymi brothers hiding in it.



The "Józef" oak tree. Photo: Natalia Romik.

Both brothers survived the occupation, but their later fate remains unknown.⁵⁴ To date, despite the story being reproduced on many history portals and by the Ulma Family Museum in Markowa, I have not been able to locate sources that would corroborate the history of the brothers in hiding. The archives of the Yad Vashem Institute in Israel and ŻIH in Warsaw hold no information about their existence. For this reason, I have been seeking other ways, alternative to archival queries, of searching for traces of the hiding place. In the summer of 2020, I plan a dendrological examination of the inside of the tree in question: I am going to introduce a probe with an illuminated camera into one of the hollows. If the Jews hiding there created (with some external help, I assume) some observation and/or lodging structures inside the tree, their traces may still be found, such as cuts on the inside of the old trunk, perhaps a rod or a bench. However, it is very likely that these were overgrown over the years; after all, a tree is a living organism that continues to change and regenerates seasonally. This is why it cannot be entered anymore. One archival post-war photograph (year and author unknown),⁵⁵ used at times as an illustration of the history of this hiding place, shows the oak with a large cavity, sizable enough for a human being. Nowadays, it is impossible to stick even one's head into it.

Conclusions

The oak *Józef* serves as a fair illustration of the challenges faced by a researcher of hidden architecture. Human memory heals as quickly as a broken tree. Former hiding places get filled up; cultivation of their memory is a rare occurrence. Can one expect that the present residents and users of houses like the one in Siemianowice Śląskie will retain a bunker under the kitchen floor, a bunker which has thankfully already served its purpose? Moreover, commemorations of such

spaces should not take the form of heroic monuments or romanticize the day-to-day existence of the people who hid in them. Their problems, apart from the prying eyes of the neighbors, included flea bites, cold and overcrowding. Still, their experience and their daily struggles should not be forgotten.

I perceive hiding places as fulfilling the role of a spatial catalyst, a material testimony to mechanisms of Jewish self-help and Polish assistance to hiding Jews. They affirm the extraordinary inventiveness and structural engineering skills of the people who built them, who adapted architecture in unprecedented conditions of shortages of basic materials and resources. I see them as meticulously woven cells of emotion, filled with memorial testimonies. These hiding places are shabby spaces, aesthetically unattractive—after all, a small cell behind a wardrobe will not delight anyone with its “beauty”—but at the same time they hold an “immeasurable” charge of energy, testifying to a daily heroism and will to live.

For this reason, I plan to devote the upcoming phase of my project to work with artistic casts of these spaces and experimentation with methods of distilling memory from architectural detail. I plan to apply non-standard scanning methods to existing hiding places, with the use of geodetic tools designed for exploration of the bottom of lakes and seas. I will then use the digital data obtained to construct sculptural models of the hiding places. I am interested in uneven and crumbling walls, in the fissures and recesses in them, and in the places through which rays of modern probes can pass.

Translated by Marek Jeżowski

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6. See: The “Postwar Years Gallery” in the core exhibition of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, curated by Dr Helena Datner, Prof. Stanisław Krajewski and Prof. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett; Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Endless Night. The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland], vol. 1 (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów–The Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2018), 29. ↵
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which have dealt (in a critical way) with the subject of hiding and hiding places, include the following: Cobel-Tokarska, *Desert Island, Burrow, Grave. Wartime Hiding Places of Jews in Occupied Poland*; Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011) [*Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)]; Anna Bikont, *Sendlerowa. W ukryciu* [Sendler. In Hiding] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2017); Barbara Engelking, Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*; Leociak, *Ratowanie*; Gunnar S. Paulsson, *Secret City: The Hidden Jews of Warsaw 1940–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pogrom Cries—Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019); Tomasz Żukowski, *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów* [The Great Makeover: How We Forgot That Poles Killed Jews] (Warsaw: Wielka Litera, 2018); Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day...: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016); and Elżbieta Rączy, *Pomoc Polaków dla ludności żydowskiej na Rzeszowszczyźnie 1939-1945* [Polish Aid to the Jewish People in the Rzeszow Region 1939-1945] (Rzeszow: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2008). Important articles dealing with the topic of hiding places include, amongst others, Michał Grynberg, *Strategie przetrwania. Bunkry i schrony w warszawskim getcie* [Survival Strategies. Bunkers and Shelters in the Warsaw Ghetto] “Biuletyn ŻIH,” no. 149 (1989): 53-64; Natalia Aleksion, “Daily Survival. Social History of Jews in Family Bunkers in Eastern Galicia,” in *Lessons and Legacies XII: New Directions in Holocaust Research and Education*, eds. Wendy Lower, Lauren Faulkner Rossi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 304-331; and Gunnar S. Paulsson, “The Demography of Jews in Hiding in Warsaw, 1943–1945,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 13 (2000): 78-103. Articles on hiding places can be also found in the *Yad Vashem Studies* and *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* scholarly journals. Relevant material on hiding places and stories of survivors can also be found on such websites as: www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl and www.teatrnn.pl/sprawiedliwi-lubelszczyzna/. ↵

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Natalia Romik

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Natalia Romik is a graduate in political science, practitioner of architecture, designer, artist, member of the Association of Polish Architects. In 2018 she was awarded a PhD at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, for a thesis entitled "Post-Jewish Architecture of Memory within

Former Eastern European Shtetls.” Currently Dr Romik holds a scholarship from the Gerda Henkel Stiftung program. In her practice, she combines academic research with methods of contemporary art and architecture, realizing numerous projects such as: “Predator” and “What Makes You Horny and Itchy in Architecture?” performances for the “PARADE. Critical Practice” festival in London; “Nomadic Shtetl Archive,” “Open Anti-fascist Studio” and “Dream Catcher—Mobile Sauna,” carried out in the course of two editions of the Roskilde Festival in Denmark. Dr Romik has been awarded numerous grants, including that of the London Arts and Humanities Partnership for her doctoral studies, and the Scholarship of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of Poland for the *Jewish Architecture of (Non)Memory in Silesia* project. Between 2007 and 2014, she cooperated with the Nizio Design studio as, amongst other things: Consultant for the core exhibition design of the “19th Century Gallery” in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews; and co-author of the restoration of the 18th century synagogue in Chmielnik. In 2018, she designed and co-curated (together with Justyna Koszarska-Szulc), *Estranged: March '68 and Its Aftermath* exhibition (POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw 2018). Dr Romik is a member of the SENNA architecture collective, which designed, among other things, the core exhibition of the 19th century neo-Gothic Jewish Pre-Burial House in Gliwice, titled “House of Memory of Upper Silesian Jews.”

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