

# Commemorating the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław

## Summary of the activities of the Urban Memory Foundation (2020 – 2023)



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## 1. Historical outline and contemporary social contexts of the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street

The Jewish cemetery in Wrocław (Breslau until 1945) located on the nowadays' Gwarna Street (Classenstrasse until 1945) was built in 1761 and served as a burial place for the city's Jewish community until 1856. During this period, over 4,000 people were buried there. In the mid-18th century, when it was built, this area was located outside the city walls, but as the city of Breslau grew - and primarily as a result of the construction of the Main Railway Station in its vicinity in the 1850s - the cemetery became part of the central, rapidly developing area of the city. Therefore, from the early 20th century, the cemetery's perimeter started to be gradually reduced. Ultimately, during the Nazi rule, the authorities of the Jewish community were forced to sell the remaining section, which from then on was further falling into decay. The cemetery was officially closed down in post-war Poland. Subsequently, as pre-war German cemeteries were being transformed into parks, recreational spaces or areas intended for development, the last surviving tombstones were removed from the area.

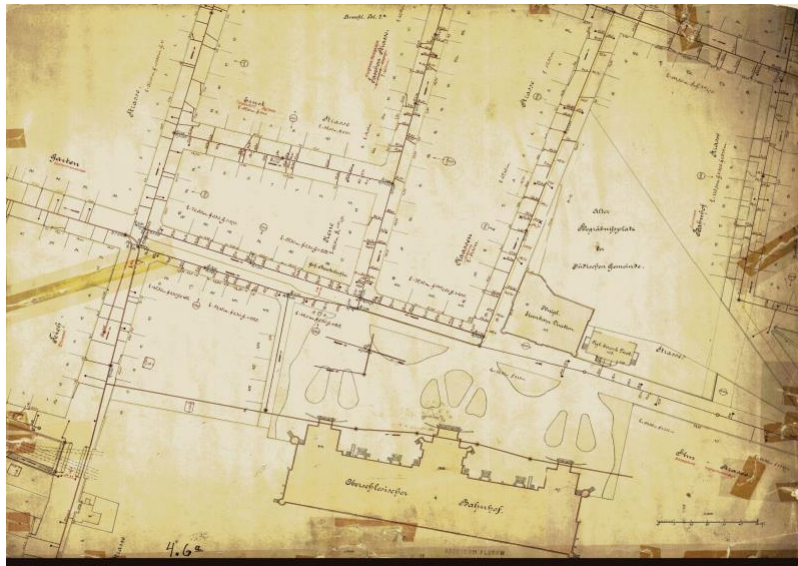


Fig. 1. Breslau, Main Railway Station and the cemetery, late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Source: [https://wroclaw.polska-org.pl/508930,Wroclaw,Cmentarz\\_zydowski\\_ul\\_Gwarna\\_dawny.html](https://wroclaw.polska-org.pl/508930,Wroclaw,Cmentarz_zydowski_ul_Gwarna_dawny.html)



Fig. 2. Outline of the unpreserved cemetery on Gwarna Street in the current urban tissue of Wrocław, taking into account: a) currently non-existent pre-war buildings (dark green; map from 1907), b) area intended for the construction of a hotel (red). Developed by ch+ architects for the "Places of Memory and Forgetting" project



Fig. 3. Outline of the unpreserved cemetery on Gwarna Street in the current urban tissue of Wrocław. Developed by ch+ architects for the "Places of Memory and Forgetting" project

Today, the only visible evidence of the existence of a cemetery in this place is a fragment of the cemetery wall from 1908, located near the building on 6 Gwarna Street. A significant part of the former burial area remains undeveloped: it hosts a building of the Municipal Youth Sports Centre as well as tennis courts and a parking lot. This space is surrounded by apartment blocks from the 1960s and a hotel that was built several years ago.



Photo 1. Fragment of the former cemetery wall from 1908 on Gwarna Street. Photo by Agnieszka Jabłońska

## **2. Activities of the Urban Memory Foundation to disseminate knowledge about the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street and possibilities of its commemoration (2020-2022)**

The Urban Memory Foundation, as part of its "Places of Remembrance and Forgetting" project<sup>1</sup>, has undertaken a number of activities in order to raise awareness of the cemetery's existence among the residents of Wrocław, while anticipating its commemoration in the future.

The activities described on the following pages were carried out by a team of 21 volunteers - mainly students, PhD students and graduates of Wrocław universities. Each activity was prepared in cooperation with experts (sociologists, architects and experts in Jewish culture).

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<sup>1</sup> "Places of Memory and Forgetting" was launched by the FestivALT Association from Kraków and the Urban Memory Foundation (UMF) from Wrocław. It was implemented in 2021-2022 thanks to the EEA and Norway Grants from the Active Citizens Fund - National programme grant in cooperation with local partners: the OP ENHEIM Foundation, the Dom Pokoju Foundation and the Polish Scouting Association (Kraków region Division, Kraków-Śródmieście scout group). The project focused its activities on two places of difficult heritage: the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław and the area of the former German Nazi concentration camp KL Plaszow in Kraków.

## 2.1. Neighbourhood picnic – 10 Gwarna Street

One of the key exploratory activities of the Urban Memory Foundation was the organization of a two-day neighbourhood picnic at the Municipal Youth Sports Centre on 10 Gwarna Street on July 17-18, 2021. Over 60 participants took part in this event, including many residents of the quarter, residents of Wrocław and members of the Wrocław Jewish Community. An important element of the project was the dissemination of historical maps of the area among the participants (postcards and posters – see below): an important incentive to initiate discussions about the history of the meeting place. The information collected during these exchanges helped to develop a research toolkit used during subsequent field studies. Following the picnic, the project group members made their utmost to keep in touch with the local residents and further share knowledge about the initiative.



Fig. 4. Posters and postcards prepared for the neighbourhood picnic, superimposing historical maps (from the archives of the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław) with the current city map and the outline of the cemetery on Gwarna Street. Graphic design on behalf of Urban Memory Foundation: Arkadiusz Fochtman

## 2.2 „Three Earths” - an artistic and educational project by Anna Schapiro

Another important activity aimed at raising awareness of the local community about the existence of the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street was the cooperation with the artist Anna Schapiro. On September 13-18, 2022, Anna realised an artistic project entitled "Three Earths". This project involved marking fragments of the boundaries of the former cemetery with natural earth pigments. The former cemetery wall on Gwarna Street as well as a fragment of the sidewalk on the 3 May Constitution Square both became vehicles for her artistic intervention.

Unlike the classic idea of an artistic work with its fixed form, Anna Schapiro's visual works are flexible and adapt to the chosen place like its second skin. The space is not only a place for the artistic work to be carried out, but it also becomes an active carrier for the art project. Taking stock of material evidence of the existence of the cemetery, Anna Schapiro's work showed the previous historical and topographic layers of the area and its changes over time.

The project's intention was to make the residents of this area and of Wrocław aware of how complex and ambiguous the history of this place is. The artist's works were accompanied by information boards explaining the history of the cemetery, shaping up an educational walk that led from the wall on Gwarna Street to the 3 May Constitution Square (or in the opposite direction).



Photo 2. Anna Schapiro's artistic and educational project in Wrocław. Photo by Filip Morawski

What's important, Schapiro's artistic project managed to fit into the landscape of Gwarna Street and the 3 May Constitution Square, fuelling further exchanges among the residents on their urban space. Thanks to the efforts of the Urban Memory Foundation, the city authorities agreed to extend Anna Shapiro's project until March 31, 2023. In September 2023, the artist returned to Wrocław and, together with the Foundation's volunteers, renewed her works on the wall on Gwarna Street and at the 3 May Constitution Square.

Further information about the "Three Earths" project by Anna Schapiro can be found on the website of the Urban Memory Foundation<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup><http://urbanmemoryfoundation.org/miejsca-pamieci-i-zapominania-projekt-dla-bylego-cmentarza-zydowskiego-przy-ul-gwarnej/>

### **2.3 Discussion panel "Places of difficult memory", part of the Lower Silesian Festival of Architecture (DOFA 2022)**

Further opportunity for an in-depth discussion about the former cemetery and the possibilities of revitalizing the area of Gwarna Street was offered by an event entitled "Places of difficult memory - how to design them, how to talk about them?" organized on November 16, 2022. It was organised by the Urban Memory Foundation in cooperation with the OP ENHEIM Foundation and the Lower Silesian Festival of Architecture (DOFA 2022) as part of the "NeDiPa: Negotiating Difficult Pasts"<sup>3</sup> project. The event's discussion panel, consisting of architects and experts, referred to the festival's motto - "The Solidarity City".

The main topic of the meeting was the preservation of monuments and challenges associated with it in Wrocław and in the Lower Silesia region. The Zapomniane Foundation and the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland presented selected aspects of Jewish law (halakha) in relation to burial places as well as examples of use of non-invasive field research practices - including for the specific case of the cemetery on Gwarna Street. Architects and art historians that took part in the panel discussed possible design and revitalization concepts for difficult heritage sites in Wrocław, with particular emphasis on the cemetery on Gwarna Street.<sup>4</sup>

### **2.4 Field research: commemorating the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street**

The key activity of the Urban Memory Foundation as part of the "Places of Remembrance and Forgetting" project was to prepare and conduct pilot opinion surveys of representatives of the local community (residents and employees of companies located in the vicinity), public actors (representatives of the Jewish community, NGOs and municipal institutions) and descendants of the pre-war Jewish community, i.e. so-called Breslauers (nowadays living in the US, the UK, Sweden, Belgium and Israel). The respondents were interviewed in relation to the potential commemoration of the cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław.

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<sup>3</sup> „NeDiPa: Negotiating Difficult Pasts” is a project carried out by three organizations from Poland – Urban Memory Foundation, Zapomniane Foundation and the FestivALT Association, thanks to the support of the European Union under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. More information: <https://nedipa.eu/en/>

<sup>4</sup> Full report from the panel (in Polish) can be found here: <https://urbanmemoryfoundation.org/dofa/>



Field research was carried out from mid-February 2022 to mid-September 2022 by 21 volunteers via structured and semi-structured interviews (depending on the competences of specific interviewers).

As part of the research, a total of 78 interviews were conducted (in which a total of 100 people took part), including 49 structured or semi-structured interviews and 29 informal conversations.

The document presents below the most important conclusions from the research as well as recommendations stemming from it, prepared by the architects that actively cooperate with the Urban Memory Foundation. The entire report, authored by Kamilla Biskupska, Wojciech Chrzanowski, Agnieszka Jabłońska, Wiktoria Morawska and Karolina Polak, is available on the website of the Urban Memory Foundation: <https://urbanmemoryfoundation.org/en/places-of-remembering-and-forgetting/>.

#### **2.4.1 Conclusions from the field research**

Representatives of the local community generally agree that the pre-war Jewish cemetery should be commemorated on Gwarna Street. Some respondents imagine that such commemoration could have a form of an information plaque or a monument.

The idea of creating a small park or square was approved by the vast majority of research participants:

I agree to planting trees as a form of commemoration (RLB4)<sup>5</sup>;

Creating a memorial park is the best form of remembrance. It will attract people, but it will also enhance the neighbourhood (RM21);

Some form of green commemoration would make the area more pleasant and safer (RLB8);

Residents perceive green commemoration as an opportunity to “socialize” the space and to create some kind of resting area:

All you need is a plaque, a statue, a path, so that it is also a space for residents to sit down and have a look. This would be very nice for people who need such a place (RM7);

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<sup>5</sup> The statements of individual respondents are marked with the following codes: RLP – representatives of local businesses, RM – residents.

It would be good to have some green area where seniors could spend their time (RM8).

Most of the facilities on Gwarna Street are neglected or inaccessible, while there is no place that would connect the residents. Possible green areas, with functional dimension for residents, could enable the use of this currently empty space while counterbalancing the overuse of concrete that is prevailing in the city centre.

The respondents from this group emphasized that they live in this area and are in touch with this place every day. Therefore, they would like it to be a friendly space that does not create greater distance, which could be the case with a commemoration taking the form of a monument:

I see this place from my window, I don't want a monument that I would see every morning and that would bring fear in me and remind me about it [...] this is not a place for a monument, because there are other places in Wrocław that are suitable for such purposes, and this is not a neutral place because people live here, because people's windows are facing it. Someone should take care of it, make a maze there, make a fountain so that people can pass by and there will be positive, nice feelings, not fear and regret, and not generational trauma (RM2).

It is also important to note that neither residents nor people working around Gwarna Street would like the yard to be transformed (again) into a cemetery.

We won't keep on forever thinking how there was a cemetery here... You don't intend to build any crosses or Jewish monuments here, do you? (RLB7);

It wouldn't be okay if someone put tombstones, because it would be depressing. Nothing cemetery-like here please! (RM7);

Well, I don't know if people would like to live in a cemetery... (RM10).

The park or square would become a place for the community to strengthen neighbourly ties, but also relationships with a space with a complicated biography, which would be crucial in the context of further care for this place. The green area could become an intercultural stimulator of attachment to the place, which - due to its practical function - will also be valuable for people who do not understand and do not fully identify with the history of the cemetery as a place of remembrance of the Jewish community.

Forging bonds with the place could translate into creating a relationship with the memory of the cemetery and the pre-war Jewish community of Breslau. Some interviews with residents and representatives of local businesses showed that not all respondents had broader

historical knowledge about the cemetery on Gwarna Street. For this reason, for them, the necropolis - as well as other issues related to Jewish topics - are often associated only with the Holocaust. This requires participatory and educational activities not only in the context of commemoration itself, but more broadly in the context of building awareness of local history.

### **3. Revitalizing the cemetery area on Gwarna Street - recommendations from the Urban Memory Foundation**

Based on the field activities described above and carried out in 2020-2022, the Urban Memory Foundation has prepared recommendations for the revitalization of the cemetery area on Gwarna Street. The abovementioned activities were and still are being carried out by the Urban Memory Foundation in cooperation with architects, sociologists, civic participation experts and experts from the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish cemeteries in Poland.

The proposed revitalization activities of the cemetery area on Gwarna Street could cover the following issues:

- revitalization of the entire area of the former cemetery within the plot of land managed by the Municipality of Wrocław - primarily archaeological and preservation activities carried out in accordance with the recommendations of and in consultation with the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland and the Monuments Preservation offices;
- construction of a small, single-story pavilion with an educational function, located in the former cemetery, in the place of the former funeral home;
- creating, within the entrance area (from the side of Gwarna Street) a cosy square located next to the educational pavilion, the commemoration zone and the open meeting area;
- carrying out conservation works aimed at revitalizing the existing fragments of the historic fencing of the area from the side of Gwarna Street, along with revitalizing and reconstructing the entrance area;
- creating an area of contemplation, located in the central part of the cemetery plot, integrated into the surrounding greenery, with a dedicated sculpture/spatial installation commemorating the cemetery and the people buried there;
- setting up an uncovered meeting place for groups visiting the area, shaped in a way that allows to organise short presentations and discussions there;

- covering the majority of the plot with low and high plans (long-lived, durable plant species with the lowest possible maintenance needs), ensuring intimacy, shading and reducing the urban heat island effect.

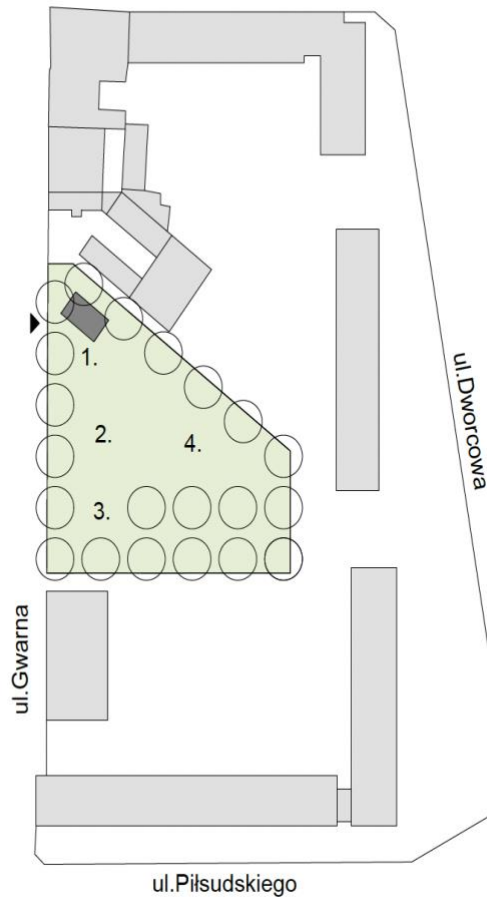


Fig. 7 Proposed zoning of the former cemetery area (plot B4.3Z). Developed by ch+ architects for the "Places of Memory and Forgetting" project

Description for the drawing:

1. Educational pavilion
2. Entrance square
3. Meeting/education area
4. Main green area and commemoration zone

In 2023 based on these recommendations, architectural studio ch+ architekci<sup>6</sup> and UMF developed a vision<sup>7</sup> (one of many possible) aligned with the New European Bauhaus principles for a green commemoration of the Jewish cemetery on Gwarna Street in Wrocław.

<sup>6</sup> <http://chplus.pl/en>

<sup>7</sup> „Green Gwarna” [https://urbanmemoryfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/green-gwarna\\_umf.pdf](https://urbanmemoryfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/green-gwarna_umf.pdf)