

הזיכרון

Memory of the Shoah

Cultural Representations and Commemorative Practices

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Trees as Living Monuments at the Museum-Memorial Site at Bełżec¹

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I remembered someone in a Cambridge common room pestering the self-designated "non-Jewish Jew" and Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher, himself a native of this country, about his roots. "Trees have roots", he shot back, scornfully, "Jews have legs". And I thought, as yet another metaphor collapsed into ironic literalism, well, some Jews have both branches and stems too.²

Simon Schama landscape and memory

The History of the Trees in Bełżec

According to Simon Schama, the author of the book, *Landscape and Memory*, "Landscapes are culture before they are nature; con-

¹ This title refers to George Tremmel's and Shiko Fukuhara artistic project *Biopresence*, which makes possible the creation of transgenic trees, able to store genetic information and, consequently, become living monuments. See: <http://www.biopresence.com/>.

² S. Schama, *Landscape and memory*, HarperCollinsPublishers, London 1995, p. 29.

structs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock.³ In his view, the landscape is perceived as a medium of memory and a substitute for human history. In one of the chapters of the book, Schama describes Holocaust as an event without a landscape:

For Poland's Jews en route to the charnel house, the view of the countryside had been blotted out by the shutters and nailed-down slats of transport wagons clattering relentlessly toward the death camps. In our mind's eye we are accustomed to think of the Holocaust as having no landscape — or, at best, one emptied of features and color shrouded in night and fog, blanketed by perpetual winter, collapsed into shades of dun and gray; the gray of smoke, of ash, of pulverized bones, of quicklime. It is shocking, then, to realize that Treblinka, too, belongs to a brilliantly vivid countryside: the riverland of the Bug and the Vistula; rolling, gentle land, lined by avenues of poplar and aspen.⁴

In the quotation above, the British historian reveals how nature that is lush and full of life becomes the Holocaust landscape when it receives a particular shading. As such, it becomes a representation of the event, which, according to witnesses, cannot be represented. In Schama's argumentation, the grim landscape of the Holocaust is simultaneously a fragment of an entirely different landscape. I would like to examine the elements of that landscape by using the sources describing Belzec during and after the existence of the concentration camp.

The concentration camp in Belzec was set up on the forested Kozielek Hill, and it covered an area of more than 7 hectares. The construction started in 1941. In less than a year, between March and December of 1942, more than 300 000 Jews died there. The testimony of Rudolf Reder makes it clear that locating the concentration camp in a forest was intentional, in order to hide the crime:

After a time I knew all the terrain well. It lay in the middle of a young pine forest. The forest cover was heavy, and to reduce the penetration of light further, one tree was lashed to another in order to double the density of the greenery around the place where the chambers were. Beyond them was the sandy road where the corpses were dragged. The Germans stretched a roof made of smooth wire overhead, and foliage was laid on the wire.⁵

In the quotation above we can see a juxtaposition of two landscapes. Gas chambers emerge from the pine forest; the dark shadows of trees contrast sharply with the forest green. The surrounding trees, used by the SS to conceal the camp, became unintentional participants of the events. One of the reasons for the liquidation of the camp in 1943, could have been the lack of space for more mass graves.⁶ That is to say, the Kozielek Hill ended with a sharp drop-off that made any further development impossible. In this way, nature itself seemed to express its protest against the crime.

³ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵ R. Reder, *Belzec*, transl. by W. Brand, M. Jacobs, Judaica Foundation, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Cracow 1999, p. 122.

⁶ R. Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Belżcu*, Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku, Lublin-Belzec 2005, p. 48–49.

In 1943 the concentration camp in Belzec was shut down. All the buildings were removed, and a pine forest was planted on the camp grounds, in order to cover the traces of the crime. The first known description of that landscape can be found in Reder's testimony, who in July 1944 decided to visit Belzec once again. This is what we read in his account:

I had a desire to see the place where two and a half million people had been smothered — people who had wanted to live, to live (...). When the production of a "synthetic fertilizer" from millions of human bones was finished, the torn-up graves were filled in and the surface of the blood-soaked ground was properly and painstakingly leveled. The criminal German monster spread lush vegetation over the Jewish grave of a million at Belzec. I exchanged goodbyes with my informants and went along the familiar path of the "rail spur". It was no longer there. The field led me to a living, fragrant pine forest. Now it was very quiet there. In the middle of the forest there was a huge bright meadow.⁷

A lush pine forest invariably constitutes the main element of that landscape. If we compare, however, Reder's description with that of Eugeniusz Szrojt's, the post-concentration camp landscape will acquire yet another characteristic. Szrojt, who was involved in the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland visited Belzec in 1945. This is what he saw:

Sandy dunes covered with a pine forest stretch to the left of the train tracks. This tedious landscape consists of dwarf pine trees and powdery yellow sand dotted with clumps of green grass.

This description does not differ from Reder's, were it not followed by the following remarks:

During the inspection, it was confirmed that the area, near the railway siding, bears traces of tree-cutting. In this spot there were scattered various objects of everyday use, such as tin pots, water flasks, glass, fragments of clothes, remnants of footwear, pieces of bricks and bits of concrete (...). In the north-eastern section of this area, the Investigatory and Judiciary Committee found various human bones, skulls, tibiae, vertebrae, ribs, jaws, rubber dental prosthetics, a star of David, tattered Jewish prayer books.⁸

The local population had been "treasure hunting" on the camp grounds, drastically changing the condition of the site. Similar incidents were taking place in the forties and fifties, and were not unique to Belzec. If the "traces of tree-cutting" came into existence due to the digging up of the ground containing the remnants of the victims, this gesture of digging could be interpreted as an unintended reversal of the "executioner's gesture". Paradoxically, then, the executioner's gesture of planting a forest at the crime scene with

⁷ R. Reder, *Belzec*, p. 142–143.

⁸ E. Szrojt, *Obóz zagłady w Belżcu*, "Biuletyn Głównego Komisji Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce" 1947, vol. 3, p. 31–33.

the victims' hands may constitute a "gesture of remembrance". The digging on the concentration camp grounds after the war and the destruction of trees could be interpreted as an attempt to erase the traces of the crime.

The landscape of the concentration camp, consisting of gas chambers and dead bodies, is turned into a post-concentration camp landscape with scattered body parts and human hyenas searching for gold. In the fifties, a wood storage facility was also situated in the camp area. The only element present in every description is the pine forest. It also appears in a much later description by Piotr Lisiewicz in 1983:

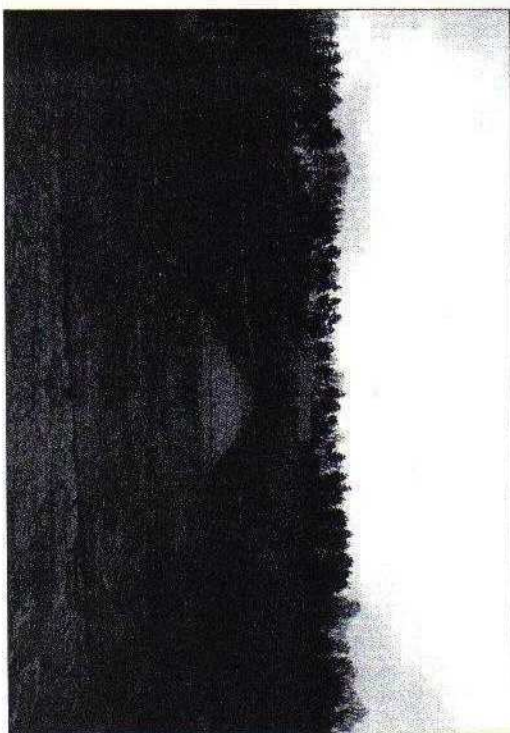
I pass by the train station and after half a kilometer I turn into a side road. In vain am I looking for a young pine forest from forty years ago. It has grown large and dense, teeming with life and overgrown with long, luscious grass. The plaque with the inscription "Waffen SS-Dienststelle Belzec" has long been lost and had it not been for the memory symbolized by the inscription on a stone obelisk in the forest clearing, it would be hard to guess that I am standing in a place where the Nazis had perpetrated one of the most hideous crimes in Europe⁹.

The stone obelisk in the forest is a fragment of the first attempt to commemorate the site, and was erected in the sixties. The camp area was then fenced in, and a monument, in the form of a rectangular prism, was constructed. On the front of the prism was a sculpture of a human skeleton. The scattered bones, part of the post-concentration camp landscape, were turned into a metaphorical representation. Apart from the monument, four pylons were erected and a row of memorial candles marked the likely sites of mass graves on the camp grounds. The borders of the designated area, however, did not encompass the entirety of the former concentration camp.

The Role of Trees in the New Monument.

In 2002 started the works on a new form of commemoration on the grounds of the former concentration camp in Belzec. It had been preceded by an archaeological study, whose aim was to recreate the camp's topography, so that the site of burial of 500 000 murdered Jews would be respected in accordance with the Jewish laws. Consequently, thirty three mass graves were found, scattered over most of the terrain. In the Belzec study, a minimally invasive method of probe drilling was used. In the case of a similar study at Sobibór, an analysis of the "the structure of the surface green areas" was also completed, and it confirmed human involvement¹⁰. The intention of the creators of the new monument: Andrzej Sołtyga, Zdzisław Pidlka and Marcin Roszczyk, was to transform the whole concentration camp grounds into one large commemorative site. As a consequence, it was necessary to cut down all the trees. Before that, however, a dendrological survey was conducted in order to determine which trees had been there before the Holocaust. In this way, a few older oak trees were saved and included in the narrative created by the new monument. Younger trees, which had been planted in order to hide

the crime, were cut down following the decision of the Voivodeship's Historical Monuments Conservator¹¹. Jacek Nowakowski, who supervised the work on the monument as a representative of the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, suggested that some of the trees (370 in total) were to be sent to the hometowns of the murdered Jews¹². This project, however, was not realized.



Belzec, Photo 1

The present monument depicts the journey of the Jews from the moment of arrival in the concentration camp until their deaths in the gas chambers. The main part is an immense, grey slag heap, inaccessible to the visitors, which was called by the monument's creators "the Cemetery-Burial Ground" and which covers the area that contains human remains. A symbolic "Crossing Point" leads to the "Interstice-Way", which traverses the "Cemetery-Burial Ground" [photo 1]. The "Crossing Point" is situated at the place of the historical railway ramp and is an iron relief, rusty in colour, of engraved train tracks that criss-cross in the shape of the Star of David. "Interstice-Way" descends gradually towards the bottom of the slag heap to the depth of nine meters and leads to "Niche-Obel". Following the "Interstice-Way", one has the impression that there is no exit. In the silence, one can clearly hear the echo of one's footsteps and the cold, concrete walls give a chilling impression. In "Niche-Obel" plaques with hundreds of Jewish names are placed. Directly opposite, a fragment of the Book of Job is engraved on a high, granite wall: "Earth, do not cover my blood: let there be no resting place for my outcry". Only after entering the "Niche" we discover that there are stairs on both sides leading to a cast-iron border walk that surrounds the "Cemetery-Burial Ground". Along the walk there are names of towns in a chronological order from which the murdered Jews had come, written in Polish and Yiddish. The trees that have been saved are located on the "Ceme-

⁹ P. Lisiewicz, *W Belżcu zrozumieliem*, "Życie Literackie" 1983, vol. 30, p. 12.

¹⁰ A. Kola, *Sprawozdanie z archeologicznych badań na terenie b. obozu Zagłady Żydów w Sobiborze*, "Przeszłość i Pamięć" 2000, vol. 3, p. 89.

¹¹ R. Grauman, *Realizacja nowego upamiętnienia na terenie b. obozu zagłady w Belżcu*, *Słan* na 30 VI 2003 r., "Przeszłość i Pamięć" 2003, vol. 12, p. 79-81.

¹² B. Węglarczyk, *W Belżcu stanie niezwykły pomnik ofiar Holocaustu*, <http://serwis.gazeta.pl/swiat/1,34254,634176.html> 9 stycznia 2001 (07.11.2009).

tery-Burial Ground¹³, growing out of the slag-covered ground [photo 2]. The monument's creators wrote: "on this ground hallowed by the blood of the victims only the oak trees remain — the trees which were witnesses to the crime"¹³. The stark and grim sculpture on the monument corresponds to the living nature of the surrounding region of Roztocze Lubelskie, and its fence draws a symbolic boundary between nature and culture.



Belzec, Photo 2

The Tree as a Witness

In his book *Remnants of Auschwitz* Giorgio Agamben distinguishes a witness as *testis* (a third person) from a witness as *superstes* (a participant in the events).¹⁴ A survivor is the latter witness par excellence, according to the Italian philosopher, and as such he can never be impartial. None of the survivors can truly testify to what happened in Auschwitz. In consequence, in the structure of a testimony, we encounter a lacuna. Only a Muselmann could be a "complete witness", a prisoner who had been driven to the limits of his humanity, deprived of memory and language, whose very sight becomes insufferable. The above-mentioned distinction acquires a new meaning, if we consider the opposition of human/inhuman hidden underneath. The Muselmann, who is a "complete witness", stands at the threshold dividing human and inhuman: "The Muselmann is the non-human who obstinately appears as human; he is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman."¹⁵ Paradoxically, when the author of *Homo sacer* employs the term "inhuman", he does not consider beings other than "human". In his theory, a different category of what is "human" is hidden beneath the category "inhuman", one that is closer to the biological one. Yet the human and inhuman, however different they may be, are intertwined. The terms put forward by Agamben, namely: "complete witness", *testis*,

superstes, do not represent trees as witnesses in the places of Holocaust and compel me to search for a different approach. As long as we retain the anthropomorphized figure of the tree as a witness, the cutting down of certain trees to make room for others shall be justified. If we consider the organic structure of trees however, it shall be made clear that both the trees planted by Nazis and the ones, which had originally been there, hold the remnants of victims. Thus, paraphrasing James E. Young, it could be said that the first monuments of the Holocaust were created neither in stone, glass, steel nor in narrative,¹⁶ but in nature as "living monuments".

The relation between humans and trees that grow in the places where the Holocaust took place could exemplify the change in the generations of memory, as described by Frank Ankersmit.¹⁷ With the passing away of the last witnesses, the ideal of authenticity that dominated the Holocaust representations after the war gives way to new forms of remembering. One instance would be a way of conserving trees on the grounds of the Auschwitz concentration camp. When in 1957 Oskar Hansen suggested to build a road for visitors that would traverse the concentration camp grounds and to relinquish the camp relics to nature, his project sparked protests from the camp survivors and ultimately was not realized.¹⁸ Up to the nineties the sickly trees were replaced by healthy ones. Only in 1994 the decision was made to allow the dead trees to remain. Barbara Zajac, whose job is to conserve the trees in Auschwitz-Birkenau, wrote: "in 1998 three trees died, they were not removed, however, only cut down to a safe height, so that the dead trunks and the remaining fragments of branches could still testify about the past."¹⁹ Aleida Assman commented on the contradiction inherent to the efforts to safeguard the camp relics by their reconstruction and conservation: "They are converted into places of remembrance and museums-sites of memory", the German scholar observes, "and as such succumb to a crucial paradox: Conserving these places in order to safeguard their authenticity means inevitably the loss of authenticity."²⁰ In Belzec, however, a reverse process took place. The trees were removed, as they were not authentic, meaning that they did not exist during the operations of the concentration camp. Even the commandments of Judaism were not enough to prevent the removal of trees. Aleksander Wąsowicz, a consultant of the Rabbinic Committee for Cemeteries who supervised the Belzec project, admits: "Old trees belong to the dead as the tree roots touch their bones and as a consequence the trees deserve respect as well!"²¹

transl. by Aleksandra Wnuk

¹³ Belzec — *Miejsce Pamięci*, Architektura Murator 2004 nr 9, p. 43.
¹⁴ G. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. by D. Heller-Roazen, Zone Books, New York, p. 17.
¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 81-82.

¹⁶ "In keeping with the bookish, iconoclastic side of Jewish tradition, the first 'memorials' to the Holocaust period came not in stone, glass, or steel — but in narrative", J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993, p. 7.
¹⁷ F. Ankersmit, *Remembering the Holocaust: Mourning and Melancholia*, in his, *Historical Representation*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2001, p. 176-194.
¹⁸ P. Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od "Melancholia" do "Pamięci"*, Gracow 2007, p. 125-138.
¹⁹ B. Zajac, *Szary czy zielony? Problemy związane z utrzymaniem zieleni na terenach muzealnych*, in: *Chronić dla przyszłości. Międzynarodowa Konferencja Konserwatorska. Oświęcim, 24-25 czerwca 2003 roku*, ed. K. Marszałek, Auschwitz-Birkenau 2003, p. 60.
²⁰ A. Assmann, *Erinnerungsorte und Gedächtnislandschaften*, in: *Erlebnis-Gedächtnis-Sinn. Authentische und konstruierte Erinnerung*, ed. H. Loewy, B. Möhlmann, Frankfurt am Main 1996, p. 22.
²¹ *Życia nie starczy. Z Aleksandrem Wąsowiczem rozmawia Piotr Paziński*, "Młot" 2007, vol. 4, p. 7.