

# The Ohel of Israel Joshua Trunk in the Jewish Cemetery in Kutno (Poland)

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THE *OHEL* OF ISRAEL JOSHUA TRUNK  
IN THE JEWISH CEMETERY IN KUTNO (POLAND)**Abstract**

In 2020, the Agudat Israel Organisation and the Jewish Religious Community in Łódź came up with an idea to commemorate the once-venerated grave of Israel Joshua Trunk by rebuilding the *ohel* that had been erected over it. The deceased was one of the most famous rabbis of his time and a commonly known wise man honoured with the title of *gaon*. In order to implement this idea archaeological excavations began in the Jewish cemetery in Kutno with the aim to find the foundations of the building destroyed during the Second World War and to draw up documentation that would allow it to be rebuilt. The research goals were achieved and the lost *ohel* was uncovered along with its accompanying buildings, which most likely consisted of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century tomb of another person and the foundations of a large obelisk and tombstone.

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**KEYWORDS**

- Kutno
- Israel Joshua Trunk
- Izrael Jozsua Trunk
- Jewish cemetery
- archaeological excavations
- Ohel

**INTRODUCTION**

In 2020, the Agudat Israel Organisation and the Jewish Religious Community in Łódź came up with an idea to commemorate the once venerated grave of Israel Joshua Trunk (Fig. 1)<sup>1</sup> by rebuilding the *ohel*<sup>2</sup> ('tent') that had been erected over it but had not been preserved.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as Izrael Jozsua Trunk, Israel Elijah Joshua Trunk, Israel Yehoshua Trunk, Yisroel Yehoshua Trunk, Yehoshua Trunk, Yisrael Yehoshua Trunk, Yozsua Kutner, Joshua Kutner, Yehoshe'le, Yehoshele Kutner, Yehoshua Kutner, Shie'le Kutner, Shaye'le Kutner, and Star Shiya Trunk.

<sup>2</sup> A wooden or brick structure erected over the grave of an eminent rabbi or tzaddik.

<sup>3</sup> It is a more and more frequent form of the Jewish community's activity, which contributes to the gradual rebuilding of the destroyed *ohelim* in Poland; cf. Bielawski n.d., 97-120.

The deceased was one of the most famous rabbis of his time and was a commonly known wise man honoured with the title of *gaon* ('genius').<sup>4</sup> He was born in 1820 in Płock, and as early as 1840 he assumed his first rabbi's office in Szreńsk. Later he was a rabbi in Gąbin (from 1847), Warka (from 1950), and Pułtusk (from 1853). In 1861 he became the rabbi of Kutno and held this office for more than 30 years until his death in 1893.<sup>5</sup> While in office, he boldly spoke out on matters that were fundamental to the whole Jewish community. After a series of pogroms of the Jewish population in the Russian Empire, he was one of the first to support the demands made by Rabbi Zwi Hirsch Kalischer<sup>6</sup> and the Lovers of Zion movement (*Hibbat Zion*),

<sup>4</sup> Elberg 1968, 240-241; Trunk 1968, 420; Lewinberg 2016, 120.

<sup>5</sup> Bromberg 1968, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Zwi Hirsch Kalischer (1795-1874), rabbi, precursor of Zionism.



**Fig. 1.** Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk from Kutno.  
Source: Collection of the Regional Museum in Kutno.



which promoted the ideas of the resettlement of the Land of Israel by Jews, this time mostly based on developing agriculture.<sup>7</sup> In 1886, he went to Palestine<sup>8</sup> to express his support and to encourage both the ancient *Yishuv*<sup>9</sup> and the newly arrived settlers to acquire agricultural skills and to take up an agricultural lifestyle, without getting discouraged by any difficulties or initial failures.

The approaching sabbath year (*'shmita'*) of 1889, which was connected with the Torah's prohibition to cultivate the land and reap harvest, caused an overpowering fear among the Jewish novice farmers in Palestine. The prospect of famine, suffering, poverty, and great difficulty in surviving the Sabbath year in the already harsh conditions discouraged the pioneers from conducting agricultural activity, and at the same time effectively dissuaded those considering emigrating to Palestine. In 1888, to prevent social unrest, Samuel Mohylewer,<sup>10</sup> Chief Rabbi of Białystok and head of the Hibbat Zion organisation, appointed a rabbinical commission consisting of three eminent experts in the Torah and the Talmud. Apart from Mohylewer, its members were Rabbi Samuel Zanvil Klepfish<sup>11</sup> (the *av beit din* – 'head of the rabbinical court' of Warsaw) and Israel Joshua Trunk from

Kutno.<sup>12</sup> The scholars discussed this troublesome issue and developed *halakha* making it possible to conclude agreements on the sale of farms to *goy*s for one year and continue cultivation of these fields and the sale of crops as if in the form of a lease.<sup>13</sup> The official permission of rabbinical authorities for this type of sale had an enormous influence on the further economic development of the region, and even though it caused a lot of controversies, it is still binding and recognised today.

Israel Joshua Trunk also took an active part in a significant debate, started in the middle of the 1880s by the rabbi of Radzyń, Gershon Henoeh Leiner,<sup>14</sup> over the technology of manufacturing *tekhelet*<sup>15</sup> ('sky blue') – the manufacture of which had long been lost.<sup>16</sup> Trunk, based on his knowledge of the Talmud, rejected Leiner's theory that identified the common cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*) with the creature called by the ancient rabbis 'hillazon', and ruled out the use of this cephalopod in the process of manufacturing *tekhelet*.<sup>17</sup> Trunk also strongly objected to the manufacturing of blue dye based on this material. Time showed that his intuition was right because as early as 1913, in his doctoral dissertation, Rabbi Isaac Ha-Levi Herzog<sup>18</sup> proved that the shade of blue in question could not be naturally derived from cuttlefish and turned his attention – with certain doubts – to a sea snail, *Murex trunculus*<sup>19</sup> (today called *Hexaplex trunculus*). Nowadays, based on physicochemical analyses of two fragments of fabrics obtained during archaeological excavations of the Masada fortress in Israel, it has unequivocally been established that the *tekhelet* colour was only obtained from the *Hexaplex*.<sup>20</sup>

In 1870, Israel Joshua Trunk published a work titled *Yeshu'ot Yisrael*,<sup>21</sup> a commentary on Choshen Mishpat, the fourth part of the *Shulchan Aruch*. His grandson, Isaac Judah Trunk, undertook to publish the rest of his treatises. A collection of Talmudic novellas, *Yeshu'ot Malka*, was published in 1927<sup>22</sup> and was included in the list of key documents concerning Jewish law from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> Melamed 2014; Schwartz 2014, 41; Halickman 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Raccach 2022, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gershon Henoeh Leiner (1839–1890), rabbi of Radzyń.

<sup>15</sup> A type of dye used to colour prayer shawls.

<sup>16</sup> Magid 1998, 31–52; Zerbib 2015, 53; Gontarek 2018, 226–227.

<sup>17</sup> The Talmud mentions hillazon shells and obtaining the dye from live animals, which refutes Leiner's argument, cf. Tverski 1997, 98–99; Sterman 1999, 5–6; Gontarek 2009, 235, 236.

<sup>18</sup> Isaac Ha-Levi Herzog (1888–1957), rabbi of Belfast, Dublin, chief rabbi of Ireland, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi.

<sup>19</sup> Sterman 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Koren 2018, 87–97; Koren 2022, 46–72.

<sup>21</sup> Trunk 1870.

<sup>22</sup> Trunk 1927.

<sup>7</sup> Bromberg 1968, 238.

<sup>8</sup> Grajewski 1968, 239–240.

<sup>9</sup> The Jews living in the Land of Israel before the first Zionist immigration wave in 1882.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Mohylewer (1824–1898), rabbi, social activist, Zionist.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Zanvil Klepfish (1820–1902), rabbi.





**Fig. 2.** A – Kutno: a map from 1803 (Gilly D., Cron, [Südpreussen] 1802–1803. Scale: ca. 1:50 000, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, ref. Kart N 14431, Bl. XXXVIII); B – Kutno: a map from 1825 showing the course of the royal route from Warsaw to Kalisz. The Jewish cemetery is marked with a red arrow. Source: AGAD, *Geographical Collection of Stanislaw August*, ref. AK. 0157, k. 19); C – Kutno: a map from 1940. The Jewish cemetery is marked with a red arrow. Source: Collection of the Regional Museum in Kutno.

*Yevin Daat*, a commentary on the second part of the *Shulchan Aruch* (Yoreh De'ah with responsa), was published in 1932.<sup>23</sup>

After his death, the whole town of Kutno was filled with great sorrow. His funeral was attended by many eminent rabbis who wanted to pay their respects.<sup>24</sup>

### THE JEWISH CEMETERY IN KUTNO

Rabbi Trunk was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Kutno and an *ohel* was erected on his grave, distinguishing the place of burial and ensuring protection against the weather for pilgrims visiting the grave while they prayed.

The Jewish cemetery in Kutno was established on a small hill that dominated the area, north of the chartered town. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it must have been a considerable necropolis, as it was clearly marked on a map from 1803<sup>25</sup> even though that map was not very detailed; its area was similar to the area occupied by the Old Market Square along with adjacent tenement houses (Fig. 2). In the following years, the town developed, with buildings appearing around the cemetery. By 1940, it had grown considerably both to the north and south, so the cemetery in question became a part of the town, which can be clearly seen on the town map from that year.

A few preserved photographs of the cemetery show that it was really large, and the density of the graves was very high (Fig. 3).

Unfortunately, it has not been preserved in this state. During the Second World War, the activities of the German administration and army led to its destruction and caused damage to large parts of the necropolis.<sup>26</sup> Many *matzevot*, obelisks, and the surrounding wall were broken and taken away as construction material.<sup>27</sup>

In his memoir *In Liberated Kutno*, Efraim Wajkselisz described his first visit to his hometown of Kutno right after the war. The market square and the streets were paved with *matzevot*, placed with engravings facing upwards, and people and animals walked on them.<sup>28</sup>

The cemetery itself was visited by Aaron Hench Koenig in June 1946. In his memoirs, he described the sight of desecrated graves and destroyed headstones.<sup>29</sup> At a similar time Yekhiel Yeshaye Trunk, a great-grandson of Rabbi Israel Joshua

<sup>26</sup> Trunk 1968, 420.

<sup>27</sup> It is not an isolated case. A similar thing happened, for example, in Poddębice, where during archaeological excavations conducted on the market square by the authors of this paper, a collection of a few hundred very well-preserved *matzevot* was obtained. They were restored, transported to the area of the former Jewish cemetery, and handed over to the Jewish Religious Commune. Unfortunately, the *matzevot* have not been properly secured, which is why their condition is deteriorating year by year, cf. Ginter and Ginter 2013; Bielawski 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Siedlecki 1968.

<sup>29</sup> Siedlecki 1968, 408.

<sup>23</sup> Trunk 1932.

<sup>24</sup> Szatan 1968, 241–243.

<sup>25</sup> Gilly 1802–1803.

**Fig. 3.** Kutno: the Jewish cemetery before World War II.

Source: Collection of the Regional Museum in Kutno.



**Fig. 4.** Kutno: the Jewish cemetery, 1946.

Source: <https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo>. Item ID: 76447.



Trunk, was shocked by the sight of a dug-up field with a destroyed surrounding wall and scattered fragments of *matzevot*. He wrote that the cemetery looked like a battlefield after a very difficult fight.<sup>30</sup>

In photographs taken in 1946 during a symbolic funeral for the ashes of the victims murdered in the German Kulmhof Death Camp in Chełmno on Ner and a few days later, there is not a single *matzevah* or an obelisk – the landscape of the place was considerably different than a few years earlier (Fig. 4). Approximately 20 years after the war, Moshe Pietrkowski saw the post-war necropolis as a large field overgrown with grass, with scattered human bones and broken, destroyed headstones that could no longer be read.<sup>31</sup> Horses were grazed there.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Trunk 1968, 420.

<sup>31</sup> Only in the 1980s were the pieces of the *matzevot* that remained in the cemetery collected and inventoried by the Society of Friends of the Kutno Region, and then handed over to the Regional Museum in Kutno. In 2022, they were described in a study, cf. Kutner and Hopper 2022. Interestingly, one of the inventoried fragments was the tombstone of Rabbi Trunk's wife, Priwe Trunk, cf. Kutner and Hopper 2022, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Pietrkowski 1968, 412; cf. Siedlecki 1968.

The destruction of Jewish cemeteries in a slightly different form continued also after the war when new housing and the accompanying infrastructure came to the fore.

Today, the Jewish cemetery is located nearly in the centre of the town. Surrounded by large-panel blocks of flats, a school, and a housing estate of single-family houses, it is a place for local residents to take their dogs for a walk, drink alcohol, socialise in the evenings and, shockingly, throw away and bury garbage.

Many Jewish cemeteries have almost completely disappeared from the face of the earth in a very similar way, e.g. those in Poddebice or Łęczycza. Although the cemeteries in Poddebice and Kutno have been preserved and commemorated to a small extent (by placing a plaque or erecting a lapidarium), the Łęczycza cemetery met a crueler fate, as a housing estate of blocks of flats and an asphalt road were built in its place, destroying both the tombstones left after the ravages of war and the burials.<sup>33</sup>

#### IN SEARCH OF THE *OHEL* OF ISRAEL JOSHUA TRUNK

In May 2020, archaeological excavations began in the Jewish cemetery in Kutno with the aim to find the foundations of Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk's *ohel* which had been destroyed during the Second World War,<sup>34</sup> and to draw up documentation that would allow rebuilding it.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ginter and Durda 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Trunk 1968, 420 (in the text Israel Trunk is referred to as an 'old *gaon*'); Siedlecki 1968, 408 (in the text Rabbi Trunk is referred to as 'R'Yehoshele Kutner'). This dating is also confirmed by older inhabitants of Kutno. One of them recalled his father, who had told him that 'after the war, nothing but a few *matzevot* and rubble were left in the Jewish cemetery.'

<sup>35</sup> The authors would like to thank Dariusz Dekiert, whose involvement and support throughout the research process were invaluable.





**Fig. 5.** Kutno, an *ohel*. View from the southeast. Source: Collection of the Regional Museum in Kutno.

This element of small-scale architecture is considerably well known from the only preserved photograph (Fig. 5). Based on it, its appearance can be recreated, but its size is extremely difficult to determine. It was a masonry structure on a rectangular plan, plastered and whitewashed, with a door, a window (or perhaps two windows), and a metal sheet-covered gable roof. It was rather austere and modest.

In an aerial photograph taken in 1940 in the Kutno cemetery (Fig. 6), one can see a small bright spot in the northeastern part, which we believe to be the *ohel* of Israel Joshua Trunk. Based on this photograph, it was possible to determine its potential location with a considerable degree of certainty (Fig. 7). The remains of the foundations were overgrown with low vegetation and a small tree grew in their centre (Fig. 8).

At this point, it should be emphasised that due to the principle of inviolability of the grave and the applicable guidelines for conducting earthworks in the areas of Jewish cemeteries, archaeological exploration was only carried out at the foundations of the *ohel* to a depth not exceeding 50 centimetres from the ground surface, without unnecessary interference with the ground, and under the close supervision of a representative of the Jewish Religious Community.

First, weeds and small bushes were removed and the crowns of the walls were cleaned. Then, excavations were carried out around their perimeter and in their immediate vicinity, ensuring, however, that the excavation depth did not exceed the established ordinate at any point.

The earth accumulations explored during the excavations, due to the small depth of the research activities, were treated as one level formed during



**Fig. 6.** The Jewish cemetery in Kutno, a close-up of the aerial photograph from 1941. The red arrow indicates the object identified as an *ohel*. Source: <https://photos.yadvashem.org/>.



**Fig. 7.** An orthophoto map of the Jewish cemetery in Kutno with the location of the building marked in red. Source: [www.geoportal.gov.pl](http://www.geoportal.gov.pl).

the Second World War and today and associated with the demolition of the *ohel* and the accompanying structures, the penetration of the graves inside it and in its vicinity, and the process of becoming overgrown with vegetation during the post-war period. It was established that, in addition, the stratigraphy had



**Fig. 8.** Kutno. Foundations of the building before the beginning of the excavations, view towards the southwest. Photo: J. Ginter.



been disturbed and the ground strongly transformed as a result of the actions of third parties who, without the consent of the owner of the land or the Provincial Heritage Conservation Office, illegally excavated a part of the foundations and then left them unfilled until we commenced our research.

During work, a number of masonry structures from various phases of the cemetery's existence were uncovered. The inventory of the walls in the excavation was performed using photogrammetric techniques (a 3D model, an orthophoto map, and a digital terrain model were made) (Fig. 9). Analysis of the layout of the foundations discovered allows us to state that with a high degree of probability, we managed to uncover the foundations of the lost *ohel* of Israel Joshua Trunk (marked in red on

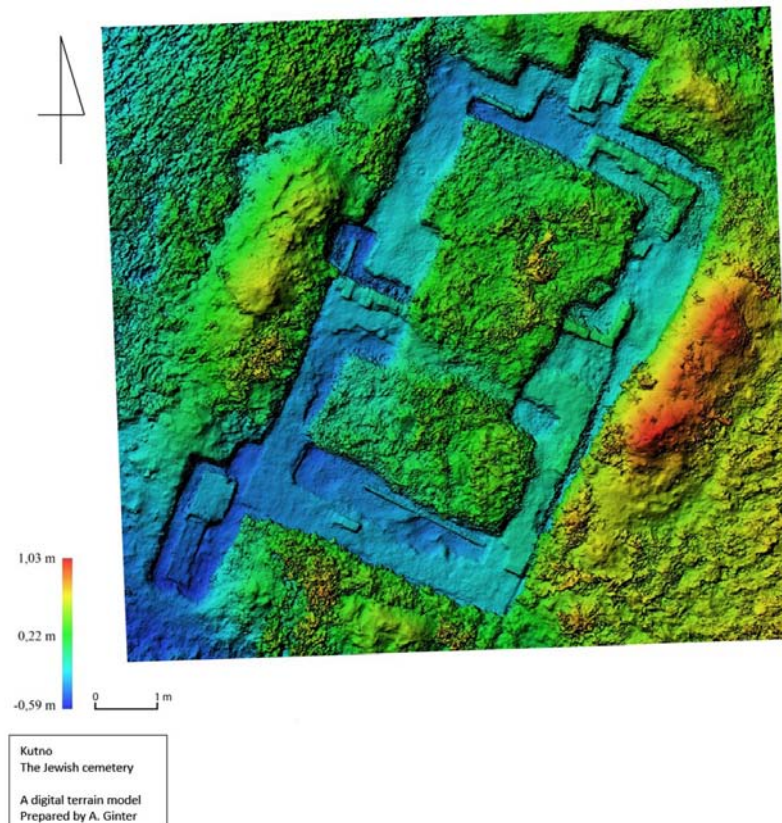
the map below) (Fig. 10). The *ohel* was a masonry building measuring 4.5 m in the northwest/southeast line and 3.9 m in the northeast-southwest line, with the gable wall more or less facing the southeast (Fig. 11).

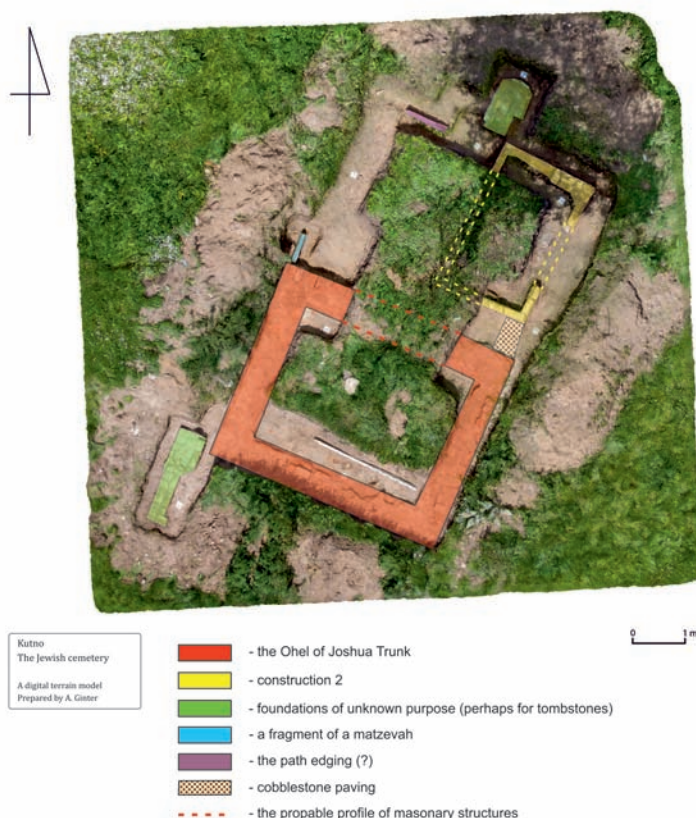
The foundation, approximately 0.64 m wide, was partly made using the *opus emplectum* technique. In the faces, hand-made bricks were used, bound with lime mortar, while the core was made of stone and brick rubble, abundantly poured with lime mortar. The remaining part was made of stone and brick rubble.

Based on the preserved remains, it is impossible to say from which side the entrance to the building was located, but the photograph of the *ohel* presented in this paper leaves no doubt that there were internal circulation spaces from the southeast.

*Ohelim* similar in form were very popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and we know them from undamaged cemeteries in such towns and cities as Piotrków Trybunalski: Hayim David Bernard, d. 1858), Warsaw (Baruch Szapiro, d. 1879; Jaakov Jicchak Szapiro, d. 1882; Josef Aron Rabinowicz, d. 1921; Hayim Binjamin Taub from Zwoleń, d. 1930; Abraham Joseph from Kock, d. 1939 (?); a *tzaddik* from Skierniewice (plot 47); two structures from plot 4 (unidentified in terms

**Fig. 9.** Kutno. A digital terrain model. Graphic design: A. Ginter.





**Fig. 10.** Kutno. Objects uncovered during archaeological excavations. Graphic design: A. Ginter.

of ownership), and Trzebinia: Moshe Yona Levy, d. 1843.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, an almost identical *ohel* was placed on the grave of Shimson Kleuger, who died in 2000 in Oświęcim.

To the northeast of the *ohel*, a second construction made with a completely different technology was located (Fig. 10). It measured 1.9 m in the northwest/southeast line and 2.9 m in the northeast/southwest line. Walls of machine-made bricks were placed directly on the ground without foundations (Fig. 12:A). They were covered with cement plaster on the outside. Due to its frail construction, the structure was considerably damaged by demolition and robberies.

It can be considered most likely that these are the remains of a low wall surrounding the grave of an important person in the community, in this case perhaps a member of Rabbi Israel's family. Examples of such construction are well known, for example, from the grave of Asher Anshel Gotshal and his son Jeheskiel in the New Jewish Cemetery in Łódź, and the more sophisticated Rappaport family grave, as well as many others.

The lack of solid foundations, largely resulting from the principle of the inviolability of the earth at the burial site, does not exclude the possibility



**Fig. 11.** Kutno, the *ohel* foundations, view from the south. Photo: J. Ginter.

of interpreting these remains also as an *ohel* – a very modest and small one, similar to the ones of Shlomo Chanoch Rabinowitz (d. 1942; buried: plot 57, row 7) and Moshe Mordechai Morgenstern (d. 1929; buried: plot 47, row 6) in the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw or, more interestingly, to the one of Mina Cira Maizel, the wife of a famous Rabbi of Łódź Eliyahu Hayim Maizel, buried in the cemetery in Wrocław in 1909.<sup>37</sup>

Between the building of Israel Joshua Trunk's *ohel* and the construction discussed above, a small fragment of a cobbled surface was uncovered.

<sup>36</sup> Kostka 2016, 27.

<sup>37</sup> *Ohelim* on women's graves were extremely rare, Bielawski n.d.



**Fig. 12.** Kutno, the *ohel* during excavation: A – Construction 2, the view of the southeast corner; B – The alleged fragment of the destroyed obelisk; C – The foundation of an obelisk, view from the west.  
Photo: J. Ginter.



**Fig. 13.** Kutno. The foundation at the southwest corner of the *ohel*, view from the northwest.  
Photo: J. Ginter.



**Fig. 14.** The grave of Moshe Ash in the cemetery in Kutno.  
Source: <https://photos.yadvashem.org/>



During the excavations, two foundations of a nature difficult to explain were also uncovered. The structure at the southwest corner of the rabbi's *ohel* (marked in green in Fig. 10) seems to be particularly enigmatic (Fig. 13). It was made of reclaimed hand-made bricks bound with lime mortar, plastered on all sides.

In the already presented photograph of the *ohel* (Fig. 5), nothing special can be seen in this location. However, our attention was drawn by a different photograph from the Kutno cemetery which shows a Moshe Ash's tombstone form different from the *matzevot* we are familiar with (Fig. 14). In this case, a large, massive, rectangular base, approx. 0.5 m high, approx. 1.5 m wide, and approx. 0.5 m deep, supported a narrower and smaller stele with inscriptions. It may seem that the uncovered object is what remained of such an uncharacteristic grave slab.

Even though there is no evidence that the uncovered structure constitutes the remains of the grave of a specific person, it can be said with a high degree of probability that these are the remains of a monument similar to the one erected for Moshe Ash.

The other foundation (marked in green in Fig. 10; Fig. 12:C) located in the northernmost part of the excavation, measuring 0.62×0.97 m, nearly rectangular in shape, was made of machine bricks joined with lime mortar and plastered on the outside.

In this case, a comparison between the location of the discussed foundation and the photograph of the *ohel* allows us to assume that it was the basis of the obelisk visible in the photograph.

This interpretation is strengthened by the discovery of the remains of a stone detail similar in shape to the obelisk within a deep robbery pit located in structure 2 (Fig. 12:B). However, considering the limited depth of the earthworks, we do not know what condition it was in, but it is worth noting that the exposed part was characterised by numerous edge damages.

## CONCLUSION

Summing up the small exploratory research discussed above, first of all, it should be stated that we undoubtedly managed to uncover and

record the foundations of the lost *ohel* and the accompanying buildings, which most likely consisted of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century tomb of another person and the foundations of a large obelisk and tombstone.

The excavation also included structures that are more difficult to interpret, both due to the limited exploration possibilities and the scant photographic documentation available to us from the pre-war period. The sparse movable material only consisted of 20<sup>th</sup>-century items, which were the result of the deposition of garbage during the Second World War and the post-war period.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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