

# **Jewish Cemetery at Gwarna Street (former Claassenstrasse) in Wrocław: Excavation Report from 2017 and Opportunities for Rescue and Commemoration**

Aleksander Limisiewicz, Jerzy Kichler, Agnieszka  
Jabłońska

PL ISSN 0860-0007; e-ISSN: 2719-7069

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23858/FAH36/2023.006>

<https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/277106>

## **Jak cytować**

Limisiewicz, A., Kichler, J., & Jabłońska, A. (2023). Jewish Cemetery at Gwarna Street (former Claassenstrasse) in Wrocław: Excavation Report from 2017 and Opportunities for Rescue and Commemoration. *Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae*, 36, 119–134.  
<https://doi.org/10.23858/FAH36.2023.006>

ALEKSANDER LIMISIEWICZ\*, JERZY KICHLER\*\*, AGNIESZKA JABŁOŃSKA\*\*\*

## JEWISH CEMETERY AT GWARNA STREET (FORMER CLAASSENSTRASSE) IN WROCLAW: EXCAVATION REPORT FROM 2017 AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESCUE AND COMMEMORATION

### Abstract

Excavations in the area of the former Jewish cemetery in Wrocław at Gwarna Street (formerly Claassenstrasse) have been undertaken many times, most recently in 2017. Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cemetery has been subject to urban encroachment which gradually reduced its historic area, forcing two exhumations, followed by devastation in the 1940s under the Nazi regime. The cemetery was formally liquidated in post-war Poland, in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, the remaining tombstones were removed and part of the area was built over. In order to develop the areas covered by the earlier exhumations, exploration works were carried out to identify the exact area. In 2017, burials from the cemetery were discovered during construction works. Excavations carried out in 2017 revealed seven individual burials, a mass grave with 115 burials in wooden cases, and 5 mass graves from WWII. Within the cases, fragments of pottery from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were found. The authors discuss the history of the cemetery, details of the 2017 excavation report with analysis, and current efforts to protect and commemorate the area.

**Received:** 02.09.2022 **Revised:** 07.10.2022 **Accepted:** 24.01.2023


**Citation:** Limisiewicz A., Kichler J., Jabłońska A. 2023. *Jewish Cemetery at Gwarna Street (former Claassenstrasse) in Wrocław: Excavation Report from 2017 and Opportunities for Rescue and Commemoration*. "Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae" 36, 119-134, DOI 10.23858/FAH36.2023.006

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW


#### CEMETERIES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN WROCLAW (BRESLAU)

The Jewish community of Wrocław (Breslau) was most likely established at the turn of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, due to the chaos caused by the First Crusade, the Jews who inhabited the territories of Czechia began to escape to what today is Poland and Hungary. It is mentioned

by Kosmas, who emphasises the levies collected from the refugees.<sup>1</sup> Researchers assume that the community already had a designated burial ground during this period. The first two cemeteries may have been located in the immediate vicinity of the Prince's seat – one on Ostrów Tumski, and the other somewhere in the area of today's Walońska Street.<sup>2</sup> Hypothetically, there was also a third one, located in front of the Brama Oławska II.<sup>3</sup> It is believed that it closed to the east the 'belt' of the cemeteries surrounding the town.<sup>4</sup> Their presence, however, preceded the town's foundation in 1241 and dates back to the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century

\* „Akme”, Zdzisław Wiśniewski, sp. z o.o., Wrocław;  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5136-905X>; [aleksanderlimisiewicz@gmail.com](mailto:aleksanderlimisiewicz@gmail.com)

\*\* Jewish Community of Wrocław;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7277-4097>; [jmkichler@gmail.com](mailto:jmkichler@gmail.com)

\*\*\* Corresponding author; The Urban Memory Foundation, Wrocław;  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7685-4334>; [info@urbanmemoryfoundation.org](mailto:info@urbanmemoryfoundation.org)

<sup>1</sup> Kosmasa *Kronika Czechów*, III, V, 319-320.

<sup>2</sup> Goliński 1997, 216.

<sup>3</sup> Markgraf 1896, 96-97.

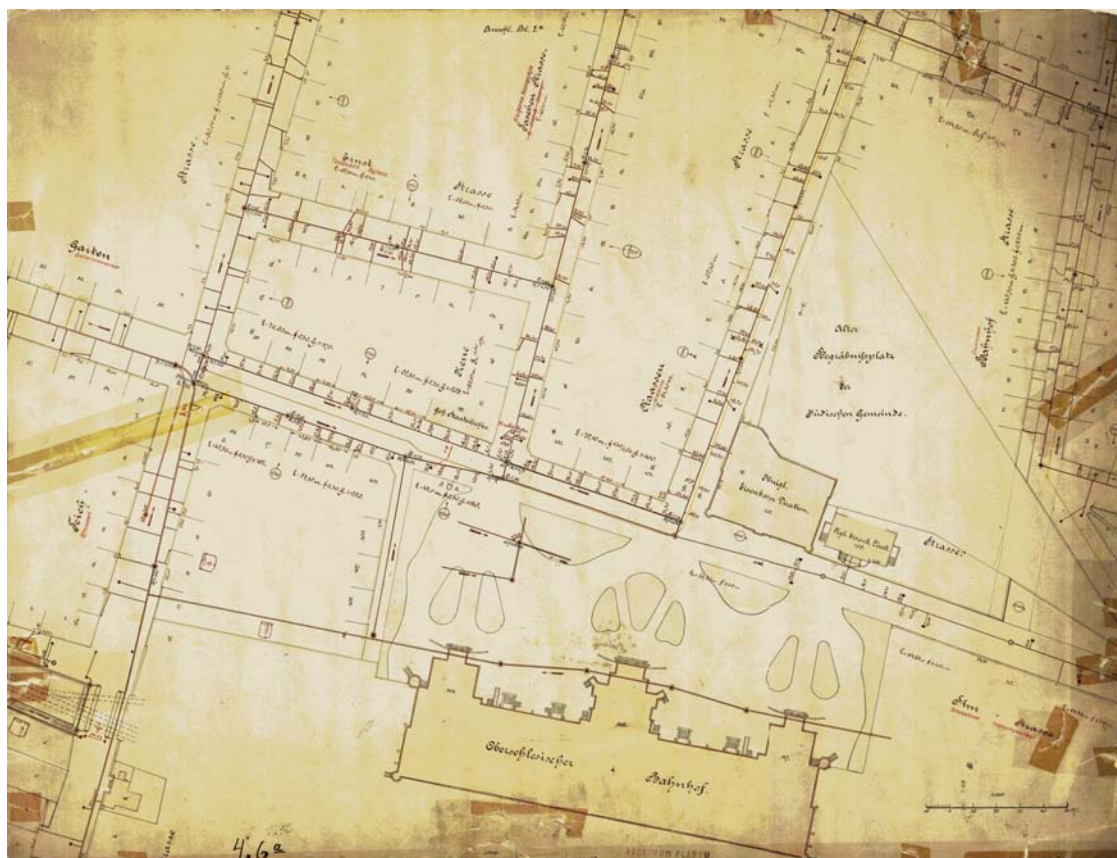
<sup>4</sup> Buško 2005, 191-192.

### KEYWORDS

- Wrocław
- Breslau
- Jewish cemetery
- mass grave
- pottery
- archaeological excavations



**Fig. 1.** Map dated 1880–1900; view of the main railway station area with the Jewish cemetery. Source: <https://wroclaw.polska-org.pl>.



at the latest.<sup>5</sup> In 1315 or 1316, the Jewish cemetery on Oławska Street was subject to territorial correction which resulted from the erection of the second line of city walls.<sup>6</sup>

The end of the town's medieval Jewish community came with false accusations of Jews desecrating the host in 1453. In 1479, the area of the former cemetery became the property of a burgher, Peter Girdan, and the bodies of Jews who died in Wrocław had to be transported to active Jewish cemeteries in nearby cities, including Brzeg Dolny (approx. 40 km) and Krotoszyn (over 80 km).

#### **ESTABLISHING A NEW CEMETERY**

In 1740, Prussian authorities allowed for the reactivation of a Jewish community in Breslau, but it was not until 1761 that it acquired a proper burial ground among gardens and fields, approx. 2 km south-east of the Jewish district, which was located on the same bank of the Odra River and had an easy access to Gartenstrasse (today's Marszałka Józefa Piłsudskiego Street). On March 13, 1761, the territory, also known as Lange's garden, was purchased for 2000 thalers.<sup>7</sup>

The first funeral of a suddenly deceased wealthy merchant, Menachem Fränkel, was held on

April 18, 1761. A farewell was given to him by his wife, Sara Süsel, who came from the famous Bacharach family. Her ancestors had settled in Bohemia in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and her great-great-grandfather was Judah Loew ben Bezale I, the Maharal of Prague, a Jewish rabbinical scholar, Talmudist, mystic, Kabbalist, astrologer, and mathematician, traditionally presented as the creator of the Golem.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a house for *Chevra Kadisha* and a hospital for infectious diseases and for the mentally ill were built next to the cemetery. The cemetery covered an area of 11,791 ha and the site consisted of over 4,000 graves.

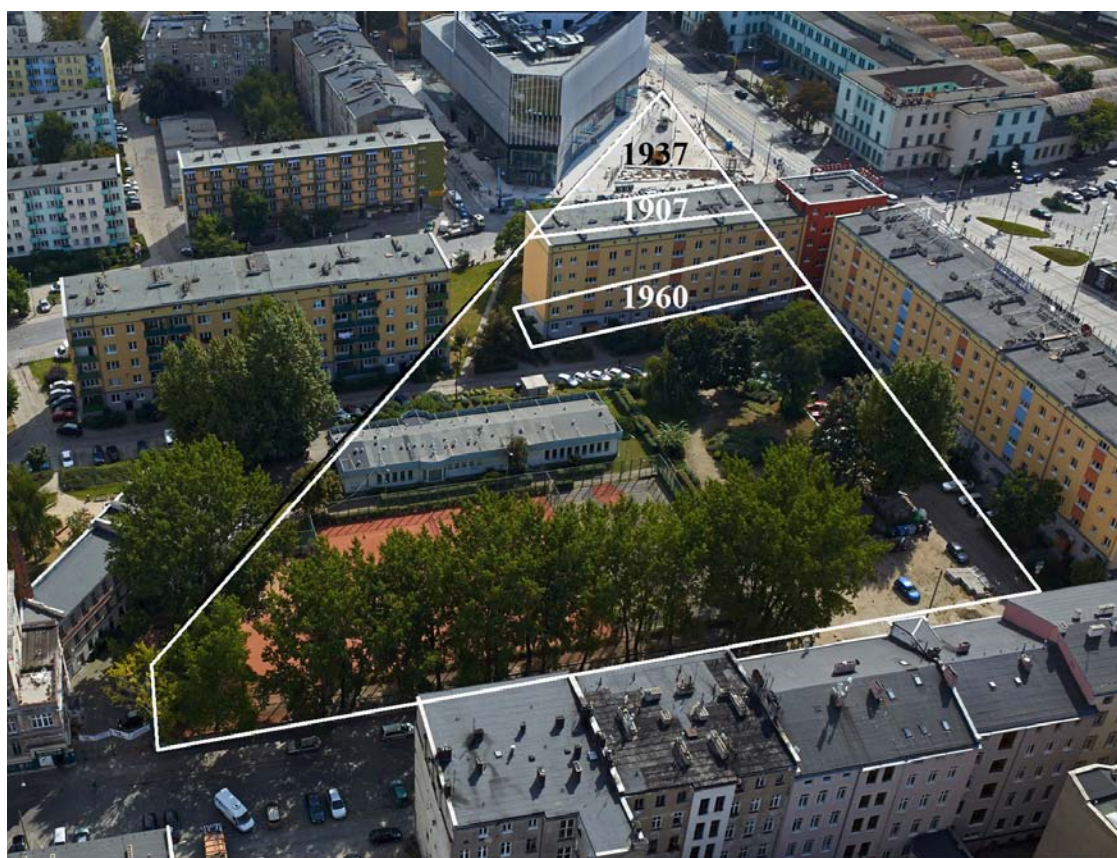
In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the city council decided to develop the area to the west of the cemetery. In the years 1850–1851, a new street – Claassenstrasse – was built along its border. It was named after a local benefactor, Heinrich Theodor Claassen (1774–1845). This made the further development of the cemetery in this direction impossible (Fig. 1). On November 6, 1853, *Chevra Kadisha* informed the community authorities that the burial grounds would soon be full. Therefore, in the years 1854–1856, a new plot in the village of Gabitz (today's Gajowice) at Lohestrasse (today's Ślężna) was purchased. The first burial in the new cemetery took place on November 18, 1856. From that day on, the deceased were buried in the old cemetery only if they had a previously purchased plot.

<sup>5</sup> Buško 2005, 192.

<sup>6</sup> Limisiewicz and Mruzeczek 2010, 100-105.

<sup>7</sup> Grotte 1927.





**Fig. 2.** Aerial photos of the Jewish cemetery at Gwarna Street in Wrocław before the construction of the hotel began. Source: <https://fotopolska.eu>.

In 1901, the city council decided to create an access road from the north to the railway station which had opened in 1857 in the vicinity of the cemetery. It required a new artery to be cut through the burial area. In 1908, the Jewish community sold the town a strip of 809 square meters and the necessary width of a new street – Bahnhofstrasse (today's Dworcowa Street) – for 48,540 marks. The city covered the costs of the exhumation of the remains of 345 people (previous studies indicate a number of 900, which, however, seems to be a serious overestimation) and their transfer to the old cemetery. The city also funded paving the paths and constructing new brick walls that surrounded the area. Four spans of these walls, separating the necropolis from Claassenstrasse, have survived to this day.

During the construction of the new street, the oldest part of the necropolis, located on Fontaneplatz (today's Plac Konstytucji 3 Maja), was fenced off in the east, in the shape of a 800 m<sup>2</sup> triangle. In 1937, the Nazi authorities decided to turn this part of the cemetery into a fire protection water reservoir. The authorities of the Jewish community were forced to liquidate that part of the burial grounds. After the exhumation, the remains were moved to the old cemetery.<sup>8</sup> The Jewish cemetery at

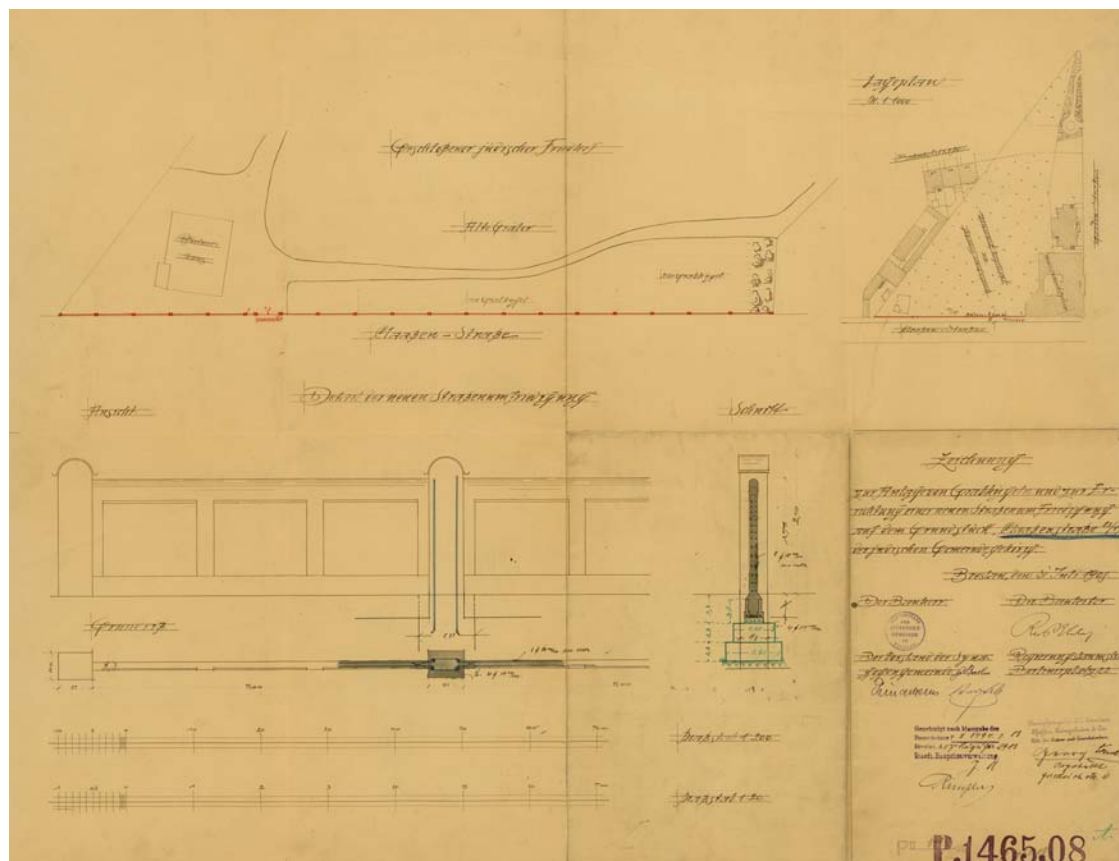
Claassenstrasse, like the Jewish inhabitants of Breslau, became a victim of the Nazi ideology.

In 1944, the construction of an air raid shelter in the eastern part of the Jewish cemetery began, but there is no data on the completion of work on such a building. Further destruction of the cemetery took place after World War II. The policy of the Polish People's Republic authorities resulted in the total destruction of about 40 percent of the cemetery area by building in its surviving eastern part a row of apartment blocks (along Dworcowa Street), together with internal roads and parking lots. It is not known what happened to the bones from the destroyed graves – we may assume that some of them, together with the soil from the excavations, were transferred to the remaining part of the cemetery. A month after the events of March 1968 (i.e., the anti-Semitic propaganda campaign led by the authorities of the Polish People's Republic), a tennis court was established in the part of the cemetery that had survived until then. It was fenced with a high metal fence, and a gymnasium was erected in the western part of the area (Fig. 2).

In the south-eastern part of the cemetery at Gwarna Street, after the demolition of 8 garages that stood in the south-eastern part of the former cemetery and the conduction of archaeological research, which claimed that there were no traces of burials, an investor planned to erect a hotel on

<sup>8</sup> Wodziński 1996, 53-54; Ziátkowski 2000, 40-41.

**Fig. 3.** Design of the cemetery wall at Claassenstrasse (Gwarna Street) and the site of the exhumed burials in the eastern part of the cemetery. Source: Archival drawing from 1908, collection of the Wrocław Construction Archive – Museum of Architecture, folder no. 643, ref. 105043.



the empty plot. In 2017, construction works began. On February 21, 2017, the Lower Silesian Provincial Conservator of Monuments issued a decision to suspend construction works in connection with the information that human bones had been found in the area, and allowed another research to be conducted, under the name of ‘exploration’, in the area where the hotel was to be built. The exploration was completed in May 2017 and the construction of the hotel continued until its completion in 2020.

#### ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE FORMER CEMETERY AREA IN 2017

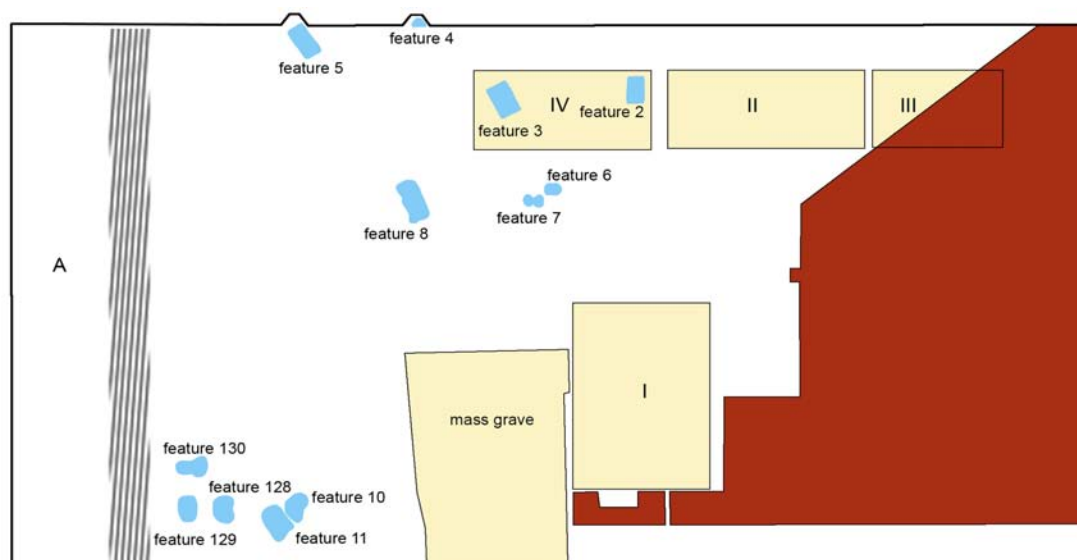
The exploration was carried out in a small area of the former Jewish cemetery, located in its southwest corner, along today’s Gwarna Street (formerly Claassenstrasse), covering an area of nearly 650 m<sup>2</sup>. This area – formerly agricultural – was bought from a burgher, Brieger, and incorporated into the pre-existing Jewish cemetery in 1807. In 1912, another correction of the cemetery boundaries was carried out, when the new route of Claassenstrasse was marked out in exchange for a fragment handed over to the city for the construction of Bahnhofstrasse. The area was enlarged on the west side, and a concrete wall, partially preserved to this day, was built along its border (Fig. 3). Because the actual shape of all of the cemetery borders remained a controversial issue, however, the Lower Silesian

Provincial Conservator of Monuments consented for work allowing for their determination. During the archaeological works carried out in 2013, no traces of burials were found, and an appropriate administrative permit was issued allowing for the development of a new building in this area.

The discovery of human remains during construction works that began in 2017 prompted the resumption of excavation works in this area. The process leading to their resumption was described by Jerzy Kichler.<sup>9</sup> The Investor – Gwarna Wrocław sp. z o.o. – applied to the Lower Silesian Monuments Conservator in Wrocław and obtained a permit to conduct exploratory works. The works were managed by A. Limisiewicz under the supervision of the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries in Poland. On behalf of the Commission, the works were supervised by Jerzy Kichler, as well as by the Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich and Rabbi David Basok, who regularly visited the area.

The exploration works were carried out between March and May 2017. At the moment of their commencement, the area in question was fenced off with a Larssen sheet wall hammered around it. A small excavation site (4.2×6 m), with the longer border parallel to the east-west axis, was established in this place and named Survey I. Additional

<sup>9</sup> Kichler 2017, 30-42.



**Fig. 4.** The excavation plan at Gwarna Street. A – excavation for the bunker; I–IV – trenches; blue – features. Photo: A. Limisiewicz.

surveys (II, III, and IV) were established along the eastern edge of the excavations conducted on the construction site. Their aim was to determine the extent and intensity of the presence of historic material (Fig. 4).

After the reconnaissance works, the decision was made to carry out comprehensive excavation works covering almost the entire construction site, only excluding the area occupied by the underground part of the former Upper Silesian Railway Directorate building, located in the southern part of the site, and the dismantled concrete slab located in its northern part.

After the excavations reached the level of sand on the Oder River terrace, partially destroyed remains of a settlement were uncovered, including:

- I. Structures related to the former horticultural role of the plot, dating back to the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, including an irrigation canal and the ground floor of a garden bower;
- II. Remains of secondary burials during the liquidation of the eastern part of the cemetery in 1937 and their transfer to the area added to the cemetery in 1912. Among them, three groups of burials were distinguished:
  - A. seven individual burials, partially destroyed, located in the western part of the site and marked with numbers 2–8;
  - B. a ‘mass grave’ (nos. 9 and 12–127), including a mass exhumation from the eastern part of the cemetery in 1937;<sup>10</sup>

C. the ‘wartime burials’ (nos. 10–11 and 128–130), dating back to the construction of the concrete slab in 1943.

During the examination of soil layers of the studied area, numerous human burials were discovered. For some, the remains of the deceased had been placed in small, wooden cases. There were also several cases of burials in which the remains had been randomly thrown into dug pits. The burials in wooden cases formed two separate series.

The first series consisted of burials arranged with the longer edges parallel to either the south-west-northeast axis (nos. 3, 5, and 8) or the east-west axis (nos. 2, 4, 6, and 7). Each contained the remains of an individual person. In their immediate vicinity, usually above the wooden cases, numerous badges of various NSDAP formations were found. This group of burials was named the ‘special graves’.

The second series was located approximately halfway along the western edge of the site. It consisted of a structure built from over a hundred stacked wooden cases, arranged with their longer edges along the east-west axis, in eight rows perpendicular to the axis and maximum eight rows parallel to it. All wooden cases are placed in shared quarters measuring 6.5×4.2 m. The burials were characterised by an orderly organisation of the burial space, aimed at limiting its size and distinguishing individual remains. In our opinion, the intention here was to retain the possibility of reversing the process and allowing for an individual re-burial. For these reasons, we called this series the ‘mass grave’.

The last group of burials was located in the northwestern part of the site. It consisted of five irregular pits, roughly rectangular in shape, not exceeding 1 m in length and about 0.5 m in width.

<sup>10</sup> A. Jabłońska, on the basis of an analysis of the Jewish press published in Breslau in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Jüdisches Volksblatt*), puts forward a different conclusion that the mass grave in this part of the cemetery might come from the exhumation carried out on the occasion of the first reduction of the cemetery in 1908, Jabłońska 2019, 44–45.



There were no signs of any attempts to align the long edges of the pits, and the remains found in them suggested a chaotic, disorderly burial. Presumably, the remains came from the graves destroyed during the excavation of the foundations for the planned anti-aircraft bunker.<sup>11</sup> We called this group the ‘wartime burials’.

#### **INDIVIDUAL BURIALS**

This group of burials included seven graves with different degrees of preservation (nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8). They were located in the eastern part of the excavation. Two of them (features nos. 4 and 5) were located in the immediate vicinity of the wall, two others (2, 3) at a distance of more than 2 m and the remaining three (6, 7, 8) at a distance of over 6 m from the wall. Features nos. 3, 5, and 8 were oriented along the northeast-southwest axis, which was most likely parallel to the former border of the cemetery, before the street (Claassenstrasse) was built in its vicinity. We believe that this orientation of the re-burials likely followed the lines marked by other graves that remained in this section of the cemetery. The remaining features were oriented along the east-west axis. All of them were characterised by the composition of single individuals in them. Among them (no. 8) was a 1.8 m long and 0.6 m wide wooden case containing an almost complete skeleton of a young woman about 30–35 years old. The skeleton inside must have been moved: the right tibia lay crosswise and overlapped with the left fibula and tibia, the hip bones were broken with the right plate moved upwards, and the vertebrae were stretched out to the sides. The skull was missing, and only the jaw has been preserved. The observed arrangement of the bones indicates that they were shifted after the decomposition of the soft tissues. Most likely, during the exhumation, the entire coffin was moved along with the bones. We believe it might have been opened during the secondary burial – suggested not only by the lack of the skull, but – above all – by the accumulation of NSDAP badges that were found just above the skeleton.

In the grave marked as no. 5, adult leg bones were exposed in a wooden case around 1.15 m long. Neither the pelvis nor the upper parts of the skeleton have been preserved. They were most likely placed in the top part of the wooden case, which had been destroyed during previous earthworks, presumably during the construction of garages.

Other individual burial sites were smaller. In two cases (nos. 2 and 3) the excavations uncovered

completely decomposed wooden boxes of 0.8×0.5 m (feature 2) and 1×0.6 m (feature 3). In grave no. 2, only the shin bones were found, and in grave no. 3 only the skull vault remained. In the first case we were able to confirm that the bones were of legs, amputated during a surgery performed in a nearby Jewish hospital. In the second, however, we are convinced that the wooden case was partly destroyed and only a part of the skeleton remained.

The graves nos. 4, 6, and 7 were in a similar state, and their small size indicated that they were only partially preserved. Grave no. 4 was located on the eastern side of the 2013 excavations border. Only a small fragment that included the eastern border of the artifact with visible traces of the burial remained. The width of the site discovered was 0.65 m and its preserved length was 0.45 m; within it, the outline of a 0.4 m wide wooden case was visible. The grave was filled with gray sand, with only the preserved adult foot bones discovered. The remains of the skeleton might have been destroyed either during the works carried out in 2013, or during the piling of Larssen sheet walls in 2017.

The two remaining individual graves, nos. 6 and 7, were located 6 meters to the west of the eastern edge of the excavation site. They were 0.4–0.5 m wide, and their preserved length was 0.3 m. Most likely, the small wooden cases were placed on uneven ground, which caused one of their ends to move upwards. Therefore, during the exploration, only the deeper parts of wooden boxes were discovered, and the remaining parts were probably destroyed during previous works.

The dimensions of the wooden, fully or partially preserved wooden cases indicate that the remains were buried in coffins that were previously dug up and transferred to a new area (feature nos. 5 and 8 (?)). The coffins were 0.6 m wide and adjusted to the height of the deceased. The arrangement of the bones corresponded to the correct anatomical arrangement, except for the visible shifts which probably occurred during the transport and re-burial. What draws attention is the lack of a skull in tomb no. 8, which we suspect was donated to an anthropological collection, and the presence of numerous badges of the NSDAP party and other institutions of the Third Reich in the vicinity of both graves.

#### **MASS GRAVE**

The largest concentration of burials was found next to the western edge of the research area, approximately halfway along its length. It covered approximately 35 m<sup>2</sup> (5×7 m) and was located directly north of Survey I and south of the 1943 burial site.

<sup>11</sup> Kichler 2017, 33–35.

The so-called 'mass grave' was discovered after the completion of the exploration of the eastern part of the research area, including Surveys II, III, and IV, relics of horticultural settlement, as well as individual burials and a discovery of traces of the northern part of the building of the former Upper Silesian Railway Directorate. When it seemed that the works would be completed soon – only a quarter of the designated area remained to be examined – an almost dense plane of scattered bones was revealed, with a total size of approx. 5–6 m<sup>2</sup> (feature 9). For that reason, the field of observation was expanded, with the explored area widened along the clear boundaries of the above-mentioned feature 9 containing the scattered bones. During the exploration, it was found that there were overlapping layers of wooden cases below feature 9. We assumed that some of the burials could have been destroyed by an excavator tearing out the foundation of the cemetery wall. The scope of this work was particularly visible in the course of the walls of the Directorate building, where the strip of the destroyed foundations was 1 m wide from the Larsen sheet wall. However, this does not explain the presence of the extensive structure no. 9, the range of which was twice the width of the excavations mounting the Larsen sheet wall. Therefore, the damage must have occurred when the uppermost part of the surface containing numerous wooden cases was exposed. Both the pieces of wooden cases and the bones were scattered over the entire surface of the area. We are sure that this happened before the commencement of construction works in 2017.

Further exploration work turned into archaeological research. As before, it consisted of the preparation of full descriptive, graphic and photographic documentation of the discovered features, and the extraction of artifacts and bone remains which, after cleaning, were sorted and submitted for anthropological analysis. A research method was adopted that is typical for multi-layer sites with preserved relics of wooden structures, reminiscent of the research of early state settlements or early urban centres.

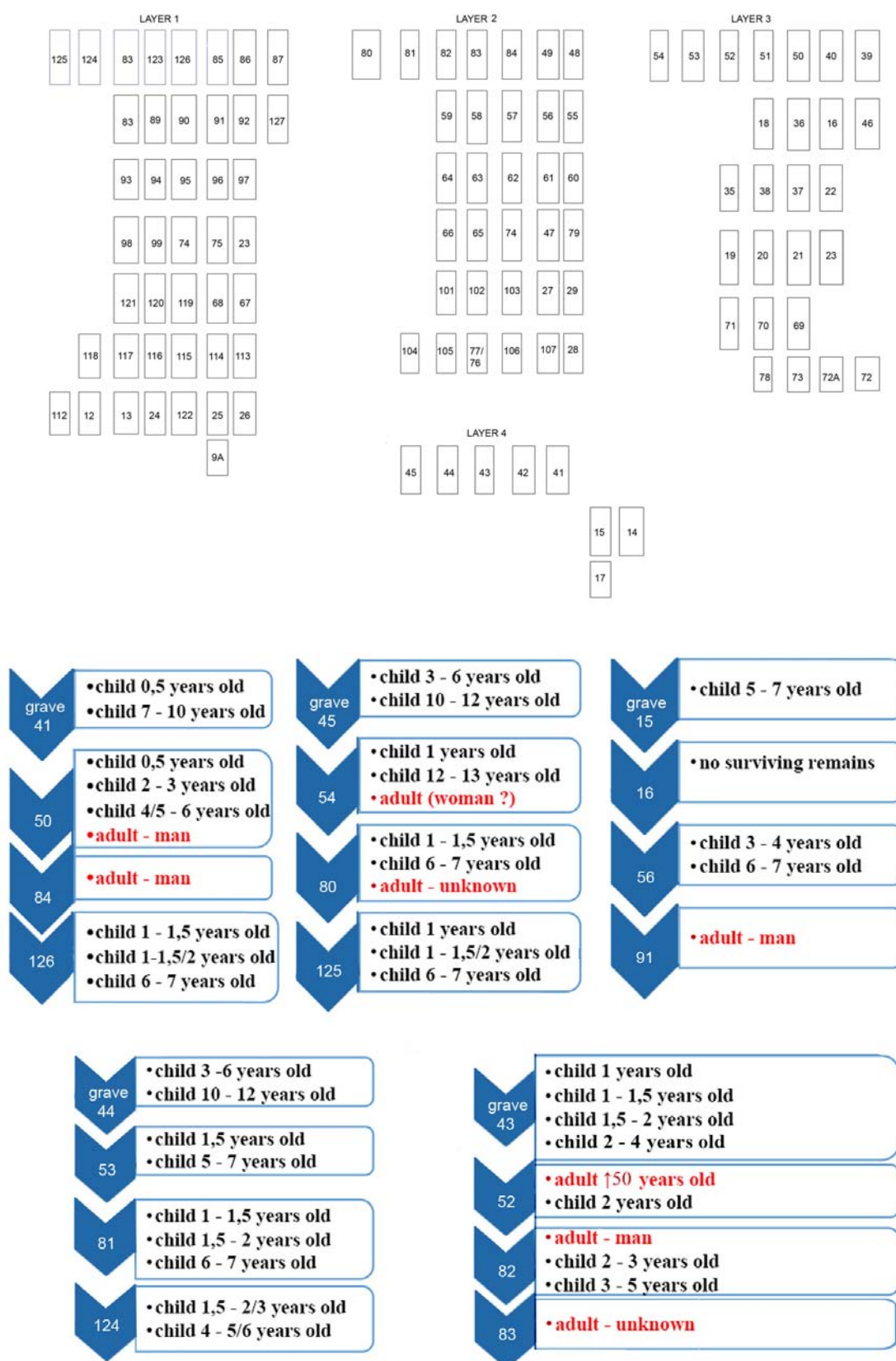
During the uncovering of the uppermost part of the burial, which we called the 'mass grave', the presence of outlines of rectangular features with the size of approx. 0.3×0.6 m was found. In some cases, human bones were found inside of them – in others, the outlines of the decomposed wooden boxes did not contain bones, and after a short exploration, these outlines disappeared. The reason for this was probably the fact that they were the lower parts of the side casings, squeezed into the sand with which the boxes were sprinkled. In no case was the

cover of such a box found, and in exceptional cases the remains of the bottoms of few boxes were noticed. The width of the strips of decayed wood, forming the outline of the wooden case, ranged from 0.007 to 0.02–0.03 m. In some cases, not fully decomposed wood fibres could be seen within the humus strips. The average depth of the cases was about 0.15 m, however it depended largely on the presence of the skull. We suspect that the height of each wooden box was similar to its width, which results mainly from the size of a human skull – in the case of an adult it is approx. 17–20 cm front to back. In the case of its absence or damage, such as broken or crushed bones, the depth was smaller. The remains of the deceased in the wooden case were placed in two or three layers. As a rule, the bones of the torso and hips were placed on the bottom, and the skull and long bones were placed at the top – probably in those cases where the soft tissue decomposition process was complete. The other set up of bones noticed suggests that the soft tissue decomposition was not complete at the time of re-burial. Therefore, the remains were set up in the cases in the form of preserved fragments. Since children's remains were common in the exploration area, we noticed greater care in trying to preserve the anatomical arrangement of their remains.

The similar shapes and sizes of the cases suggest that they were made by a carpentry workshop at the request of the Jewish Community. Deviations from the uniform shape and dimensions result from post-depositional processes. The boxes, except for bones and small artifacts, were empty. They were placed on top of each other, at least three layers deep, and then covered with sand. In this way, a structure that underwent far-reaching post-depositional processes was created. Sand, under the influence of water, gradually filled the spaces between the cases, especially at the lowest layer. This exposed the upper layers and allowed air to enter them freely, which accelerated the decomposition of the wood. The research shows that mainly the upper lids of the cases were destroyed. The lack of the top lids of the structure, which collapsed inwards at various angles, also caused the side walls to tilt outwards or inwards. That is why the preserved contours of the wooden case ceilings differed not only in shape, usually similar to a rectangle or trapezoid, but also in dimensions that depended on the degree and direction of the side walls tilt. The destruction of the lids closing the cases also allowed for sand and dirt to fill them, increasing their weight and pressure on the lower layers, which also broke under the weight and heavy irrigation. Traces of the presence of case bases were



**Fig. 5.** The mass grave at Gwarna Street, layers 1–4. A – Reconstruction of layout of wooden cases; B – Description of human remains found in some of the wooden cases. Graphic design: A. Limisiewicz.



found only among the containers on the lowest layer. The decay of the lids also made it possible for individual bones to move. However, since the displacement of human remains was preceded by an earlier gradual filling of cases with sand, discoveries of mixed-up remains are rare. The most obvious cases are, for example, single bones of an

adult found in a child's grave, or vice versa. It was much more difficult to separate the displacements between cases in the case of bones of individuals of the same sex or similar age.

Dynamic destructive processes caused some individual wooden cases to collapse. While some of them were strongly flattened, however, others

remained uncollapsed. We became aware of this issue quite quickly, so during the excavations we distinguished each single layer – each level, within which we documented the exposed wooden cases, assuming that they did not have to be the same as the original level of their assembly. After the extraction process was completed, their location was again marked on the plan, taking into account the order of the layers (Fig. 5). In this way, the arrangement of the wooden cases within the burial pit was determined. This made it possible to recreate the process of their arrangement and, above all, to determine the degree of their destruction in the post-depositional process.

We found that at the moment of the commencement of the exhumed remains' reburial, a 4–4.8 m wide and almost 7 m long pit had been dug. Its original outline was blurred during earlier earthworks (construction of garages, archaeological excavations from 2013) and as a result of covering the wooden cases with sand from the dug pit. This is where the four layers (levels of wooden cases) were found during the research.

Summing up the height of all levels of wooden cases, we determined the original height of the entire construction: approx. 1.2–1.4 m. This was also the minimum depth of the burial pit. The floor of the lowest level of the wooden cases was at an altitude of 116.6 m above sea level. As they have probably shifted slightly since they were placed there, the top-level ceiling would have been at least 117.8–118 m above sea level, which roughly corresponds to the height of stone curbs along Gwarna Street. Thus, the wooden boxes, at the moment of re-burial, reached the ground level of the cemetery. They were covered with sand and soil. We suppose that it created a burial mound that protruded above the ground level. Indirectly, such a picture is indicated by the note found on the plan from 1908, probably added between 1937 and 1943, i.e. after the exhumation of the eastern part of the cemetery and before attempting to erect a concrete bunker. At the site of the discovery of the mass grave, there is an inscription '250 Grabhügel', which means the number of graves transferred here, together forming a kind of burial mound (Fig. 3). At a distance of 15–20 meters north of the first entry, there is the second inscription: '165 Grabhügel'. We may assume that these are the graves moved here earlier, due to the construction of Bahnhofstrasse.

The lowest level, defined as Level I or layer 4, consisted of 47 features arranged quite closely next to each other (Fig. 6). The distances between them were small and did not exceed 30 cm – in some



**Fig. 6.** Exploration of the mass grave, Gwarna Street. Photo: J. Kichler.

cases, they were almost non-existent. The adjacent containers, with straight, parallel side edges, were 7–15 cm apart and this figure should be considered the norm. The distances between the shorter edges of the wooden cases, which underwent less deformation resulting from the weight of both the ground and the above-placed layers, were usually similar in size and amounted to 10–15 cm.

The wooden cases were arranged in seven or eight rows, a maximum of eight in each. Their longer border was parallel to the east-west axis, and the remains maintained a typical skeleton layout, with skulls placed either on the eastern or western side.

Level II (Fig. 7) included the remnants of 34 wooden cases below which the ones from Level I were discovered. They were arranged in six rows, generally repeating the layout from the Level I below, where the wooden cases were also arranged along the longer edge parallel to the east-west axis. The wooden cases rested on one another, i.e., those from Level II lay directly on those from Level I. The slight shifts observed may be the result of post-depositional processes and permissible documentation errors. Level III – the second layer from the top – consisted of 25 wooden cases arranged in six rows. In the top layer, Level IV (defined as layer 1), only eight wooden cases and two levels of scattered human bones were observed.



**Fig. 7.** Wrocław, Gwarna Street, exploration works.  
Photo: J. Kichler.



The wooden cases of the uppermost level were characterised by poorly legible outlines, which could have been a result of the previous earthworks. This was especially visible in the south-western part of the burial pit, where randomly scattered human bones covering an area of approximately 5 m<sup>2</sup> were found (feature 9).

During the excavation work, we got the impression that the gravediggers were trying to fill the burial pit evenly with wooden cases. We also assume that the gravediggers entered the pit from the northern side and had a system of placing them within individual rows to their full heights (all 4 levels) on both sides – in the east and in the west – row by row toward the middle. At the same time, no permanent markings of individual wooden cases in any form were found.

During the analysis of the individual wooden cases, we noticed that they were filled either with remains of an individual person, or with remains of more than one person – in the case of burials of children or adults with children. This allows us to assume that in some cases the parent and child (or children) were placed in one wooden case. We also noticed that the remains were sometimes inverted in the wooden cases – the skull was either placed on the western side, facing the east, or on the eastern side, facing the west. We believe that these were the determinants used to allow the future reconstruction of the original layout of the

tombs and, consequently, the identification of the deceased whose remains were transferred here.

#### **WARTIME BURIALS**

Another group of burials was uncovered in the north-western part of the site, 1–5 m from the southern edge of the concrete slab poured in 1944<sup>12</sup> and 1–4 m from the western edge of the site, identical with the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century concrete fence. The re-burial site was chosen because it was close to the foundation pit for the concrete slab on which the anti-aircraft bunker was to be built, and because it was covered with a concrete fence. In total, five features (nos. 10, 11, 128, 129, 130) were uncovered, with approximately rectangular outlines and the sizes of 0.4×0.7, 0.5×0.7, 0.5×0.9, 0.7×0.8, and 0.7×1 m. Two of them were oriented with the longer edge parallel to the east-west axis (nos. 128 and 129), and the others along the north-south axis (no. 130), southwest-northeast axis (no. 11) or south-east-north-west axis (no. 10). In none of the cases were the remains of wooden cases found, which suggests that they were not used for this group of burials. There were also no visible attempts to arrange the bones in an orderly manner – in fact, most of them, especially the long bones, were put in vertically. Mixed remains of multiple people – men, women, and children – were found

<sup>12</sup> Kichler 2017, 34.

in each pit. We believe that the remains excavated during the foundation works for the concrete slab were moved here, and that they had to be located east of the alley running from the funeral home towards the Railway Directorate building. As this happened after the last transport of Breslau Jews to Auschwitz in May 1943, no exhumations were carried out – the workers only tried to hide the remains from public view. That is why, probably, such a hidden place, in the corner between the cemetery fence and the fence surrounding the construction site, was chosen.

#### ITEMS FOUND IN THE GRAVES

During the exploration of the secondary burials, placed in the south-eastern part of the Jewish cemetery in Wrocław at ul. Gwarna, numerous artifacts related to individual features were obtained (Figs. 8 and 9). They should not be regarded as grave goods, since the Jewish funeral doctrine does not allow for them. It should also be taken into account that they came from single burials, placed in the ground during the functioning of the necropolis in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries (1761–1856). Therefore, the artifacts found in the area of secondary burials had to be excavated in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and deposited again in the wooden cases – apparently, the items were considered to be of special value, since they were both exhumed and reburied.

The vast majority of them are fragments of vessels from the period of the functioning of the cemetery. All of them were deliberately broken up and are most likely incomplete. Comparing the number of individuals whose remains were found within the secondary burial with the number of vessels from which the fragments were obtained, we notice that they were similar, which allows us to assume that their presence was somehow symbolically justified.

#### CERAMIC VESSELS

Almost without exception, the ceramics found came from burials located within the mass grave. The only exception was the fragmented grave no. 4, along the bend of the Larssen sheet wall – however, the bigger part of the grave did not belong to the area of excavations. It cannot be ruled out that the artifacts obtained from it may have been moved by the Larssen sheet wall.

None of the discovered pottery fragments allowed for the recreation of their previous forms nor did they show any signs of use (Fig. 9). There are no visible traces of soot or food burns. These are also not ceramics with decorative or exquisite features. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, industrially refined



**Fig. 8.** Wrocław, Gwarna Street, fragment of a Hebrew prayer book. Verse of the Kina for Tisha B'Av – liturgical poetry, lamentation, read for Jewish holiday commemorating the anniversary of the destruction of the First and Second Temple of Jerusalem. Several visible letters (here marked in bold) enabled identification of the verse: **פָּצוּ פִּיהֶם** מְבַאֵר שְׁחַת וְאִטְרוּ עָלַי בְּתוֹכָהֶן **פָּתַח וּפְתַח**

Translation of the verse: Their mouths gaped wider than the wellsprings of the netherworld. / They engulfed me with harsh reproof! / "Panic and pitfalls!" (The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot 2010). Verse identified by W. Tworek.

Photo: J. Kichler.

ceramics intended for the middle class became popular in Europe, but we do not observe these specimens in the discussed collection. The discovered fragments can be described as kitchen ware, with no signs of use, with an archaic appearance. Most of the ceramic fragments can be dated to the 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, much earlier than the time when the cemetery was functioning.

Among pieces found during the excavations are pieces of modern ceramics, either unglazed or glazed on one or both sides, as well as stoneware, faience, majolica, and a few small fractions of slab tiles. We suppose that these are the remains of vessels that were used to wash the corpses, which had to be broken in order to prevent their reuse.

#### OTHER ARTIFACTS

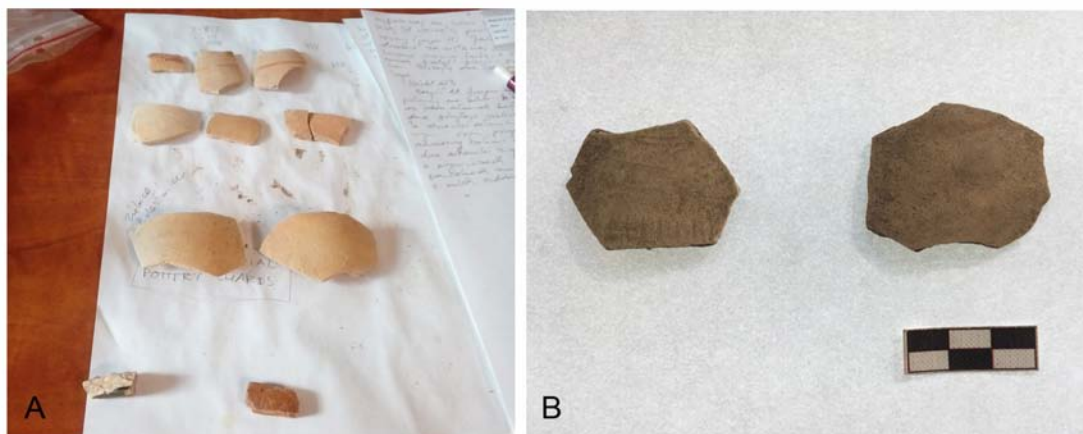
Other items found during the exploration include: two pieces of kaolin pipes, two ceramic bottle stoppers, a foot of a glass goblet/cup (?), an iron nail, and a lump of clay, pieces of gravestones (Fig. 10), numerous badges of various NSDAP formations and German soldiers' uniform buttons (Fig. 11).

#### BURIAL CONTAINERS

Almost all secondary burials were placed in burial boxes. The only exception were the 'war graves', where no black streaks of decay that could result from the decomposition of wooden casings were observed around the irregular, small pits. The remaining groups of burials, including the one designated as a 'mass grave' and the 'special burials', were put in wooden boxes. None of them have survived in their original state. In a few cases single wood fibers have been found. In the others,



**Fig. 9.** Gwarna Street cemetery – ceramic shards.  
Photo: J. Kichler, A. Jabłońska.



**Fig. 10.** Gwarna Street explorations – pieces of matzevot.  
Photo: J. Kichler.



the wood decayed completely. The preserved relics were thin streaks, 0.01–0.03 m wide, of dark, almost black sand. These bands formed rectangular shapes of various dimensions. Generally, most of them were about 0.6 m long and 0.3 m wide. These sizes were characteristic for the mass grave containers and some of the special burials. The observed size differences are the result of the post-depositional destruction of the boxes. It is possible to recreate the original size of the boxes by averaging all the sizes and using a statistical method, although the thickness of the boards from which the wooden

containers were made was undefined due to their complete decomposition. We can only guess that this dimension was at least 0.01 m. The presence of metal nails was not observed in any of the containers, as they would most likely have caused the delicate boards to split. The containers were instead probably connected using the so-called dovetail joints and glued together. It cannot be ruled out, as the boards were seemingly very thin, that they were made of plywood.

In reference to the burial boxes, we used the term ‘wooden case’, although the term ‘ossuary’ would be more appropriate, as it is justified in the ancient burial tradition (except for the difference in raw material).

A simplified record of the arrangement of individual wooden cases on subsequent levels is presented in Fig. 5 and 6. They were arranged in levels, from the lowest, and assigned ascending numbers 1–4. Only at the eastern edge of the mass grave have all four levels of the wooden cases been preserved. The rest of the area was not completely filled with wooden cases. Comparing anthropological burials within the levels, it was not possible to recreate the layout of the tombs that would correspond to the expected distribution of the remains, typical for cemeteries with graves arranged in rows.

We believe it was a reoriented arrangement of the graves from the old cemetery, that the community was still able to recreate. Instead of a horizontal layout, separate for men and women (?), and most likely with accompanying child burials, they were arranged vertically.

A relatively complete arrangement has been preserved in the case of the first row from the eastern side. For four burials, all four levels have been preserved. Another vertical arrangement of four wooden cases was found in the second row from the eastern side. In both cases, the bones were separated by age and, if possible, by gender.

The preserved four-layer systems are characterised by alternating the remains of adults and children.

In all cases, in the lowest ossuaries only the remains of children were found, mainly in *infans I* (0–7 years) and (almost three times less often) in *infans II* (7–14 years).

The second tier of wooden cases also includes mostly the burials of children, with the majority of younger (*infans I*) over older (*infans II*) ones in a ratio of 8:1. Noteworthy is the presence of the remains of three adults, one of them most likely being a woman (in the other two cases, the gender could not be determined).

On the next level, bones of adult individuals were also found in three wooden cases – one of an undetermined gender and two of men. In our opinion, it can be assumed that the third layer was used for men's burials, as opposed to the second layer, where women's remains were probably placed. As before, the third layer also contained the remains of children, mainly of the younger (*infans I*) age. In one case, an isolated burial of an adult male was found.

In the uppermost layer, level 4, the burials of younger children are again predominant. Two isolated adult burials have also been identified – one of a person of an unidentifiable gender and one of a male.

We assume that some of the four-layer piles could have been family burials, transferred during the exhumation, with young children buried at the base, and above them women (mothers?), possibly sometimes with their daughters in shared wooden cases. Our guess is that girls were also buried at the lowest level. In the upper levels (3 and 4), therefore, the remains of men and boys (sons?) would be buried.



**Fig. 11.** Gwarna Street explorations. A – various NSDAP pins and German soldiers uniform buttons; B – Railway NSDAP pins. Photo: A. Jabłońska.

After anthropological research, all human remains excavated during the exploration were put back into cardboard cases and buried for the third time at the New Jewish Cemetery at Lotnicza street in Wrocław (Fig. 12).

#### THE FUTURE OF THE CEMETERY AREA

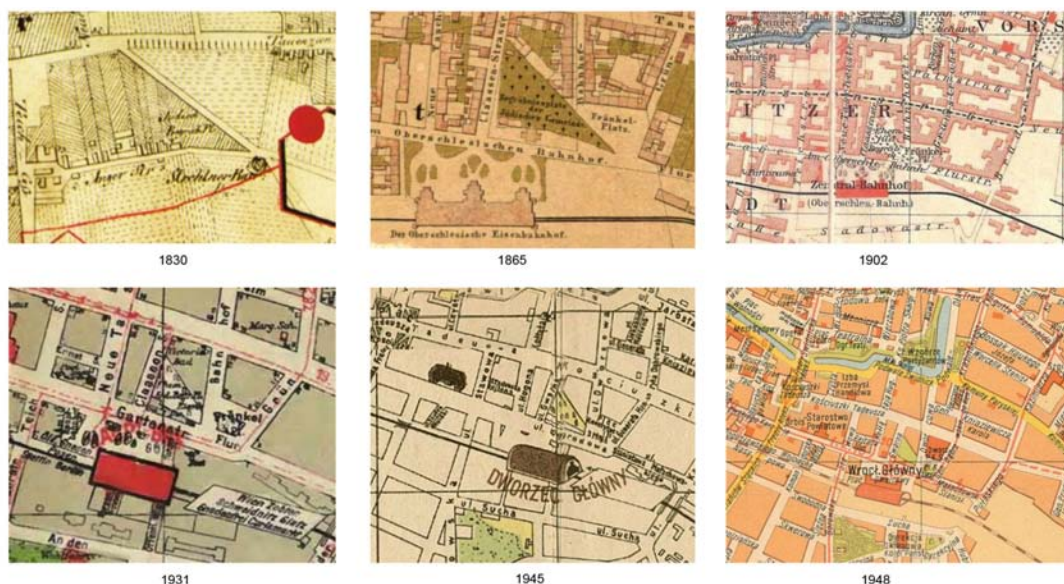
The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish cemetery at ul. Gwarna in Wrocław, formerly known as Jüdischer Friedhof an der Claassenstrasse in the German city of Breslau, operated for almost a hundred years, from 1761 until its closure in 1856. Over 4,000 people from the Jewish community of the city were buried here. It was said to have been one



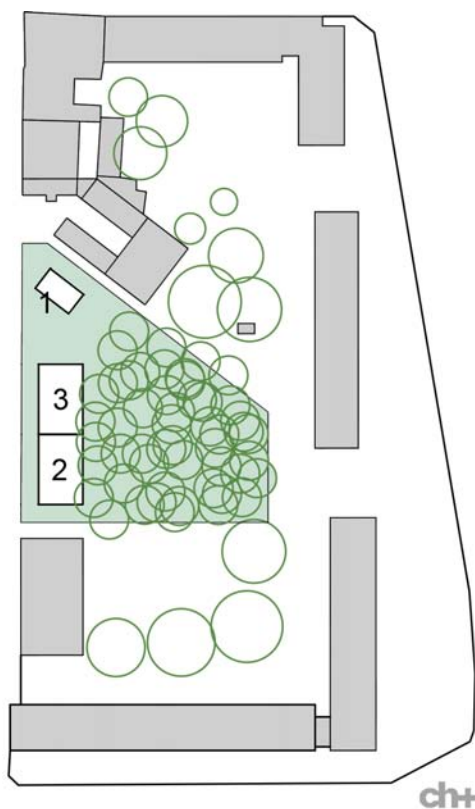
**Fig. 12.** Reburial of human remains from Gwarna Street at the New Jewish Cemetery at Lotnicza Street, Wrocław. Photo: J. Kichler.



**Fig. 13.** Tracing the cemetery outline on the city maps across centuries. Source: <https://polska-org.pl/> and map from 1830. Source: *Atlas* 2017, 51.



**Fig. 14.** Proposal for the development, commemoration, and protection of the cemetery area. Project: ch+ architekci for the Urban Memory Foundation.



of the most impressive cemeteries in Germany in terms of cemetery art.<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cemetery was subject to urban encroachment, which gradually reduced the historic burial area until it disappeared from the map of Wrocław after World War II (Fig. 13). Today, the cemetery does not function in the minds of the current residents of the city. It remains a forgotten, neglected space, recalled by the archaeological excavations of 2017 described above. It was these archaeological

discoveries that prompted deeper research on the history of the cemetery and on this fragment of the city space. It opened conversations among a mixed group of researchers, architects, and genealogists – all with ties to the city – around memory and place, remembering and forgetting, and led to a civic initiative aiming at commemorating the cemetery area. This is how the Urban Memory Foundation (UMF) of Wrocław was created.

Since 2020, UMF has taken steps to commemorate the forgotten cemetery area. An initiative was established around this non-site of memory,<sup>14</sup> to start a dialogue with stakeholders and discuss possible forms of protecting and remembering this place. The first step was to include a group of volunteers, mainly young students from Wrocław universities, who, after a series of training sessions, conducted field interviews in Wrocław in 2022. This activity helped to break a taboo surrounding the cemetery and draft a report with analysis and recommendations.<sup>15</sup> In the next stage, this report will serve as a guideline for developing a revitalisation proposal for the urban quarter located within the historic cemetery borders between Gwarna and Dworcowa Street. There is a chance to develop a new model of cooperation and shaping urban space that involves the local community in caring for this area as part of a shared local history. The Municipal Plan of Spatial Development (MPZP) of 2000 of the City Council of Wrocław takes this

<sup>14</sup> Sites of this type have some distinctive features. The case of Gwarna falls under their description. These places – the non-sites of memory – ‘are inconvenient for the surrounding community in the sense that their commemoration is a greater threat to collective identity than (also threatening with criticism) abandoning their commemoration’, Sendyka 2021, 49.

<sup>15</sup> The research results will be published in early 2023 on the Foundation’s website.

<sup>13</sup> Lewin 1926, 21.



**Fig. 15.** The outline of the cemetery in the present urban fabric of the city. Study: ch+ architekci for the Urban Memory Foundation; map of Wrocław from <http://ukosne.gis.um.wroc.pl/?hg=671>.

direction into account, including the introduction of greenery. Figure 10 illustrates one of the many possibilities of land development by introducing sections, where 1. is an information point, 2. an area of commemoration and reflection, 3. an educational area, and the remaining space a green area.

A local spatial plan for a part of the cemetery area at pl. Konstytucji 3 Maja has already been completed and the new Silver Tower building in 2014 is deliberately oriented diagonally to the main street in order to underline the area where the former cemetery was located, and hence commemorating the history of this Jewish space (Fig. 15). However, an information board has yet to be placed there, and leaving the place unmarked makes it invisible to potential recipients. The Foundation is working toward marking this part of the public space and including it in the

official narrative about the history of the city and its inhabitants before 1945.

#### CONCLUSION

The 18<sup>th</sup>-century cemetery at Gwarna Street/Claassenstrasse is a special type of heritage – a contentious heritage doubly excluded because of its Jewish and German past in now-Polish Wrocław. Nevertheless, we trust that thanks to further projects at the intersection of urbanism, research, education, and civic activism in Wrocław, it will be possible to change this. Information on further activities for the Gwarna cemetery is published on an ongoing basis at [www.urbanmemoryfoundation.org](http://www.urbanmemoryfoundation.org).

#### DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

#### SOURCES

*Kosmasa Kronika Czechów 1968, III, V*: translation, introduction, comments prepared by M. Wojciechowska. Warszawa 2012.

#### REFERENCES

- Atlas – *Atlas historyczny miast polskich 4, Śląsk 13*. In: Wrocław. R. Czaja (ed.). Wrocław.  
 Buśko C. 2005. *Wrocław u progu lokacji*. In: C. Buśko (ed.), *Wschodnia strefa Starego Miasta w XII–XIV wieku. Badania na Placu Nowy Targ*. Wrocław, 177-194.  
 Goliński M. 1997. *Socjotopografia późnośredniowiecznego Wrocławia*. Wrocław.



- Grotte A. 1927. *Alte Schlesische Judenfriedhöfe*. Berlin.
- Jabłońska A. 2019. *Re-mapping and Re-constructing: Spatial Dimension of the History of Breslau Jews on the Example of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish Cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław, Poland (former Claassenstrasse in Breslau, Germany)*. Unpublished MA dissertation. Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg.
- Kichler J. 2017. *Agonia cmentarza czyli rzecz o wrocławskim kirkucie*. "Midrasz" 2017(4/198), lipiec/sierpień, 30-42.
- The Koren Mesorat HaRav Kinot, The Complete Tisha B'Av Service with Commentary by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*. OU Press 2010.
- Lewin L. 1926. *Geschichte der israelitischen Kranken-Verpflegungs-Anstalt und Beerdigungs-Gesellschaft zu Breslau, 1726-1926: Hevra kadisha, 5486-5686*. Breslau.
- Limisiewicz A., Mruczek R. 2010. *Fara św. Marii Magdaleny na tle przemian przestrzennych wczesnego Wrocławia*. In: B. Czechowicz (ed.), *Śródmiejska Katedra: kościół św. Marii Magdaleny w dziejach i kulturze Wrocławia*. Wrocław, 55-136.
- Markgraf H. 1896. *Die Straßen Breslau nach ihrer Geschichte und ihren Namen*. Breslau.
- Sendyka R. 2021. *Poza obozem. Nie-miejsca pamięci – próba rozpoznania*. Warszawa.
- Stawiarski B. 2010. *Cmentarze Żydów aszkenazyjskich w średniowieczu. Przykład Wrocławia*. In: K. Wachowski (ed.), *Średniowieczne i nowożytnie nekropole Wrocławia 1*. *Wratislavia Antiqua* 12, 261-290.
- Szwed R. 2004. *Wczesnonowożytna ceramika naczyniowa z ulicy św. Antoniego we Wrocławiu*. In: J. Piekałski, K. Wachowski (eds.), *Wrocław na przełomie średniowiecza i czasów nowożytnych. Materialne przejawy życia codziennego*. *Wratislavia Antiqua* 6, Wrocław, 31-381.
- Wodziński M. 1996. *Hebrajskie inskrypcje na Śląsku XIII-XVIII wieku*. Wrocław.
- Ziątkowski L. 2000. *Dzieje Żydów we Wrocławiu*. Wrocław.