

Reference Points



It is forbidden to move the
dead and their bones from
their resting places.¹

¹ *Jerusalem Talmud* Moed Katan 2:4

There is a tradition that soul and body remain connected even after death, so if bones are disturbed here on Earth, the peace of the soul in Heaven is also violated.²

² Guidelines of the Rabbinic Commission for Cemeteries at the Office of the Chief Rabbi of Poland

The experience of the 20th century caused many areas of Central and Eastern Europe to turn into *contaminated landscapes*. Austrian essayist and columnist Martin Pollack describes in that way sites of violence and mass murder that have been carefully obliterated. Such sites include the unmarked graves of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, hundreds of which are located in Polish villages and towns, left without any commemoration. Individual, collective and mass graves remain invisible among arable fields, in forests, along roads and in public spaces. Fundacja Zapomniane deals with finding, researching and commemorating these places.



Due to the requirements of Halakha (Jewish religious law), research in such places can only be carried out using non-invasive methods, because Judaism forbids disturbing the bones of the dead. In addition to interviews with witnesses and their descendants and archival inquiries, researchers use a forensic approach, using methods drawn from many disciplines. To avoid interference with the soil structure, they use the synchronization of aerial photos, lidar (Light Detection and Ranging) and geophysical tools (including GPR). The demarcation of the boundaries of the tomb enables its protection and marks the first necessary step towards its commemoration, which has often taken many years. Reference points are an attempt to find a way to mark these places before they can be commemorated.





As part of the cooperation with The Matzevah Foundation, in September 2017 Fundacja Zapomniane marked thirty such previously examined places using symbolic wooden markers in the form of matzevot. The markers referred to the tradition of wooden tombstones that could be found before the war in Jewish cemeteries in eastern Poland. The action was meant to be a small intervention in the landscape of these places, reminding of what remains invisible but often present in the memory of local communities. At the same time, it was an attempt to include them in the local infrastructure - along with its full-fledged monuments. The impermanence of this gesture was intentional. Being only a temporary commemoration, wooden matzevot are intended to open up the possibility for local communities to take care of these places, to get accustomed to them, and perhaps to start their own related practices or to commemorate them permanently.

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In the autumn of 2017,
30 burial sites located
in 23 towns were marked.



To create the matzevot, we used larch and pine wood, typical for the southern and eastern regions of Poland. Using a laser, we engraved inscriptions in Polish and the *tantzeva*—an abbreviation consisting of five Hebrew letters TNCBN, which means “let his (her) soul be bound into the knot of life”.

In the inscriptions, we used a typeface created as a part of the Warsaw Types project, which was inspired by pre-war signboards and Warsaw plaques commemorating World War II.



Returning to these 30 places in the following year, we noticed that almost all the matzevot remained intact. Only one of them was—in agreement with Fundacja Zapomniane—moved to protect it from damage. Some—such as in Karmanowice and Rogalów—became the starting point of permanent commemorations, which, in consultation with the local authorities, were set up in June 2018. Another—such as the one in Brzesko—had a plaque bearing the name of the victims added by local activists, thus becoming their tombstone. Flowers and candles were found under one of them. Another was carefully avoided by someone mowing the grass nearby. We believe this is proof that these modest interventions have the power to transform the local culture of memory.



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By the end of 2021, the Zapomniane Foundation has marked 75 burial sites with wooden matzevot. Only three of them were removed or displaced without the Foundation's supervision or consultation. The remaining majority has grown into the local landscape and became the subject of local community remembrance practices and in some cases—initiating permanent commemorations. Since 2021 the Foundation has started co-creating wooden matzevot with local youth from villages and towns where uncommemorated burial sites are located.

