

Polychromatic Tombstones in Polish Jewish Cemeteries

by Kamila Klauzinska and H. Daniel Wagner

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As part of an educational and renovation undertaking, we recently initiated (September 2003) a photographic census project to record all *matzevot* (tombstones) in the Zdunska Wola, Poland, Jewish cemetery. The detailed methodology developed to perform this extensive task is briefly described in this article. Throughout this systematic process, we discovered that a non-negligible number of *matzevot* have remnants of vivid colors, which led us to wonder whether this was only a local tradition or a more widespread practice and whether there was any deep meaning to this custom beyond the decorative aspect. In this paper, we attempt to partially answer some of the above questions. A few particularly impressive examples of colored *matzevot* are displayed, including computer-enhanced ones that aim to simulate the original magnificence of those *matzevot*.

Jewish Cemetery in Zdunska Wola

Zdunska Wola is a mid-size town located 40 km west of Lodz. Jews lived in Zdunska Wola from the late 18th century until World War II. In 1828, a *chevra kadisha* (burial society) was formed and the cemetery subsequently founded. Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews were buried there. The oldest gravestone is that of Elazar Lipszyc, who died in 1837. Several known individuals and rabbis are buried in the cemetery, including Szmul Grinspan (who wrote Torah books), Sarah Rachel Katz (whose father was Rabbi Nisen of Bialystok), Eliezer Lifshic (high judge of the rabbinical court in Zdunska Wola), Menachem Mendel Lipman (high judge of the rabbinical court in Zdunska Wola) and several individuals who belonged to famous rabbinical lineages (such as descendants of the Rabbi of Gur).

The Jewish cemetery is the only remaining physical testimony of the Jewish presence in Zdunska Wola since the early 19th century. As such, its historical value is fundamental. Details about the historical setting and value of the Jewish cemetery are available elsewhere.¹⁻³

Photographic Census Project

As of June 2004, we estimate that the number of *matzevot* in the cemetery of Zdunska Wola is at least (and probably more than) 2,000. This makes it by far the largest Jewish cemetery in the Sieradz region. More than 1,000 Jewish cemeteries have been identified in present-day Poland,⁴ but only 44 cemeteries have more than 500 visible *matzevot*. Those 44 cemeteries, which include 7 large ones (2 in Warsaw, 2 in Wrocław, 1 each in Lodz, Krakow and Bialystok) with more than 5,000 *matzevot*, will almost certainly be the only ones to last into the future, provided they are properly tended. The Zdunska Wola cemetery is one of these few valuable testimonials.

During recent visits (starting in 1998) of several members of the Organization of Former (Jewish) Residents of Zdunska Wola, and thanks to the efforts of a local group of citizens (Elzbieta and Renek Bartsch, Kamila Klauzinska, Tomek Polkowski) and the students and teachers of several Israeli and Polish schools, the names and texts of many of the *matzevot* were deciphered and the data published on the Zdunska Wola website (see address below). Although impressive, this work suffers from the major drawback that the exact locations of the *matzevot* within the cemetery have not been recorded, because of the non-systematic nature of that early documentation process.

Beginning in September 2003, a new, systematic process was instituted. First, the cemetery was divided into sections, and a detailed cemetery map was drawn. Second, a photographic census of all *matzevot* in the Zdunska Wola cemetery was launched, the work progressing in a methodical fashion, section by section, based on the new cemetery map. The methodology used to create the photographic census of the cemetery includes the following steps:

- Clean-up and righting of an overturned *matzeva* and, if necessary, use of chalk to restore the text
- Digital photography of the *matzeva*, as is
- Permanent numbering of the *matzeva* (this includes the section letter and the *matzeva* number) followed by a photograph of the *matzeva* with its number
- Photography of any remarkable detail of the *matzeva*, such as symbols, text, color, and so on
- Drawing of the exact location and position of the *matzeva* in the section
- Copying of photographs to a computer; extraction of data from the photographs and transfer to an Excel database

To date, seven of the eleven sections of the cemetery have been fully surveyed. We now have in the database the exact locations and photographs of 1660 *matzevot*. Based on this systematic work, the current estimate is that there must be more than 2,000 *matzevot*, about twice the number estimated five years ago. About half of the *matzevot* are patronymic.

Polychromatic Tombstones

Traces of vivid colors were discovered on many *matzevot*. Preliminary investigation of the literature reveals no extensive description or discussion of polychromatic tombstones in Jewish cemeteries, although some evidence suggests that the practice existed in other Polish Jewish cemeteries.⁵⁻⁷ Colored *matzevot* have been found in Jewish cemeteries in Lask, Lodz, Losice, Lubaczow and Lublin, and there are probably more cemeteries in Poland in which colored *matzevot* can be found. According to Trzciński, the most ancient polychromatic *matzevot* were

found in Lublin, dating from the 16th century.⁶ Tombstones have been found from the second half of the 17th century and of the 18th century with black letters on a white background, the most significant words being emphasized with red color. In the 19th century, more symbols appear on the matzevot, with sometimes up to 10 different colors on a single matzeva, such as in Losice.

Some rather austere matzevot have been found, including a few in Zdunska Wola, with painted text without relief (see figure 2 on the page before this article). One of these simply painted stones recently was transferred to the Historical Museum of Zdunska Wola because the letters (which had remained in the buried part of the stone so far) are water soluble. The prevalent colors were red, green, yellow, orange, blue and white. Gold, silver and black appeared more rarely.

There is little doubt that tombstone coloring was practiced to emphasize other decorative motifs such as the sculpted symbols or specific words within the epitaphs, as clearly seen in Figure 1a and 1b.⁶ Beyond the ornamental aspects, however, it is likely that there was a deeper meaning to the practice. Jewish art was codified—in part at least—by biblical lore. For example, Figure 1b shows a matzeva in Zdunska Wola in which a deer stands on blue ground or stones, which is reminiscent of the text of the Bible (Exodus 24:10) and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. A blue ground also appears in another photograph among those in Figure 3. Deep blue areas of the matzeva are evocative of God in general. The pillars are often painted in brown, yellow or ocher, and in Zdunska Wola, especially, many tombstones have yellow pillars. According to Trzciński, this may be a reference to the color of the columns of Solomon's Temple, which were made of bronze.⁶

The mid-portion of the matzeva usually is white or black. White symbolizes purity or innocence, but also the clarity of light. The color black dominates in the clothing habits of orthodox Polish Jews. In Zdunska Wola, red often appears as well, frequently on sculpted crowns. In antiquity, red was a defense against demons. Red is also commonly present in synagogue decoration and paraphernalia in Poland (for example, in Horb and Chodorow) and abroad too. Important words or names sometimes are emphasized with gold or silver (Figure 1).⁸

It seems that renovating the paint of matzevot also was important. A number of layers of paint have been found on matzevot in Lublin.⁶ Even today, matzevot are sometimes being repainted, such as in Pabianice.

The Talmud mentions that it was customary to paint tombstones during the month of Adar using white color, possibly to serve as a clear remote warning for Cohanim who are forbidden to enter cemeteries.^{9,10}

To reproduce the early magnificence of polychromatic matzevot, the original colors on specific photographs were reconstituted by computer enhancement. A few particularly impressive examples of such simulations are depicted in Figure 3. On the left side are the matzevot in their

current (as is) condition. Shown on the right are the computer-enhanced colored headstones.

Additional information about the Jewish cemetery in Zdunska Wola is available on the following websites:

- WWW.WEIZMANN.AC.IL/WAGNER/ZDUNSKAWOLA/CONTENTS.HTM
- WWW.JEWISHGEN.ORG/JRI-PL/ZDUNWOLA.HTM
- WWW.GEOCITIES.COM/PARIS/RUE/4017/ZDUNSKA/ZDUNSKA.HTM

Notes

1. H.D. Wagner, "A Brief History of the Jews in Zdunska Wola," *Sharsheret Hadorot*. 16 (3) (June 2002).
2. K. Klauzinska, "Cmentarz Żydowski w Zdunskiej Woli," M.A. Thesis, University of Lodz (2000).
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4. S. Gruber, P. Myers, E. Bergman, J. Jagielski, "Survey of Historic Jewish Monuments in Poland," A Report to the United States Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, 2d Edition (1995), WWW.HERITAGEABROAD.GOV/REPORTS/INDEX.HTML.
5. I. Rejduch-Samkowa and J. Samek, *Dawna sztuka Żydowska w Polsce* (Old Jewish art in Poland), Warszawa (2002).
6. A. Trzciński, *Polichromia nagrobków na cmentarzach Żydowskich w Polsce południowo-wschodniej* (Polychromatic tombstones in Jewish cemeteries in southeast Poland). [Polish] PSL Konteksty, Nr 1-2 (1989).
7. E. Floersheim, "Gravestone Decorations in Lubaczow, Poland," Lecture presented at the 24th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, Jerusalem, Israel, July 4-9, 2004.
8. O. Goldberg-Mulkiewicz, *Cmentarze Żydowskie* (Jewish cemeteries). [Polish] Białystok, 2000.
9. Yehuda Klausner, personal communication. The specific comments by Rashi and Bartunura on this issue refer to Masechet "Maaser Sheni," chapter 5, paragraph 1, and to Masechet "Shekalim," Mishna chapter 1, paragraph 1.
10. A. Trzciński, *Symbole i obrazy: Tresci symboliczne przedstawien na nagrobkach żydowskich w Polsce* (Symbols and pictures: Symbolic contents on Jewish tombstones in Poland). [Polish] Lublin (1997).

Kamila Klauzinska holds a M.A. degree in Ethnology, Faculty of Philosophy and History, the University of Lodz. Her thesis focused on the Jewish cemetery in Zdunska Wola. She is the author of the exhibition "The Jews of Zdunska Wola," which took place in September 2003 in that town. H. Daniel Wagner is a Professor of Materials Science at the Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel. He has researched his Polish roots since 1995, and is the author of 150 scientific papers and 15 genealogical papers. He is a member of the Board of JRI-Poland, a town leader for Zdunska Wola, an archive coordinator for the Grodzisk Mazowiecki Archive Project, a member of the Israel Genealogical Society, President of the Organization of Former Residents of Zdunska Wola in Israel and a co-chairman of the 24th IAJGS International Conference on Jewish Genealogy.



FIGURE 1: Examples of colored *mazewot* found in the cemetery of Zdunska Wola.



FIGURE 2: A painted *mazewa* that was transferred to the local Historical Museum.



FIGURE 3: “Repainting” using computer simulation