Final chapter: portraying the exhumation and reburial of Polish Jewish Holocaust victims in the pages of yizkor books

Gabriel N. Finder

The Jewish population of pre-war Poland numbered about 3.5 million. But only a remnant of this largest Jewish population in Europe survived the Holocaust. The total number of Polish Jewish survivors probably never exceeded 350,000 to 400,000. This rate of mortality – in Poland, around 90 per cent – was higher only in the Baltic states. The majority of Poland's Jewish population died on Polish soil. The Germans and their accomplices killed Poland's Jews mainly in death camps and concentration camps, but a sizeable proportion of the victims perished in ghettos, in hiding, in open fields, in forests, by the side of roads, and in small labour camps unequipped to cope with a cascade of dead bodies. And since the rate of killing in death camps and concentration camps eventually exceeded their capacity to incinerate their victims, by the end of the Second World War these camps, too, were overrun by corpses. By the same token, hundreds of Jewish cemeteries lay in ruins, desecrated, their human remains exposed, manhandled, dismembered, and strewn helter-skelter. In other words, under the Nazi occupation of Poland from 1939 to 1945, the Germans and their accomplices turned Poland into a boundless graveyard of their Jewish victims, with the corpses of Jews buried unceremoniously in mass graves, partially buried, or simply left unburied. This is what Polish Jewish survivors encountered when they returned to or emerged from hiding in their home towns in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust.

Domicile in Poland proved unsustainable for the vast majority of these returning Jews, whose numbers reached some 220,000 by June 1946. Although the resumption of normal life for Jewish victims of the Holocaust was difficult everywhere, the difficulty was exacerbated in immediate post-war Poland by a variety of factors: Polish antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence, private and state-sanctioned confiscation of Jewish property, and the desire by most Jews to steer clear of communism. Moreover, most returnees, already traumatized, could not bear to remain on Polish soil since, in the words of Simcha Mincberg, a survivor who returned to his home town of Wierzbniok, only to find a handful of survivors like himself and resolved to leave Poland – words repeated by countless survivors ad infinitum – the country ‘had become now in my mind a cemetery for Polish Jewry’.¹ Mincberg left Poland for Israel in August 1949. Their lives under constant threat, unable to locate their relatives and friends, let alone recover any property, and drawn to the prospect of resettlement in various Western countries and the nascent State of Israel, most returning Jews saw no reason to stay in their home towns and every reason to leave Poland forever. By 1950, when emigration from Poland became virtually impossible, the Jewish population had been reduced to roughly 60,000.

However, regardless of whether Polish Jewish survivors of the Holocaust stayed in Poland or left it, they took pains to afford the Jewish dead a proper burial, exhuming their corpses and then reburying them with dignity in accordance with Jewish ritual in, if possible, a Jewish cemetery, which itself generally required extensive restoration. Even Jews who harboured no intentions of remaining in post-war Poland returned to their home towns with this sole purpose in mind. Some returning Jews took snapshots of the exhumation and reburial of their relatives and friends, thereby etching the final resting place of their loved ones in their personal memories and for posterity.² Others recorded the disinterment and reinterment of fellow Jews for posterity in communal memorial books or ‘yizkor books’.

Written mainly in Yiddish and Hebrew, yizkor books (*yizker bikher* in Yiddish; *sifrei zikaron* in Hebrew) were the product of grass-roots efforts by surviving members of hundreds of destroyed Jewish communities. Meant to commemorate these communities, yizkor books were published in small runs, primarily in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, by *landsmanshaftn*, mutual-aid societies of Jews located mainly in Israel and North America but also in South America, Australia, and various countries in Western Europe who

came from the same town or region in Eastern Europe. Six hundred yizkor books have been published. Ninety per cent pertain to Jewish communities within the borders of interwar Poland, most of the rest concern Jewish communities in Lithuania, Latvia, and the Soviet Union.³

Their funerary function is central to yizkor books. As literary scholar James E. Young puts it, 'For a murdered people without graves, without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as symbolic tombstones.'⁴ That said, a large number of yizkor books recount attempts by returning survivors to recover and rebury the corpses of their relatives, friends, and neighbours, that is to say, they recount survivors' attempts to place *actual* gravestones on the site of their loved ones' and acquaintances' final resting place. Indeed, one theme in particular from the exhumation and reburial of Polish Jewish victims of the Holocaust throughout Poland in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust runs like a thread through scores of yizkor books: the single-minded effort of one man to give the Jewish dead a dignified burial in accordance with Jewish tradition. Such was the case in a large number of mid-size and small towns, in which one returning survivor seized the initiative to exhume and rebury the Jewish dead with honour in a Jewish cemetery, almost always restored after its desecration, and indefatigably pursued this objective. This fact is reflected in myriad yizkor books.

My first example of the depiction in a yizkor book of the exhumation and reburial of Polish Jewish victims of the Holocaust by Jews returning to Poland comes from the yizkor book of Żelechów, published by the Żelechów *landsmanshaft* in Chicago in 1953. Żelechów lies in east-central Poland, 85 kilometres from Warsaw. About 5,500 Jews, two-thirds of the town's population, lived there on the eve of the Second World War. The German army entered Żelechów on 14 September 1939, and on the following day the Nazis set fire to the synagogue. During 1940–41 more than 2,000 Jews, mostly from surrounding smaller towns and villages, were resettled in Żelechów. In the fall of 1940 an open ghetto was established there. On 30 September 1942, the ghetto was liquidated and all its inhabitants were deported to Treblinka and gassed there. Only a few hundred Jews managed to flee prior to the liquidation of the ghetto. No Jewish community was reconstituted in Żelechów after the war. Organizations of former Jewish residents were active in Israel, the United States, Brazil, and Argentina.⁵

The concluding section of the Żelechów yizkor book includes an account by Shmuel Laksman, a religious survivor from Żelechów

who single-handedly initiated the exhumation and reburial of Jewish Holocaust victims in his region. Resettled in Israel, Laksman describes in the yizkor book the threat posed to the few Jews who returned temporarily to Żelechów by their Polish neighbours, who were displeased to see them. Undeterred and tireless, Laksman solicited the assistance of fellow Jews and local civilian and military authorities, including Red Army officers, to undertake his self-appointed task. His first effort in this regard was modest and deeply personal. With the aid of a friend who had returned to Żelechów with the Polish division of the Red Army, he travelled to a neighbouring village to exhume the bodies of his three children, whom he then buried in the Jewish cemetery in Żelechów. The funeral of Laksman's children was attended by practically all of the Jews who were then residing in Żelechów and it elicited deep emotions. In Laksman's words, 'The wish to bury their families in a Jewish cemetery was awakened in everyone watching the funeral.'⁶ After the funeral, a brother and sister beseeched Laksman to travel with them to a small town in the vicinity with the aim of exhuming their sister and reburying her in the Jewish cemetery in Żelechów. Laksman then conducted the exhumation of another daughter of his who had been killed by Poles. After her funeral, Laksman resolved to find the Poles who murdered his children. They were the same Poles who had handed over eighteen Jewish men to the police, who then shot them. However, Polish anti-Jewish violence forced him to abandon his plans for revenge and, like many of his fellow Jews, leave Żelechów. In his case, he moved to the Polish city of Łódź, which in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust evolved into the centre of post-war Jewish life in Poland.⁷

Undaunted, Laksman continued his work from Łódź. He helped form a committee there composed of surviving Jews from Żelechów and Garwolin, a neighbouring town, to exhume and rebury Jewish victims of the Holocaust in the administrative district of Garwolin, which included the two towns. Appointed to attend to the welfare of the few remaining Jews in Żelechów and Garwolin by the Central Committee of Polish Jews, which from its office in Warsaw represented the interests of Polish Jews in the immediate post-war period, Laksman revisited Żelechów, this time accompanied by an armed guard, and was informed by city officials that the corpses of two Jewish families murdered by the Germans lay in surrounding fields. He resolved to give them a proper burial in the Jewish cemetery. Since the Central Committee of Polish Jews lacked sufficient funds to subsidize the exhumation and reburial of Holocaust victims, Laksman

turned successfully to the American *landsmanshaft* of Żelechów for financial support. With its support in hand, in May 1947 he then successfully petitioned Polish regional authorities to conduct the exhumation of the seventeen bodies – the members of two Jewish families, the Popowskis and the Zadoks, from Żelechów, whose hiding places in the countryside the Germans had discovered, and three unidentified women – and had them buried in the Jewish cemetery in Żelechów in the presence of three additional Jews originally from Żelechów, Polish officials, and Russian officers.⁸

Not yet finished, in 1948 Laksman oversaw several exhumations and reburials of the Jewish dead. He persuaded the Central Committee of Polish Jews, with the approval of Polish authorities, to conduct the exhumation and reburial of a large group of Jewish partisans, among them Jews from Żelechów, including two brothers, Max and Sergei, who fell in battle with German forces in October 1942. He then led the exhumation and reburial of two related Jewish families, the Godlens and the Lichtensteins. At the behest of relatives, Laksman then supervised the disinterment and reinterment of thirty-six Jews from the town of Parysów, including the Marski, Landan, Hermanowicz, and Herc families. Finally, he uncovered three mass graves and had their forty victims exhumed and reburied. He reburied all of the corpses discovered in 1948 in the Jewish cemetery in the town of Garwolin.⁹

Laksman left Poland for good in March 1949, his ultimate destination Israel. His account in the Żelechów yizkor book includes no final tally of the number of corpses whose disinterment and reinterment he led, but on the basis of his own account, he was responsible for the exhumation and reburial of at least 100 Jewish corpses between 1944 and 1948.

Three features in Laksman's account are especially noteworthy. First, his was a one-man effort. He recruited help, but without his initiative and sheer resolve, no Jewish corpses in Żelechów and its environs would have been exhumed and reburied. Another distinctive feature of Laksman's account is his use of names. By invoking the names of those whom he exhumed and then reburied, Laksman restored to these Jewish victims their humanity, which is precisely what the Nazi regime sought to deny them. Also of interest is Laksman's portrayal of ethnic Poles. He recounts early in his account his desire 'to do everything to take revenge' (*alts tsu ton kdey nekome tsu nemen*) on Poles who collaborated in the murder of his children and other Jews from Żelechów. He abandoned this project, though, because, in his own words, 'However, later I had to withdraw from

Figure 2.1 Shmuel Laksman overseeing the reburial of the Popowski and the Zadok families from Żelechów and three unidentified women in the Jewish cemetery in Żelechów, May 1947.

my plan because the antisemitic Poles continued to spill Jewish blood.¹⁰ Many Jewish survivors like Laksman had no choice but to flee the home towns to which they had returned to larger Polish cities in search of security in the face of intensive anti-Jewish violence, especially from the end of the Nazi occupation of Poland through the second half of 1946. But, by the same token, Laksman's account also demonstrates a large measure of gratitude for the numerous Polish officials who helped him fulfil his duty to bury his fellow Jews with dignity. The general image of Poles in yizkor books is negative, but without the assistance of Poles, Laksman's mission would have been unfeasible. Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope, Laksman seems to imply, for cooperation between Jews and Poles in tending to the memory of the Holocaust. In this regard, though, Laksman's voice is singular.

Moreover, Laksman's narrative does not appear in isolation; it is accompanied – and supported – by a photograph (Figure 2.1). The photograph is from 29 May 1947. It is from the exhumation and

impending reburial of the Popowski and Zadok families and three unidentified women. It shows Laksman, standing behind three caskets, presumably one for the skeletal remains of each family and the women. Laksman is surrounded by two or three other Jewish men, a couple of Polish officials, Russian and Polish officers, a couple of soldiers, one brandishing a rifle, and Polish labourers who probably exhumed the bodies and are about to rebury them. They all stare sternly and directly into the camera. The solemnity of the occasion, for all those in attendance, Jews and non-Jews alike, is palpable. But the dignity and resolve of the figure in the middle – Laksman himself – evident from his gaze and his taut posture, is the outstanding feature visible in this photograph. Indeed, each account discussed in this chapter contains photographs of exhumation and reburial, and the faces of all the survivors in them resemble Laksman's in their dignity and resolve.

My next example comes from the yizkor book of Skierniewice. Skierniewice lies halfway between Warsaw and Łódź in central Poland. At the outbreak of the Second World War there were about 4,300 Jews in Skierniewice, who constituted roughly one third of the town's population. The German army entered the town on 8 September 1939. Persecution of the Jews began immediately. In 1940 over 2,000 Jews from Łódź and the towns in its vicinity were forced to settle in Skierniewice, whose Jewish population expanded to about 6,500. In December 1940 a ghetto was established, but after two months all the Jews were ordered to leave and resettle in the Warsaw ghetto. By the beginning of April 1941 there were no Jews left in Skierniewice. They shared the fate of Warsaw Jewry and were deported to Treblinka.¹¹ But prior to their expulsion from the town, dozens of Jews were killed at the hands of the Nazis.

The surviving Jews of Skierniewice, organized in *landsmanshaftn* in Tel Aviv and New York, published a yizkor book in 1955. Resettled in Australia, Chaim Frenkel describes his return to Skierniewice after his demobilization from the Red Army and his efforts to exhume and rebury Holocaust victims in his essay in the Skierniewice yizkor book. The avuncular Frenkel, fresh from his army service, cuts the figure of a self-assured Jewish man on a mission.

Frenkel became aware of the presence of impromptu graves of Jews who had been shot in the fields and forests surrounding Skierniewice. Although Frenkel soon obtained his visa for Australia, he was determined not to depart before exhuming some of the victims and reburying their bodies in the restored Jewish cemetery. Receiving permission from the Polish authorities to dig in the fields for bodies, Frenkel set himself to what he terms 'this sacred endeavor' (*di heylike zakh*).¹² Frenkel and another Jew, Moshe Buki,

laboured for two weeks in the fields, locating forty-seven bodies, which were brought to rest in a collective grave – Frenkel calls it a ‘fraternal grave’ (*bruder-keyver*), probably borrowed from the Russian equivalent (*bratskaya mogila*), which he would have picked up during his service in the Red Army – in the restored Jewish cemetery.¹³ They added a memorial headstone, which was unveiled on 7 August 1947 in a public ceremony, preceded by a procession in the town in which several Jewish organizations from throughout Poland took part, waving banners. Several Jewish dignitaries from Warsaw and Łódź attended the ceremony, which was led by Rabbi David Kahane, the chief rabbi of the Polish armed forces, in the presence of the Polish mayor of Skierniewice, who received the honour of unveiling the monument. The unveiling seems to have made a deep impression on those who attended it. Frenkel makes mention of the reaction of Rabbi Kahane and Michał Mirski, the editor of *Dos naje lebn*, the popular Yiddish-language newspaper published by the Central Committee of Polish Jews. ‘After the ceremony’, Frenkel writes, ‘Rabbi Kahane and the editor Mirski told me that they had no words to express everything that they experienced here. What they saw here today they have never seen in any other town in Poland!’¹⁴ Several photographs of the event that appear in the Skierniewice yizkor book attest to the solemnity of the occasion.¹⁵ In one a group of some thirty solemn-looking survivors surround the grave and the monument (Figure 2.2).

Frenkel and his wife left shortly thereafter for Australia. Frenkel ends his account in the Skierniewice yizkor book with the following words: ‘I did everything that a proud Jew can do for Jewish honor and for our conscience, and we left Skierniewice with a heavy heart.’¹⁶ Frenkel’s invocation of Jewish honour is indicative of his sense of obligation in returning to Skierniewice to recover and rebury the Jewish dead with dignity.

A third example comes from the yizkor book of Wierzbnik, which was published in 1973 Tel Aviv by *landslayt* – Yiddish for people originally from the same town or region in Eastern Europe – living in both Israel and North America. Wierzbnik is located in central Poland, about 150 kilometres south of Warsaw. Its pre-war Jewish population numbered about 3,000. When the Germans entered Wierzbnik, they set fire to the synagogue, passed one edict after another severely restricting the life of the Jewish community, looted Jewish property, and generally treated Jews brutally, with sporadic killings. The Germans established an open ghetto in Wierzbnik in April 1941, which included Jews who fled to the town from other places or who were forcibly resettled there. Together with Ukrainian auxiliaries, the Germans

Figure 2.2 Survivors from Skierniewice surround the collective grave of the town's Jewish victims and the monument erected in their memory during its unveiling in August 1947.

liquidated the ghetto on 27 October 1942, deporting some 4,000 Jews to their death in Treblinka, murdering sixty to eighty Jews on the spot, and sending 1,600 Jews to three factory slave-labour camps in nearby Starachowice. At the end of July 1944, the Germans liquidated the Starachowice camps, deporting roughly 1,200 to 1,400 Starachowice Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau. About sixty Jews were killed trying to escape; many were killed on the periphery of the main camp during a breakout attempt on the eve of the deportation. Others were killed when the Germans discovered them hiding in bunkers below the barracks. Some 600 to 700 Jews who were deported from Starachowice to Birkenau survived to see the end of the war.¹⁷ No Jewish community was re-established in Wierzbnik after the war.

Simcha Minberg, mentioned above, was one of a handful of survivors who returned to Wierzbnik after liberation in 1945. He had been the head of Wierzbnik's Jewish Council before the German liquidation of the ghetto. He made his way to Starachowice and discovered the bodies of those killed in and under the barracks during its liquidation and those killed on the edge of the camp during their failed escape attempt. Uppermost on his mind was to exhume and rebury them, a task for which he recruited an additional survivor. 'As a first and sacred obligation [*ershter un heyliker khov*] we

Figure 2.3 Speech by Simcha Minberg to mark the reburial of victims from Wierzbnik and unveiling of the monument dedicated to their memory, 1945.

took pains to afford a Jewish burial to the tens of victims who were shot on the day of the liquidation; and those who were buried near the camp.¹⁸ This was not an easy matter for obvious reasons, but also because intermingled with the remains of Jews were the corpses of Poles. After considerable effort Minberg received permission from the local authorities to construct two collective graves, one for Jews, the other for Poles. His friend Leybush Herblum, the head of a Jewish burial society (*chevra kadisha*) established by a few of the survivors in the town, would continue even afterwards to search for the remains of Jewish victims in the vicinity and rebury them in the collective grave, a task deemed by Minberg to be a ‘sacred duty’ (*heylike flikht*). For their part, the Poles did likewise.

Minberg and Herblum then went to a Polish stone carver, who constructed a monument for them to be placed adjacent to the Jewish collective grave. On the day of the unveiling, Minberg gave a speech (Figure 2.3). In the Wierzbnik yizkor book Minberg describes this solemn occasion in a mournful tone:

The entire Polish population gathered at the site and from among us, unfortunately – a handful of Jews from the surviving remnant [*sheyris-hapleyte*]. I then ascended the rostrum and held my sad eulogy, which

was moving, heartrending, and full of sorrow, bitterness, and tears. In point of fact, this was the end of the Jewish community in Wierzbni¹⁹.

‘The end’ is my translation of Minberg’s apt use of the Yiddish term *stimas hagolel*, derived from Hebrew, which literally means ‘covering the grave’.

A fourth example comes from the yizkor book of Otwock, which was published in 1968 by *landsmanshaftn* in Israel, France, the United States, and Canada. Otwock is located near Warsaw. On the outbreak of the Second World War there were 14,200 Jews in Otwock. In October 1939, one month after the occupation of the town, the Nazis burned all the synagogues there. A closed ghetto was established in January 1941. A year later, 150 young men were deported to the newly opened Treblinka death camp, where they were among its first victims. In April 1942, 400 Jews were deported to the nearby forced-labour camp in Karczew. The great deportation to Treblinka began in August 1942. About 7,000 Jews were deported and exterminated in Treblinka, while 3,000 others, who offered limited resistance and hid themselves, were found, and most were killed on the spot. Another 700 Jews who succeeded in fleeing into the surrounding forests were killed by German armed groups searching the woods. The forced-labour camp in Karczew was liquidated on 1 December 1942. After the war about 400 Jews settled in the town, but eventually all of them left Poland.²⁰

One of the returning survivors was Mordechai-Menachem (Mendl) Braf, who returned to Otwock in 1945 after fighting in the Polish division of the Red Army. Braf came from a large and distinguished family, of whom only he survived. Braf went to Karczew after the war in search of the mass grave in which his family was buried. Unsuccessful in his first attempt to locate the mass grave, he returned a second time and while he was searching, a man approached him who knew his father and showed him the location of the mass grave. After Braf and his brother-in-law applied to no avail to the local Polish authorities to exhume the corpses, Braf, an officer in the Polish army, petitioned Polish military officials and received permission to dig. Braf then ordered three coffins from a Polish carpentry shop.

One morning Braf, his brother-in-law, Shimon Friedman, himself a survivor of Treblinka, and two Polish labourers returned to the site of the mass grave and started digging. What they discovered stunned them. Braf writes:

Over the course of several hours we extract and collect it all – corpses, bones, muscles, scraps of clothing – and wrap them in sheets that we

had brought with us. My sister [Fredl-Masha] was completely intact, although her skull had been cracked by [the impact of] bullets, but her body, her beautiful blond hair – everything [appeared] as if she had been buried yesterday! I recognized half of my father's body since I knew what he had been wearing. [Freydl-Masha's] six children were entirely intact.

How to describe what came over us on that day, from where we drew the spiritual strength to cope with all of this?²¹

Braf and Friedman exhumed the bodies and human remains and placed them in the coffins (Figure 2.4). Then Braf, Friedman, and the two Polish labourers transported the coffins, which also included several unidentified victims, to what remained of the Jewish cemetery on a wagon. They all dug a large collective grave. But Braf himself dug two separate graves for his father and sister and lowered them into their final resting place. Their mission complete at sunset, Braf and Friedman bade the Polish labourers leave them alone so that they could unite in their grief one last time with their loved ones.

The last example comes from the Kutno yizkor book, published by *landsmanshaftn* in Israel and the Jewish Diaspora in 1968. Kutno is a town in central Poland, located in the Łódź province. In 1939 Kutno had 6,700 Jewish inhabitants out of a total population of 27,000. After the Germans took Kutno they burned down the synagogue. In June 1940 the Jews were transferred to a ghetto on the site of a destroyed sugar refinery. Close to 7,000 people were crowded into this small area. Conditions deteriorated in the latter half of 1941 when the ghetto was sealed because of renewed epidemics. By the end of March 1942 the entire Jewish population was rounded up and sent to the Chełmno death camp.²²

Efraim Weichselfish returned to Kutno after liberation in January 1945 while still serving in the Polish army. On his first day in his home town he looked for Jews but did not find any. On the second day he decided to visit the Jewish cemetery. His commander provided Weichselfish, himself an officer, with a pistol, two armed military guards, and one policeman. The cemetery was badly desecrated. In the absence of bodies to bury, Weichselfish resolved to bring ashes from Chełmno, where the Germans had gassed Kutno's Jews, to Kutno for reburial. Weichselfish met other Jews from Kutno in Łódź and Warsaw and shared with them his idea to transport ashes from Chełmno and rebury them in Kutno, with a monument to mark the site. They formed a committee and received the permission of local authorities. The committee delegated two survivors from Kutno to travel to Chełmno, where they placed ashes from the crematorium in a black box.

Figure 2.4 Mordechai Braf of Otwock kneels beside the coffin of his sister Freydl-Masha in 1945 after he had exhumed her body from the mass grave in which nineteen members of his family had been buried helter-skelter after the Germans shot them. Mordechai Braf's own caption reads: 'After prolonged digging a frightful picture revealed itself before our eyes. For what seemed like an eternity we stood in shock. The corpses of my sister Freydl-Masha (Frانيا), the wife of Shimon Friedman, who was present at the site, and their six children were completely intact – three years after they were murdered! It was as if they hadn't yet made peace with their fate.'

The ashes were laid to rest in a solemn ceremony attended by leaders from the Central Committee of Polish Jews, the chief rabbi of the Polish military, David Kahane, and local officials. Speeches described the destruction of and remembered Kutno's Jewish community. A solemn procession escorted the casket containing the

Figure 2.5 Ephraim Weichselfish (centre) and Y. Fasserstein (left) bear the coffin holding the ashes taken from Chelmno during the ceremony, presided over by Rabbi David Kahane (above right), to rebury them in Kutno, 1945.

ashes through the streets of Kovno to the synagogue; the pall-bearers were Weichselfish and another Polish Jewish officer (Figure 2.5). There Rabbi Kahane eulogized the victims and *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, was intoned. The procession then continued to the Jewish cemetery. After the casket was lowered into the grave, the monument was unveiled (Figure 2.6). During the unveiling, Rabbi Kahane spoke one last time. According to Weichselfish, the ceremony was extremely emotional. The handful of survivors who attended the ceremony were overcome by grief. 'From eight thousand Kutno Jews there remains but a mound [of ashes].'²³ So ends Weichselfish his description of the ceremony. All of the survivors in attendance probably shared this sentiment.²⁴

Among these five men – Laksman, Frenkel, Mincberg, Braf, and Weichselfish – only Laksman was an observant Jew. One can infer from Braf's description of his family that he came from a traditional home. In any event, even assimilated Jews in Poland were conversant to varying degrees with Jewish customs, which was in all likelihood true in the cases of Frenkel, Mincberg, and Weichselfish. There are several prescriptive and customary practices in Judaism pertaining to burial. Jewish law ordinarily forbids exhumation (except for reburial in Israel) and the transfer of corpses and human remains from one

Figure 2.6 Survivors from Kutno surround the monument unveiled in 1945, during the reburial of ashes from Chelmno, in memory of the town's Jewish victims; Ephraim Weichselfish is visible in uniform to the far left.

grave to another. Rabbinical authorities do recognize certain exceptions to the rule prohibiting exhumation and reburial. These exceptions include the reburial of a person to a grave close to his family and relatives and to a safer site should the grave be threatened by desecration.²⁵ Landsberg, Frenkel, Minberg, Braf, and Weichselfish, like countless other Jews who replicated their efforts elsewhere in Poland, must have been cognizant more or less of these regulations. But they do not seem to have mattered very much to them. None of them apparently ever inquired of a rabbi about the propriety of disinterment and reinterment in Jewish law. Rather, they were guided by their instincts. Indeed, their actions were for the most part separated from the theological roots of Judaism. Exhumation and reburial were hardly constrained by formal religious regulations because they simply seemed like the appropriate response to the unceremonious or partial burial of Jewish bodies and human remains in mass graves, let alone the sheer exposure of many corpses and body parts to the elements. However, since religious ritual did accompany reburial in most instances, even the non-observant men from among the five clearly acceded to Jewish communal norms, indeed embraced them, not because these norms were religious *per se* but because they underlined the Jewish identity of the act.

In the event, the instincts of all five men were in harmony with rabbinical rulings issued during and after the Holocaust. An authoritative contemporary source was Rabbi Ephraim Oshry, a rabbi and expert in Jewish law who survived the Holocaust in hiding in the ghetto in Kovno (Kaunas), Lithuania. Throughout the Nazi occupation and in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, Rabbi Oshry responded to questions posed to him by Jews who wished to follow Jewish law even under the most extreme conditions. A comprehensive collection of his responsa from the Holocaust and the post-war period was published over the course of several years after the war. As rabbi of the surviving remnant of the Kovno Jewish community after the Russians' liberation of the city in August 1944, he led the search for Jewish bodies and human remains, which he and his helpers discovered scattered throughout Kovno. He supervised the reburial of approximately 3,000 corpses and bones and limbs. He had clearly recognizable bodies buried individually, but because it could not be determined which bones and limbs belonged to particular individuals, he buried them together in a collective grave. He also had the bones of Jews executed and buried hastily in a non-Jewish cemetery removed to a Jewish cemetery for burial. Clearly, the ubiquitous presence of mass graves and the scattering of human remains demanded a departure from regular Jewish law and practice. For one thing, Jewish law, he ruled, permitted unclaimed corpses to be transferred to a permanent burial ground lest they become prey to natural scavengers. (He must have also had human scavengers in mind. They certainly proliferated in Poland after the war, vandalizing graves of Holocaust victims in search of cash and valuables and desecrating their corpses, extracting gold teeth or valuables secreted in the victims' bodies if they discovered them.)²⁶ For another, Jewish law, Oshry pronounced, required that dead Jews be buried to prevent disgrace and shame to the unburied body. But there was a deeper level to his ruling permitting the exhumation and reburial of Jewish corpses even when Jewish tradition normally prohibits disinterment and requires an unclaimed, unburied corpse to be buried where it is found: a demand for divine justice and an appeal to memory. Citing earlier rabbinical edicts, Oshry explains why he ruled that Jews killed in a non-Jewish cemetery should be transferred to a Jewish cemetery:

'Bury those who are murdered [by gentiles] separately because there is a constant Divine command for justice which is not satisfied until the murderer's blood is shed, as it is written, "He who sheds the blood of a

human being, his blood must be shed.” I also required that a permanent memorial be placed upon the common grave of the bones so that future generations would remember what the murderers had destroyed and how much holy Jewish blood they shed. Earth! Do not cover their blood! It cries out to [God] from you and demands that [God] avenge it.²⁷

Although Laksman, Frenkel, Mincberg, Braf, and Weichselfish do not seem to have been aware of any rabbinical ruling, let alone Oshry’s – Oshry was, after all, a rabbi in Lithuania, not Poland – permitting the exhumation and reburial of Jewish corpses, by their actions they seem to have anticipated or intuited it.

Katherine Verdery has explored ‘the political lives of dead bodies’ in postcommunist Eastern Europe; personal grief aside, the reburial of the opponents of communist policies has become tantamount throughout the region to a political argument for spatial realignment, social reconfiguration, and accountability and punishment among other things.²⁸ For Laksman, Frenkel, and the other Jews who virtually single-handedly buried their fellow Jews after the Holocaust, dead Jewish bodies possessed no political capital. They harboured no dreams of a reconstituted Jewish community in Poland and planned themselves to leave the country in the foreseeable future. For its part, the Polish state, formally communist by 1947, was uninterested in the reburial and exhumation of dead Jews since living Jews were, from the state’s perspective, irrelevant to state-building in future while Jewish cemeteries in mid-size and small towns generally lay on the geographical and mental periphery of towns, out of sight. To be sure, in reburying the Jewish dead the survivors wanted to prove to local Poles that Jews had returned despite widespread Polish approval for and occasional Polish complicity in the Nazis’ campaign to destroy Polish Jewry. But they could not have realistically hoped that the freshly dug graves of the Jewish dead in desolate Jewish cemeteries, marked by modest monuments, would serve as admonitions to Poles or ultimately stave off the erasure of Jewish memory in Poland. Indeed, two days after the ceremony in Kutno, vandals destroyed the monument placed atop the grave where the ashes of the town’s victims were buried. And even if the wilful obliteration of the memory of the Jewish presence in Poland over centuries would eventually subside, whom could the survivors expect to tend to the gravesites of reburied Jews once they themselves left Poland for good?

In contrast, when Jews in displaced persons camps in the American and British zones of post-war occupied Germany exhumed and reburied Jews who had died on German soil, inherent in their

affording the victims a proper burial was a political argument for a Jewish state in Palestine; a Jewish state was what the world owed the Jews for their suffering, embodied by the Jewish dead. Moreover, very often Germans, including former Nazis in American or British custody, were forced to dig the graves in which their victims were buried under the eyes of the displaced persons – a token of revenge for the survivors.²⁹

To be sure, revenge was not far from the minds of Laksman, Frenkel and the others; one can find the word ‘revenge’ (in Yiddish, *nekome*; in Hebrew *nekamah*) in the accounts by Laksman and Weichselfish. For his part, Weichselfish made the decision to bring the ashes from Chelmno to Kutno for burial after a visit to the sugar refinery where the Jews of Kutno were concentrated before the Germans sent them to their deaths. In the now deserted and desolate building, he pictures the pain and suffering of Kutno’s Jews on the eve of their deportation to the death camp:

It seemed to me as if the naked walls of [the sugar refinery] were crying out to me only one word, which was carried by the wind throughout Poland, and possibly throughout the entire world: revenge! And I swore at that moment to bring some ashes from Chelmno and bury them in the Kutno [Jewish] cemetery. The ashes of the martyrs (*kedoyshim*) should be given a Jewish burial.³⁰

But even if Jewish survivors returning to Poland desired revenge, their primary motivation in exhuming and reburying the bodies of their loved ones and neighbours was decidedly not political – the exhumation and reburial of Polish Jews lacked any political argument or advantage – but, rather, deeply personal. They were first and foremost dead bodies with a claim to be buried in dignity.

It should be added that bereavement in Judaism entails several prescriptive and customary practices that precede and even follow burial. Burial should take place as soon as possible after death. It is the task of volunteers belonging to the *chevra kadisha* to prepare a body for proper Jewish burial. They wash it, ritually purify it, and wrap it in a shroud, all the while keeping guard over it until burial. There is frequently a funeral procession to accompany the corpse to its final resting place. *Kaddish*, the prayer for the dead, is recited. There is often a eulogy. Then there are well-defined stages of mourning after burial. A tombstone is unveiled after a prescribed period of time – in Europe twelve months. Relatives annually mark the death of their loved one.³¹ Very few of these rituals were – or could be – observed by Laksman, Frenkel, and the others.

It is tempting to see in these men the modern equivalent of Antigone, the eponymous heroine of Sophocles' tragic play. In Sophocles' hands Antigone's heroism is motivated by her sisterly love for Polynices; aware of what will be her punishment, she disobeys authority to afford her brother an honourable burial. Like Antigone, Laksman, Frenkel, Mincberg, Braf, and Weichselfish acted out of respect for the honour of their loved ones and neighbours. But in their own eyes, they are not heroes. Indeed, the self-representation of these men in the yizkor books – after all, they describe their own deeds – is understated, perhaps because they must have been painfully aware that theirs was a partial success, that the bodies they found, the ashes they gathered, were but a drop in the bucket, as the bodies of most victims of the Holocaust were never found. If they nevertheless took such pains it was because exhumation and reburial were not merely for the sake of the dead – in Frenkel's words, 'this sacred endeavor' (*di heylike zakh*)³² – but also for their own sake, for sake of the living – what Laksman terms his 'human obligation' (*mentschlikher khov*).³³ In the words of Robert Pogue-Harrison, a literary scholar who has written eloquently on the importance of the dead to the living, 'To be human means above all to bury.'³⁴ How much more so is this assertion true in respect of the survivors like Laksman and the others, who had struggled mightily to maintain their humanity in the face of the Germans' colossal attempt to dehumanize Jews. Anthropologists Jack Kugelmaas and Jonathan Boyarin agree. 'The problem of exhumation and proper burial', they write, 'was not merely an obligation to the dead; it had implications for the living. How were the survivors to re-establish any connection with the memory of the martyrs? How were they to locate and communicate with the dead, to obtain the ancient comfort of mourning?'³⁵

Perhaps for this very reason, however, perhaps because the survivors who returned to Poland, by the very act of exhuming and reburying the relatives and neighbours of their *landslayt*, their townspeople, afforded them, the living, a degree of solace and enabled them to reconnect with the dead without the feeling of guilt associated with leaving their loved ones and acquaintances lying somewhere unburied, in the eyes of their *landlayt*, those whose grass-roots efforts made it possible to publish yizkor books in the first place, Laksman, Frenkel, Mincberg, Braf, Weichselfish, and countless other returnees like them were heroes. Thus the deep expression of appreciation and praise for Laksman's efforts by the editorial board of the Żelechów yizkor book, which appears in its pages alongside his account.³⁶ Likewise, preceding Frenkel's account

the reader encounters an encomium penned by Chaim Leyb Fuchs, a survivor of Skierniewice, to Frenkel, whom he dubs 'the heroic captain'.³⁷ Heroic or not, the returning survivors ran a high risk when they exhumed and reburied the dead, for the volatility of antisemitic violence in post-war Poland placed their personal safety in constant jeopardy.³⁸ Perhaps for this reason, women do not seem to have initiated exhumation and reburial. Although the dissolution of Jewish families during the Holocaust led to a drastic reshaping of traditional gender roles in many cases, with women assuming more responsibility for the welfare, if not survival, of family members, exhumation and reburial required searching for, recovering, and burying bodies in the open in a highly charged, antisemitic, and non-permissive post-war Polish environment – a task deemed by men and women alike too perilous for women, especially after the war, when Jewish men and women were often eager to reassume traditional gender roles.³⁹ Moreover, to search for, disinter, move, and rebury Jewish corpses and remains in a Jewish cemetery in accordance with Jewish ritual required physical and mental stamina, which many survivors, extremely weak after their ordeal, simply lacked.⁴⁰

The depiction of the exhumation and reburial of Jewish corpses in yizkor books entails, of course, not only the event itself but also memory: first, the preservation of the memory of the victims in the minds and hearts of those who were there and took part in it and the preservation of their memory in the minds of those who were not there, either fellow townspeople or offspring. The portrayal of exhumation and reburial in yizkor books, rooted in the memory of their authors, has, however, a deeply ironic aspect. The point of this entire effort to exhume the corpses and then rebury the victims of the Holocaust with dignity was to enshrine the memory of their names for time immemorial, to prevent the erasure of memory. Yet, after Laksman and the others left Poland, the victims' graves were left, with few exceptions, untended while their names largely faded into oblivion.

By the same token, even the hundreds of exhumations and reburials undertaken by returning survivors could not contain the dead; there were just too many dead Jews to be exhumed and reburied. This is also part of the narrative of the yizkor books, the hidden narrative that, in the final analysis, destabilizes the accounts by Laksman, Frenkel, Minberg, Braf, and Weichselfish. For all of their success in exhuming and reburying Holocaust victims, a painstaking process that was meant to bring a measure of peace to the living, to some families and members of the community, in the final analysis there is in their accounts a sense of failure.

Notes

- 1 S. Mincberg, 'Noch der befrayung', in M. Schutzman (ed.), *Sefer virz-bnik-starakhovitz* (Tel Aviv: Mif'al ha-va'ad ha-tzibori shel yotz'ey virz-bnik-starakhovitz ba-'aretz uve-tefutzot, 1974), pp. 345–8, here 347.
- 2 See G. N. Finder & J. R. Cohen, 'Memento mori: photographs from the grave', *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, 20 (2008), 55–73.
- 3 A. Kopciowski, *Ksigg pamięci gmin żydowskich: Bibliograifa; Jewish Memorial Books: A Bibliography* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Cuire-Skłodowskiej, 2008), p. 19.
- 4 J. E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 7.
- 5 Y. Slutsky & S. Krakowski, 'Zelechov', in M. Berenbaum & F. Skolnik (eds), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edn, vol. 21 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), p. 500.
- 6 S. Laksman, 'In mayn geburt-shtot nokh der milkhome', in A. W. Jasny (ed.), *Yizker-bukh fun der zhelikhover yidisher kehile; Sefer yizkor li-kehilat zhelihov* (Chicago: Tsentrale zhelikhover landsmanshaft in Shikago, 1953), pp. 315–17, here 315.
- 7 See S. Redlich, *Life in Transit: Jews in Postwar Lodz, 1945–1950* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010).
- 8 Laksman, 'In mayn geburt-shtot nokh der milkhome', p. 317; 'Ekshumatsiye un levaye fun 17 hitler-korbones in zhelikhov', *Dos naje lebn*, 13 July 1943, reprinted in Jasny (ed.), *Yizker-bukh fun der zhelikhover yidisher kehile*, pp. 320–1.
- 9 S. Laksman, 'Di letste eksumatsiyes', in Jasny (ed.), *Yizker-bukh fun der zhelikhover yidisher kehile*, p. 322; see also the documents on pp. 323–6.
- 10 Laksman, 'In mayn geburt-shtot nokh der milkhome', p. 315.
- 11 A. Cygielman & S. Krakowski, 'Skierniewice', in Berenbaum & Skolnik (eds), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 18, pp. 658–9.
- 12 C. Frenkel, 'In undzer kharuver heymshtot', in I. Perlow (ed.), *Seyfer skernyevits: Lezeykher der fartilikter kehile kdushe* (Tel Aviv: Irgun yoytsey skernyevits beyisroel mit der hilf fun skernyevitser landsmanshaft in nju-york, 1955), pp. 652–65, here 661.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 662.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 663.
- 15 The photographs appear on pp. 662–4. Frenkel mentions that the event was filmed. Rare footage of the unveiling is available at the YIVO Institute in New York.
- 16 Frenkel, 'In undzer kharuver heymshtot', p. 665.
- 17 See C. R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2010).
- 18 Mincberg, 'Nokh der befrayung', p. 345.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 20 S. Krakowski, 'Otwock', in Berenbaum & Skolnik (eds), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 15, p. 546.
- 21 M.-M. (Mendl) Braf, 'iti 'eykh 'etbol be-dam', in S. Kanc (ed.), *Sefer zikaron 'otwotzk kartshev; Yizker-bukh tsu faryebikn dem ondenk fun*

- di kheyruv-gevorene yidishe kehilos otvotsk karschev* (Tel Aviv: 'Irgun yotzey 'otvotzk be-yisrael' bay der mithilf fun di otvotsker un kartshever landsmanshaftn in frankraykh, amerike un kanade, 1968), cols 971–6, here 974.
- 22 S. L. Kirshenboim & D. Dombrowska, 'Kutno', in Berenbaum & Skolnik (eds), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 12, pp. 398–9.
 - 23 E. Weichselfish, 'Kutne in Yanuar 1945', in D. Shtokfish (ed.), *Sefer kutnah ve-hasevivah* (Tel Aviv: 'Irgun yotzey kutnah ve-hasevivah be-yisrael uve-hutz la-'arets, 1968), pp. 402–5, here 405.
 - 24 It was not uncommon for survivors to collect, transfer, and bury the ashes of Holocaust victims. See J.-M. Dreyfus, 'Ashes and human remains during and after the Holocaust', unpublished conference paper delivered at Lessons and Legacies XII, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, November 2012.
 - 25 M. Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), pp. 71–2.
 - 26 See J. T. Gross & I. G. Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 - 27 E. Oshry, *Responsa from the Holocaust* (New York: The Judaica Press, 2001), pp. 157–8; on Oshry, see A. Goldberg, 'Oshry, Ephraim', in G. D. Hundert (ed.), *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1298–9.
 - 28 K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
 - 29 See M. M. Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 85–105.
 - 30 Weichselfish, 'Kutne in Yanuar 1945', p. 403.
 - 31 See Lamm, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*.
 - 32 Frenkel, 'In undzer kharuver heym-shtot', p. 661.
 - 33 Laksman, 'In mayn geburt-shtot nokh der milkhom', p. 315.
 - 34 R. P. Harrison, *The Domination of the Dead* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. xi.
 - 35 J. Kugelmass & J. Boyarin (eds), *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 31.
 - 36 'Tsu keyver-yisroel', in Jasny (ed.), *Yizker-bukh fun der zhelikhover yidisher kehile*, p. 320.
 - 37 C. L. Fuks, 'Der heldisher kapitan', in Perlow (ed.), *Seyfer skernyevits*, pp. 650–1.
 - 38 See J. T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Random House, 2006). Compare their effort with that of survivors in displaced-persons camps in American-occupied post-war Germany. Like returning survivors in Poland, Jewish displaced persons, who came mainly from Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, deemed it their solemn responsibility to afford a proper burial to Jewish victims of Nazism who, in this case, had died on German soil, either in concentration camps or on death marches, but were largely strangers to the survivors. Forming committees for this

purpose, displaced persons buried or exhumed and reburied the Jewish dead under the protection, albeit frequently begrudging protection, of the American military, with the financial support of the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), which also intervened with American commanders for permission to exhume and transfer Jewish corpses, and with the assistance of American rabbis serving in the capacity of military chaplains. In contrast, the returnees to small towns in Poland were essentially one-man operations. See G. N. Finder, 'Yizkor! Commemoration of the dead by Jewish displaced persons in postwar Germany', in A. Confino, P. Betts & D. Schumann (eds), *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 232–57, here 236–40.

- 39 On the reshaping of traditional gender roles during the Holocaust and the significant degree to which they were readopted by Jewish displaced persons after war, see Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany*, pp. 107–58; and A. Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 184–235.
- 40 In this vein, see Oshry, *Responsa from the Holocaust*, p. 155.

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