

The transfer of ashes after the Holocaust in Europe, 1945–60

HUMAN
REMAINS
& VIOLENCE

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Abstract

From 1945 until around 1960, ceremonies of a new kind took place throughout Europe to commemorate the Holocaust and the deportation of Jews; ashes would be taken from the site of a concentration camp, an extermination camp, or the site of a massacre and sent back to the deportees' country of origin (or to Israel). In these countries, commemorative ceremonies were then organised and these ashes (sometimes containing other human remains) placed within a memorial or reburied in a cemetery. These transfers of ashes have, however, received little attention from historical researchers. This article sets out to describe a certain number of them, all differing considerably from one another, before drawing up a typology of this phenomenon and attempting its analysis. It investigates the symbolic function of ashes in the aftermath of the Second World War and argues that these transfers – as well as having a mimetic relationship to transfers of relics – were also instruments of political legitimisation.

Key words: Holocaust, deportation, memorials, WWII (aftermath), human remains, ashes

Introduction¹

The Israelite cemetery in Obernai is not the oldest in Alsace, a region in which the Jewish presence dates back to the High Medieval period. In accordance with Jewish tradition, the cemetery was built outside the town, and today it is situated in the middle of an industrial estate. One of the graves bears the following inscription: 'In memory of beloved and much missed parents Moïse and Ernestine Levy and of our dear brother Ernest deported to their deaths during the 1939–1945 war. Here lie some ashes brought back from Auschwitz for them. Perhaps they are theirs.' This is followed by the traditional wording, in the form of an acronym, placed on Jewish tombs since the Middle Ages: 'here is buried' and תנצ"ה ('may his soul be bound up in the bond of life'). Meanwhile, in the Jewish cemetery of Rosenwiller, not far from Obernai, a cemetery that dates back at least to the thirteenth century, one finds a stone appendix on the grave of Bernard Zolty (15 May 1927 – 21 May 2005), clearly

placed at the same time as the headstone, bearing the inscription 'In memory of his father Moszeck, who died in 1943 in Mauthausen Concentration Camp and of All Our Dead who have no Grave'. In the same cemetery in Rosenwiller, one can also see a double grave with the inscription: 'Jeanne Fisch née Moïse, Marx Fisch of Rosheim deported to their Deaths', which seems to suggest that the grave is symbolic, just a headstone with no bodies underneath.

This little walk through two Jewish cemeteries in Alsace reveals the moving desire of survivors from small rural communities to make a gesture of remembrance to the dead. They were able to do so in spite of the absence of any ritual prescriptions in Judaism at the time concerning the treatment of dead bodies *en masse*, and especially regarding a new phenomenon created by the Holocaust: the absence of bodies. Here one can see a collective attempt to create monuments to the dead who could not be buried within the cemetery, along with an individual attempt to create a grave in traditional form (sober, with a standing headstone, as is the tradition among Ashkenazi Jews).² The burial of ashes taken from Auschwitz is also significant, a moving attempt at substitution in the absence of a funeral.

These two examples of the transfer of ashes may serve as an introduction to the subject of this article, an extremely widespread phenomenon, yet one that has until now been neither described nor studied, namely the transfer of ashes (and, to a lesser extent, of human remains) in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Nazi extermination camps. Faced with the scale of the Jewish catastrophe and the destruction in Europe, and the extreme dehumanisation of the victims of National Socialist persecutions, numerous initiatives were undertaken to help with the grieving process, suggest possible reparations and find suitable means of commemoration given the enormity of these crimes.

The content of this article is the fruit of much sustained research and observation carried out by the author over a number of years. As its subject does not fall within existing categories of research into the consequences of deportation and the Holocaust, it is based on a range of somewhat disparate sources: archival research has yielded some results, in particular the archives of the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris and those of the official Jewish community in Berlin (Centrum Judaicum). It draws on examples from across the whole of Europe, according to whatever information has been available; however, this article does not claim to be in any way exhaustive. Rather, it seeks to put forward hypotheses and consider paths for further research into the social, political and religious history of the memorialisation of ashes. To this end, it sets out some preliminary data for future thinking on a phenomenon that has, perhaps surprisingly, been neglected by the large number of historical studies devoted to the problems of the aftermath of the war and of the Holocaust. This is a history article, rather than a piece of historical anthropology, although it does refer to some notions drawn from religious anthropology in order to set out certain interpretative and explicative hypotheses. The methodology employed has involved the collection of numerous examples and their documentation, along with the selection of significant case studies which make analysis through analogy and comparison possible, given that no centralised archives dealing with this subject exist. A considerable quantity of data has been collected

during visits to the sites mentioned. This article will therefore attempt to establish a classification of the different forms of ash transfer, along with a chronology of these transfers.

Not all of the transferred ashes came from Auschwitz-Birkenau, although the latter quickly became a symbol of the Holocaust; some, as we shall see, were taken from concentration camps within the Reich, namely Dachau and Buchenwald. In the 1950s, the memory and representations of the two events linked to these sites – the persecution and deportation of anti-Nazi resistance fighters on the one hand and the destruction of European Jews on the other – were not entirely separate and were involved in constant dialogue and exchanges of references, if not active competition, with each other. This article will focus mainly on those instances of the transfer of ashes that were organised by collectives, namely survivors' associations or Jewish communities. After describing several cases of such transfers, I will try to explain the difficulties involved in inscribing this movement of remains within Jewish tradition and history, comparing it with the transfers of ashes carried out by resistance organisations. Lastly, I will attempt to give an explanation for this phenomenon which contravenes both the spirit and the letter of Jewish law (the Halakhah). In doing so I will reveal the sheer diversity of the actors involved in these transfers of ashes and human remains: these include families, individuals, survivors, families' and survivors' associations, various administrations (in particular those dealing with deportees or the victims of war) and diplomats. Many of these were new organisations, born out of the war and the German occupation (such as resistance organisations or victims' associations); others predated the Nazi period, such as the official Jewish communities. The latter, however, came out of the war severely weakened, their members in many countries having been murdered *en masse* (albeit with extremely varied survival rates), and their leadership was to a large extent rebuilt from scratch since most of the pre-war Jewish leaders had been killed.³ New organisations, some confessionally based, were also created following the liberation with the exclusive aim of perpetuating the memory of the victims. They played an important part in the phenomenon described here.

Ashes of Jewish deportees and Resistance fighters

One of the first Italian monuments to the deportation was inaugurated in 1946. It is situated at the entrance to the monumental cemetery of Milan (cimiterio monumentale di Milano).⁴ The monument was commissioned by an anti-Nazi resistance association, the National Association of Italian Antifascist Political Victims (ANPPIA). The task of constructing it was given to the architecture and design firm BBPR (the initials of the firm's four associates: Banfi, Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers), one of whose founders, Gianluigi Banfi, had been deported and murdered. The monument is modernist in form; at its centre is a glass cube containing earth brought back from Mauthausen camp. The fact that the content of the cube is described as 'earth' is an important point; in many examples studied here rather vague descriptions were given to the material that was transported and memorialised, including ashes, earth and crushed fragments of human bone. Given the

context of the liberation of the camps (such as the destruction by the SS of the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau) this is hardly surprising.⁵ Even the ashes from the crematoria were systematically placed in rivers or reservoirs as part of the process of ensuring the complete destruction of bodies implemented by the Nazis.⁶

The glass cube in the monumental cemetery of Milan also underwent numerous modifications over time, up until the end of the 1950s; deportees' families wanted to add named plaques to this predominantly conceptual monument.⁷ The symbol represented by this 'earth' brought back from the camp – just one camp – was supposed, in the eyes of the architects, to stand for the human remains of all Italian deportees, or at least the place where their ashes were scattered. This glass cube also had a companion piece in the same Milan cemetery, but was this time placed in the Jewish section and built one year later. This second monument was inaugurated on 13 July 1947. The architect Manfredo d'Urbino designed a seven-branched candelabra looking over a crypt containing twelve Jewish tombs of Jewish fighters killed, for the most part, inside Italy.⁸ At the centre of the monument were placed some 'ashes' from Dachau. They symbolise the corpses of those who are absent and of the Jewish deportees more generally. Yet Italian Jews were not deported to Dachau, which was a concentration camp for political opponents, but to Auschwitz. Another feature of the Milan monument which is typical of monuments to the deportation of the Jews constructed soon after the liberation is that it is located within the Jewish cemetery.

This symbolism of earth and ashes was also employed in Eastern Europe in particular. In September 1945, the actor and director of the Yiddish theatre Salomon Mikhoels, the president of the Soviet Jewish Antifascist Committee, appeared in public in Kiev's Jewish theatre. He arrived bearing a crystal vase, 'but there were no flowers in the vase – it was filled with a yellow and black substance', one observer reported. Mikhoels explained in Yiddish that, before coming, he had gone with some friends from the Jewish theatre in Moscow (which he ran) to a shop to buy the crystal vase. From there, they had gone straight to Babi Yar – the site of the massacre of the 33,771 Jews of Kiev on 29 and 30 September 1941, and had filled the vase with earth that 'held the screams of mothers and fathers, from the young boys and girls who did not live to grow up, screams from all who were sent there by the fascist beasts'. Holding up the vase, Mikhoels declared 'Look at this. You will see laces from a child's shoes, tied by little Sara who fell with her mother. Look carefully and you will see the tears of an old Jewish woman ... Look closely and you will see your fathers who are crying "Sh'ma Israel" and looking with beseeching eyes to heaven, hoping for an angel to rescue them.' And to conclude: 'I have brought you a little earth from Babi Yar. Throw into it some flowers so they will grow symbolically for our people ... In spite of our enemies, we shall live.'⁹ I have underlined the colour of this earth: 'yellow and black'. It does sound like this vase contained a mixture of earth and ashes. Mikhoels' speech is emblematic of these transfers of ashes that I seek to describe here; earth and ash are in this case substitutes for memory, but also represent the victims as a collective whole. They are seen as an essential basis for the reconstruction of the Jewish people, as the end of his speech suggests. On his return to Moscow, Mikhoels launched a campaign

for the construction of monuments to the Soviet Jews who had been murdered. The sequence of events here is important; the ashes appear first, recovered from the site of a massacre. Once displayed in public, they become a relic imbued with a meaning – even if this is not unequivocal – and it becomes necessary to find a resting place for them. Monuments were thus constructed because these ashes were in people's possession.

This was certainly the case in France; on 30 June 1946, the National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots (FNDIRP), the great communist-allied federation for surviving deportees and their families (with a mass-membership in France at the time), chose a spot in Père-Lachaise cemetery, near the Communards' Wall (Mur des Fédérés)¹⁰ in the 97th division, to place an urn containing ashes taken from near to one of the crematoria at Auschwitz. Five speeches were given.¹¹ This was before the creation of the Auschwitz memorial on this site. The memorial, sculpted by Françoise Salmon, herself a member of the Resistance, a Jew and a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, would only be inaugurated in June 1949. Here one can see an interesting instance of the transfer of ashes preceding the erection of a memorial. The urn, having been 'sanctified' by these ceremonies, needed to be accommodated. The present plaque is more recent, having been changed after the precise figures for deportations from France to Auschwitz were published in 1978. It bears the inscription 'A small quantity of earth and ashes from Auschwitz placed here perpetuate the memory of their martyrdom.'¹²

The symbolism of ashes following the Second World War

As early as 1946, pilgrimages took place to the sites of certain major concentration camps. These were organised by the larger European survivors' federations. Survivors of the camps grouped into national associations took part in these, occasionally alongside family members – widows, widowers and orphans. These events had political overtones, allowing survivors to commune in the cult of remembrance of their dead comrades, families to have a place and occasion for contemplation and associations to proclaim their political role. The East-West conflict was also played out in many ways during these events, with a clear division between communist and non-communist federations.¹³ National delegations brought back earth from the camps to their countries and, in rarer cases, fragments of bone that could still be found around the crematoria before the soil had been washed away by rain or sifted through by the 'panners'¹⁴ – Polish locals who, in groups or individually, dug over the sites of the extermination camps in the hope of finding valuables buried by the victims before they were murdered. While the political significance of the transfer of the ashes of deported Resistance fighters is clear, and was explained in public discourse (namely the return of the ashes of combatants to the soil of the country for which they fell), this is anything but obvious in the case of the movement of the ashes of Jews deported on racial grounds.

What is the symbolism of the ashes from Birkenau, in particular within Jewish tradition where rituals of mourning and burial, not to mention laws of impurity

surrounding corpses, are complex and codified in great detail? In Jewish biblical culture, known in the West from the Renaissance and the age of humanism onwards, ashes symbolise death. Jewish funerary practices have retained this symbolic meaning to this day; the person returning in mourning from the cemetery symbolically tears off a piece of their clothing and marks their forehead with ashes.¹⁵ In the Old Testament, 'covering one's head with ashes' is a sign of mourning. Ashes are at once what is left behind but also what marks the beginning, for Man was created by God in His image out of dust from the ground. It is written in Genesis that 'God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being'.¹⁶ In some Jewish communities, on the eve of Tisha B'Av, the fast which, in the summer, commemorates the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, ashes from burnt food are consumed.

However, the ashes and dust in question are categorically not material derived from corpses. Cremation remains strictly forbidden by Judaism. The body must return to the earth from which, according to the verse from the Bible, it originally came. Individuals do not own their bodies, and these must return to God. Because of this tradition, tattoos, scarification and self-mutilation have all been forbidden. It is therefore difficult to place the transfers of human ashes described here within an historical anthropology of Jewish funeral rites, even if the latter had undergone some modifications owing to the pressure of political and social developments in Europe since the Emancipation.¹⁷ Yet, alongside the gas chambers, descriptions of crematoria – which had been known since the 1930s when they were first built in the concentration camps – were a central representation of the 'revelation' of the Jewish genocide in 1945. One of the images from 1945 that had a particularly powerful effect on world opinion – and within the Jewish world – was the description of the mass cremation.¹⁸ It is undeniable that the most shocking visual images were those from Bergen-Belsen, with its piles of emaciated corpses, yet the first accounts by survivors of Auschwitz helped to fix this image of bodies reduced to ashes at a time when post-mortem cremation was still most uncommon in Europe. The use, from a very early stage, of the term 'Holocaust', a Greek word referring to a sacrifice that has been burned completely (as opposed to the *thyesthai*, at least part of which was eaten by the priests and their table-companions) is indicative of the analogies at work here and the symbolic role of human ashes in a vaguely conscious shift towards religious vocabulary. This distinction between burnt and unburnt sacrifices is also present in the Old Testament. This new imagery of destruction focusing on human ashes was the product of a representation of the destruction of European Jews – and of the members of the Resistance who died in the camps – which centred on the deportations from Western Europe. The 'Holocaust by bullets', as Father Patrick Desbois has recently described it, had yet to enter people's memories, in Western Europe at any rate.¹⁹ The bodies of the 1.5 million Jewish victims of this latter massacre were put in mass graves. This representational bias has been examined by the historian Timothy Snyder, who underlines how a narrative of the Holocaust was primarily constructed through reference to the testimony of Jewish survivors from Western Europe. The voices of these assimilated Jews – such as Primo Levi – who were far removed from Yiddish culture, were the only ones that

could be heard in the early post-war years,²⁰ and frames of memory, along with official or community-based practices of commemoration, varied widely from one European country to another. It is very likely that these transfers of ashes were conceived of and understood in different ways according to the country in question, yet the fundamentally invariable nature of the act – taking ashes from the ground, transporting them, burying them again – is interesting, precisely because it responds to similar commemorative needs in such widely differing contexts.

It is possible to find accounts of transfers of human remains from the Holocaust carried out – as a form of reappropriation – by individuals and families, rather than associations, but these are rare. Does this mean that they only took place very rarely, or simply that they have not remained in the collective memory? It would seem in any case that a shift in sensibilities around ashes and human remains from the Holocaust took place at the end of the 1950s, as these practices of transfer stopped at this time. Nevertheless, I can cite my personal experience of at least one case, namely that of pieces of human bone and ashes collected by Professor Robert Waitz, the French head doctor of the *Revier* (the detainees' infirmary) at Auschwitz III-Monowitz. On 27 March 2005, during my fellowship at the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem, Francine Lévy-Waitz, Robert Waitz' daughter, sent me, via mutual friends, a small, carefully wrapped package. It contained round plastic medical sample jars filled with ashes and fragments of human bone. Mrs Lévy-Waitz wanted to pass on these remains, found among her father's effects after his death, to Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust memorial in Israel. I have been able to find evidence of another case of this type: Mme Anne Schuchman has told how, among the affairs of her grandfather, a Polish Jew who had emigrated to France in the 1930s, she found a human bone, probably a femur. Leibl Azen had gone back to Poland in 1957 to visit Zaremby, the village of his birth. A friend took him to the place where 3,000 Jews from the village and surrounding country had been massacred. Bones lay scattered on the surface of the soil. Azen took one and placed it in the glove compartment of his car, where it remained for many years.²¹ After the death of their grandfather, the family decided to bury the bone beneath an olive tree in their holiday home in the Yonne region of Burgundy.²²

Were these transfers of remains from victims of the Holocaust inspired by the transfers of the ashes of the Resistance's deported members? The chronology seems to suggest that they were. This was the case in Milan where, as we have seen, the first memorialisation involving earth from a camp was performed by an anti-fascist resistance association. It was only subsequently, soon after this first inauguration, that the Jewish community in turn brought back soil from the same source. A similar pattern was visible in France. After the symbolic return of ashes from Auschwitz organised by the FNDIRP, the various organisations representing the French Jewish community followed suit. This process even used the official channels of French diplomacy. In May 1947, Léon Meiss, the president of the Central Jewish Consistory, wrote to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs at the quai d'Orsay:

Numerous Jewish cultural associations have expressed to us their desire to seal within the monument that they are erecting in memory of our coreligionists who fell

victim to the German occupation an urn containing ashes taken from the crematoria at Auschwitz. This act would constitute a symbol somewhat analogous to that of the Unknown Soldier and would enable families who cannot come to meditate upon the tomb of a loved one to evoke the memory of those whom they mourn.²³

In this same period, the Central Consistory instructed these communities to place plaques inside their synagogues bearing the names of the faithful who had been deported beneath the heading 'Fallen for France' ('Morts pour la France'). Léon Meiss's request was immediately passed on to the French embassy in Warsaw.²⁴ On 25 October 1947, the ambassador, Roger Garreau, was able to announce that the Polish authorities had provided him with an urn filled with ashes and that he would send it to Paris by diplomatic bag. The general secretary of the Consistory picked it up at the quai d'Orsay. It is interesting to note that, in addition to the practical aspects of Léon Meiss's request – which spared the Jewish authorities from making a trip to Poland – having the urn sent by diplomatic bag constituted a form of legitimisation by the State of the demands for memorialisation coming from official French Judaism. The monument to deportees in the Great Synagogue of Paris, on rue de la Victoire, had been inaugurated in the presence of the President of the Republic, Vincent Auriol, on 27 February 1947, without the ashes.²⁵ Their addition was, in a way, a testimony to the inadequacy of a monument that was nevertheless imposing, although not entirely public, being situated in the building that symbolised official French Judaism. The reference to the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, meanwhile, seems extremely significant in this context.²⁶ The deportation of the Jews of France was in this way 'militarised'; the wording 'Fallen for France' was routinely added to the plaques placed in synagogues in this period, copying the plaques engraved after the First World War. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier, built beneath the Arc de Triomphe in Paris on 11 November 1920, had been inaugurated by the Minister of War at the time, André Maginot. The body buried in it had been chosen from among eight bodies recognised as being those of French soldiers – each exhumed from one of the eight military regions of the First World War – whose identity it had not been possible to establish.

In a similar manner, the grand project for a memorial to the deportation of France's Jews was based from the outset on ashes brought back from the camps. The memorial was driven forward by the dedication and energy of Isaac Schneersohn, a Russian-born Jew with a scrap metal business in France who, on 28 April 1943, had secretly set up the Centre for Contemporary Jewish Documentation (Centre de documentation juive contemporaine) in Grenoble. The idea of transferring ashes and human remains was present from the very beginning of the project for the memorial, which caused some controversy within the established French Jewish community. From the very start, this transfer ran into opposition from the rabbinate. The Association of French Rabbis published a communiqué in which it declared that it 'cannot give its approval to the burial outside a cemetery of the sacred ashes [of the] martyrs' and added that 'the presence of such ashes in a crypt runs the risk of giving rise to ceremonies of a more or less religious nature liable to take on a character that is more often pagan than Jewish'.²⁷ The ashes

arrived in Paris before the Memorial to the Unknown Jewish Martyr (Mémorial du martyr juif inconnu) had even been inaugurated. They were temporarily placed in a grave in the Jewish section of Montparnasse cemetery. Ashes taken from the various different camps would, despite all these problems, be placed in the crypt of the Memorial when it was at last completed on 24 February 1957. The crypt was inaugurated in the presence of the chief rabbi of France Jacob Kaplan, in spite of the firm opposition to the use of these ashes that he had pronounced one year previously. It is true that, in the meantime, the chief rabbi of Israel, Isaac Herzog, had given his approval for the burial of ashes, and such ceremonies had taken place in Israel itself, under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (see below).²⁸ Soil from Israel had been added to the soil of the camps. In Alsace, too, ashes brought back from Auschwitz were buried, and the burial was performed in front of the memorial to Jewish deportees in the Jewish cemetery in Cronenbourg.

The transfer of ashes as a tool of political legitimisation

However, the interpretations placed upon these transfers of ashes in the aftermath of the Holocaust went beyond the simple notion of their being substitute graves. These ashes were becoming instruments of political legitimisation at a time when the exact form public policies of memory should take had yet to be decided. The conflicts surrounding ashes and human remains grew in number; in France, for example, the *Réseau du souvenir* ('Remembrance Network', a small but highly influential Catholic organisation for deported resistance members), which in 1954 succeeded in having a National Day of Deportation (on the last Sunday of April) recognised by the French parliament, arranged the transfer of ashes from various camps to Fort Mont-Valérien in western Paris, the focal point for Gaullist memory of the Second World War.²⁹ This was interpreted by the FNDIRP, at this time closely aligned with the communists, as a provocative declaration of Gaullist allegiance by its competitors in the field of political legitimisation. Within the Jewish world, movements of ashes were also tied up with similar political struggles; examples of this are to be found in Israel where, while the approach was always Zionist, tensions existed between different political leanings, in particular between secular and religious Zionism. Zionist ideology or, rather, the dominant currents within Zionism in the post-war period, imagined that once the Jewish State was created, all the world's Jews would emigrate to Palestine. The question of confronting the Holocaust politically – and in particular of the place it should be given within the narrative of the construction of the State – divided the various political parties after 1945. Since the State of Israel was seen as the culmination of Jewish history, it was, *de jure*, the place where the remains of the vanished Jewish communities were to be held.³⁰ These 'remains' therefore had to be moved there regardless of the form they took. The representatives of the National Religious Party, part of the governing coalition until the 1970s, pressed for the transfer to Israel of the ashes of Theodor Herzl, the founder of political Zionism, along with the ashes of the victims of the Holocaust, as well as the Torah scrolls that had been profaned in Europe. This proposal was made in the Knesset by Hillel Kook, then a member, in June 1949.³¹ At

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the same time, rabbi Shmuel Zanwil Kahana, the unmoveable director general of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, was busy developing religious sites, in particular Mount Zion, which was considered to be the place where King David had been buried. An underground place of worship and commemoration was built there and inaugurated on the 10th day of the Jewish month of Tevet, a day of fasting and also the day of commemoration of the Holocaust (at this time at least) within orthodox currents of Judaism. During the inauguration ceremony, in August 1950, individuals brought in urns containing ashes and pieces of bone that they had in their possession. Throughout the 1950s, new material was regularly added to this 'Holocaust cellar', as it was called: *shofars* (ram's horns) found in Bergen-Belsen, Torah scrolls brought from Worms in Germany, etc. These objects were not all buried, and in fact many were displayed in a sort of museum.³² The 'cellar' became an important place of pilgrimage, at a time when access to the Jewish holy sites in the old town of Jerusalem was forbidden owing to the partitioning of the city.³³ The National Religious Party fought for a number of years to maintain exclusive control over commemorations held on this site, in spite of repeated criticisms from across the ideological spectrum in the new State. In particular, rabbi Kahana forbade the burial of ashes and human remains which survivors might have in their possession anywhere other than in the Mount Zion cellar.³⁴

The quasi-monopolistic position of the 'Holocaust cellar' was soon challenged. In point of fact, it would appear that the way in which rabbi Kahana went about collecting ashes from the Holocaust was itself a reaction to a previous highly-publicised event: the arrival in Israel of a glass casket, one and a half metres in height, containing thirty porcelain urns in the colours of the Jewish State.³⁵ The transfer in question had been organised by Simon Wiesenthal, the famous Nazi-hunter, who was himself a survivor of the camps. This was his first media coup, in June 1949. Wiesenthal wanted to force Israelis to face up to the memory of the genocide. The ashes were temporarily buried in Sanhedria Cemetery, in Jerusalem, until a final resting-place could be found for them. The creation of the 'Holocaust cellar' was thus a conscious parallel to these ashes as they waited for a permanent home. The need to find one for them was one of the reasons, among others, for the creation of Yad Vashem by a law passed in the Knesset in 1953. The ashes were placed beneath the crypt in a site, which in fact consists of a series of memorials on a hillside. Again, in 1957, ashes were brought to Israel from Poland. This led to conflict between the authorities at Yad Vashem and the rabbis in charge of religious affairs. Both groups wanted to claim possession of the ashes, which were a means of legitimising their authority over the memory and commemoration of the massacres. Yad Vashem, which is a secular institution, finally emerged victorious from this argument.³⁶

Lastly, and at the risk of appearing iconoclastic, it is possible to suggest an explanation for these post-Holocaust transfers of ashes through reference to the Christian cult of saints' relics. Of course, religious Judaism would discount the presence of any Christian references, yet their impregnation within the culture of a minority group that had lived for so long in Europe and, following the Emancipation, had undergone such a high degree of acculturation to the majority culture is undeni-

able. This said, at no point during this research have we seen the ashes of the victims of National Socialism being credited with supernatural properties, usually the hallmark of Christian relics. Nevertheless, from the 1930s to 1960s, Jews did draw on Christian representations of suffering (particularly from Catholic sources) in order to express their sorrow in the face of persecution. The visual register in particular was enriched by such references. One could, among many other examples, cite Marc Chagall's painting *The White Crucifixion* from 1938.³⁷ It shows Christ on the cross, his lower body covered by a Jewish prayer shawl. Around the cross a synagogue burns, a ship carries away refugees, a mob attacks a village.

From the very beginning, saints' relics were a crucial part of Christian religious life. They carried a variety of meanings; as miracle-working objects offering a path to transcendence, they were kept in churches. They even became necessary for the performance of worship within Catholicism. Their symbolic significance resided in their capacity for multiplication; one relic could be divided up infinitely to produce more relics. They also carried a powerful eschatological charge, leading the living to wish to be buried 'ad sanctum', as close as possible to the saint or saints. Similar motives lay behind the burial of the ashes of deportees within existing cemeteries, as was the case in Père Lachaise in Paris. Relics circulated widely, being in turn presented as gifts, stolen, or transferred for their protection. Through them, the story of the networks of the symbolic legitimisation of religious and political power may be traced, as is the case in the second half of the nineteenth century which saw a resurgence in the cult of relics.³⁸

The anthropologist of religion Alfred Dupont defined a phenomenon that he termed 'sacral recharging' which involves the restoration of relics following a period of crisis, such as the Reformation or the French Revolution.³⁹ In particular, this sacral recharging saw the transfer of new relics at the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to the renewal of Christian archaeology, and these relics were often from saints described as young and vigorous. This concept may help us to understand the transfers of ashes after the Holocaust and deportations. Some of the strength of the dead was being appropriated by the organisers of these ceremonies and the builders of these memorials. At the same time, these human ashes legitimised the commemorative discourse regarding the catastrophe, at a time when this was far from being fixed or unified. A final illustration of the fascinating polysemy of these movements of ashes is given by the transfer to a chapel in the Church of Saint-Roch in Paris. Within the very walls of the chapel have been sealed earth and ashes from the principal concentration camps. The chapel was opened on 21 November 1953.⁴⁰

Conclusion

These transfers of ashes and other remains of the victims of National Socialism were all carried out in the fifteen years following the Second World War. There was only one exception; in the Jewish cemetery of Berlin-Weissensee, the grand historic cemetery built in the nineteenth century, a memorial to the deportations was built following German reunification, the cemetery having been situated in

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East Berlin during the communist period. The memorial is situated on the small esplanade in front of the chapel, but inside the boundary of the cemetery as marked by its wrought-iron railings.⁴¹ Around a plaque in the form of a headstone, which bears an inscription in memory of the victims of Nazism, twenty or so smaller plaques are placed in a circle. Each of these bears the name of a concentration or extermination camp. In front of the monument, a flat stone decorated with a Star of David has been laid into the ground. It protects an urn containing ashes taken from Auschwitz. This document shows the need, in 1991, to display a public explanation for the removal of these ashes, a sign of a change in sensibilities since the 1950s. This late transfer is unique, as all the other instances of the transfer and memorialisation of victims' ashes took place between 1945 and 1957.

The dominant discourse in these post-war years regarding the transfer of ashes was one of substitution. These ashes were the remains, the only remains, of the dead. They represented the bodies that had not been buried. The temptation to renationalise the bodies of deportees felt by Resistance associations and states was offset by the symbolism of what were, essentially, religious or even private burials. The ashes taken from beside the crematoria, the earth surrounding them, were buried in Jewish cemeteries, in individual tombs. This constituted a measure of reparation, a religious act in spite of everything, albeit one that fell outside the accepted canons of Jewish or even Christian ritual – a desperate attempt to give normality and dignity back to bodies whose death had been taken from them so completely that even the simplest burial rites had been refused. The ashes were meant to function as a part symbolising the whole, standing for all those dead bodies that should have been repatriated and buried in the soil of their countries of origin. Looking beyond the internationalism that often presided over the ceremonies during which ashes were removed, it is possible to discern a renationalisation, and also a remilitarisation of these bodies; in certain ceremonies, the bodies of completely helpless detainees were given military honours; resistance members thus became soldiers, but so too did murdered Jews. These transfers of ashes answered a particular need in the aftermath of the war. Through them, a certain form of commemoration took place, a policy towards the dead which was part of a wider approach to the treatment of bodies from the Second World War in the face of a new phenomenon: the absence of a great number of these bodies. The exchanges of experiences between various political and ideological movements and between different religious groups – often opposed to one another – show the extent to which these transfers of ashes were polysemous, even if they all responded to the same needs.

Notes

- 1 A preliminary version of this chapter was presented at the biennial 'Lessons and Legacies' conference (no. XII) held in Chicago on 1 November 2012 during the panel jointly organised by the author and Élisabeth Anstett, entitled 'Ashes and human remains during and after the Holocaust'.

- 2 On the fate of Alsatian Jews in the Holocaust, see J.-M. Dreyfus, 'Elsass-Lothringen', in W. Gruner & J. Osterloh (eds), *Das 'Grossdeutsche Reich' und die Juden: Nationalsozialistische Verfolgung in den 'angegliederten' Gebieten* (Frankfurt & New York, Campus Verlag, 2010), pp. 363–82.
- 3 I have not found evidence of any central, international decision taken by the executive organs of Jewish communities that called for the transfer of ashes with a view to memorialisation, and my initial hypothesis is that it was the result of an exchange of experiences and a process of mimetism between various actors with no central coordination. Future research, however, may well reveal the existence of an official recommendation within a federation of communities. The patchy nature of the archives – those belonging to social and cultural associations – have not always been kept well and makes it impossible to describe with any precision the processes behind these decisions. This work concerns a neglected aspect of the material culture of the aftermath of deportation and extermination and is unable to proclaim these ashes and human remains as a '*lieu de mémoire*' as defined by Pierre Nora. Quite the opposite; it is striking how limited an impact these transfers have had on the memory and representations of this period.
- 4 The information on this monument is taken from R. S. Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture, 1944–2010* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012), pp. 41–3.
- 5 At Auschwitz, the first crematory oven was moved as early as 1945 from Birkenau to Auschwitz I, in order to be shown to the first visitors. See A. Wiewiorka, *Auschwitz, 60 Ans Après* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 2005), p. 48.
- 6 For example, at Brandenburg, in the euthanasia centre for patients with mental problems used in the T4 programme, the ashes produced from the cremation of the corpses in two mobile crematoria were taken by wheelbarrow and dumped in the river Havel, which ran behind the building. See A. Ley, *Die Euthanasie-Anstalt Brandenburg an der Havel: Morde an Kranken und Behinderten im Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin, Metropol Verlag, 2012), pp. 45–6.
- 7 Gordon, *The Holocaust in Italian Culture*, p. 43.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 116–18.
- 9 J. Rubenstein & V. P. Naumov (eds), *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (New Haven & London, Washington D.C., Yale University Press, USHMM, 2001), p. 38. Here the authors quote from N. Levin, *Jews in the Soviet Union Since 1917*, vol. I (New York, New York University Press, 1988), pp. 421–2, who was in turn quoting an article from the Parisian Jewish newspaper *Naye Presse* written by Shimon Kipnis and published on 29 September 1979.
- 10 On the political significance of the *mur des Fédérés* (where hundreds of communards were shot and buried in a mass grave in 1871) and the post-war transformation of this Parisian site into a memorial to deported communists and members of the resistance, see D. Tartakowsky, *Nous Irons Chanter sur vos Tombes: Le Père-Lachaise, XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris, Aubier, 1999).
- 11 F. Azouvi, *Le Mythe du Grand Silence: Auschwitz, les Français, la Mémoire* (Paris, Fayard, 2012), p. 70.
- 12 Noted during a visit to Père Lachaise, 23 April 2012; see also Mairie de Paris,

- Père Lachaise Monuments à la Mémoire des Déporté(e)s Victimes des Camps de Concentration et d'Exterminations Nazis* (Paris, Mairie de Paris, 2005).
- 13 On the major deportees' federations and their confrontations during the Cold War, see P. Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 237ff.
 - 14 On the panners of Treblinka, see J. Gross, with I. Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012).
 - 15 For a description of contemporary rituals and regulations concerning funerals and mourning (in Orthodox Judaism), see I. Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1972), pp. 269–300.
 - 16 Genesis 2:7 (King James Version).
 - 17 Concerning these changes in France, see P. Hidirolou, *Rites Funéraires et Pratiques de Deuil Chez les Juifs en France, XIXe-XXe Siècles* (Paris, Les belles lettres, 1999). These developments concerned the use of coffins – foreign to Jewish tradition, which sought to return to the body-as-dust to the earth – and the disappearance of exclusively Jewish cemeteries, which were turned into Jewish sections within municipal cemeteries.
 - 18 A relatively small number of studies deal with what Susan Sontag called this 'negative epiphany'. They include S. Bardgett & D. Cesarani (eds), *Belsen 1945: New Historical Perspectives* (London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2006); and O. Wormser-Migot, *Quand les Alliés Ouvrirent les Portes: Le Dernier Acte de la Tragédie de la Déportation* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1965).
 - 19 His account of this search for memory is given in P. Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
 - 20 T. Snyder, 'Holocaust: The Ignored Reality', *New York Review of Books*, 56:12, 16 July 2009.
 - 21 Interview with Anne Schuchman (Leibl Azen's granddaughter), Paris, 22 July 2014; e-mail from Mme Jacqueline Schuchman (Leibl Azen's daughter), 2 December 2014.
 - 22 I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to Anne and Jacqueline Schuchman for their testimony.
 - 23 Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve, France, Y Internationale, no. 45, International Law, Law of War, December 1944 – April 1949, letter from Léon Meiss to M. Brousta, 27 May 1947.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, pièce 158.
 - 25 A. Wiewiorka, '1992: Réflexion sur une Commémoration', *Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 48:3 (1993), 703–14, 705–6. Annette Wiewiorka bases her description of the ceremony on a brochure published by the Paris Consistory. The ashes from Auschwitz are not mentioned in her article.
 - 26 On the 'invention' on the Unknown Soldier, see J. F. Jagielski, *Le Soldat Inconnu: Invention et Postérité d'un Symbole* (Paris, Imago, Ministère de la Défense, 2005); J.-Y. Le Naour, *Le Soldat Inconnu: La Guerre, la Mort, la Mémoire* (Paris, Gallimard, 2008).

- 27 On the transfers of ashes to the Memorial to the Unknown Jewish Martyr, see S. Perego, *Histoire, Justice, Mémoire: Le Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine et le Mémorial du Martyr Juif Inconnu, 1956–1969*, master's dissertation supervised by Claire Andrieu, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2007, pp. 232–7. Simon Perego quotes the declaration that 'the rabbinate is opposed to the project of the Tomb of the Unknown Jewish Martyr' ('Le rabbinat s'oppose au projet du Tombeau du martyr juif inconnu'), copy of a communiqué published 29 June 1955 in *Nouvelles Juives Mondiales*, document dated 30 June 1955; see also here p. 233.
- 28 It should nevertheless be noted that traditional Jewish law, as set out in the *Shulkhan Arukh*, prescribes mourning rituals in the absence of a body. Observant Jews could thus refer to a tradition, but during my research I have not encountered any instances of these rituals being put into practice. This may be explained by the fact the majority of cases examined here concern new collective, community-centred or political rituals, and not private mourning rituals.
- 29 S. Barcellini, 'Réflexions Autour de Deux Journées Nationales', *Bulletin Trimestriel de la Fondation d'Auschwitz*, 38:9 (1993), 25–43, 29.
- 30 Attempts were even made to claim the proceeds from the uninherited property of murdered Jews back from Germany. These plans were not followed through.
- 31 See the report in the magazine of the religious *Hatsofeh* party from 7 June 1949. Quoted in D. Bar, 'Holocaust Commemoration in Israel during the 1950s: The Holocaust Cellar on Mount Zion', *Jewish Social Studies*, New Series, 12:1 (2005), 16–38, 17.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 19–20.
- 33 R. Stauber, *The Holocaust in Israeli Public Debate in the 1950s: Ideology and Memory* (London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), pp. 99–100.
- 34 Bar, 'Holocaust Commemoration in Israel', 20.
- 35 T. Segev, *Simon Wiesenthal: L'homme qui Refusait d'Oublier* (trans. K. Wechowski) (Paris, Liana Levi, 2010), pp. 7–13.
- 36 Bar, 'Holocaust Commemoration in Israel', pp. 29–30. The 'Holocaust cellar' gradually fell out of use after 1967, when access to the holy sites of the Old Town became possible once more. Commemorations were nevertheless held there until the end of the 1980s.
- 37 The painting is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.
- 38 For more on this subject, see a recent overview which extends its analysis through to the end of the twentieth century. P. Boutry, P.-A. Fabre & D. Julia (eds), *Reliques Modernes: Cultes et Usages Chrétiens des Corps Saints des Réformes aux Révolutions* (Paris, EHESS, 2009).
- 39 In particular, see P. Boutry, 'Une Recharge Sacrale: Restauration des Reliques et Renouveau des Polémiques dans la France du XIXe Siècle', in P. Boutry, P.-A. Fabre & D. Julia (eds), *Reliques modernes: Cultes et Usages Chrétiens des Corps Saints des Réformes aux Révolutions* (Paris, EHESS, 2009), pp. 121–73.
- 40 Visited by the author, 13 July 2014; Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation*, p. 238.
- 41 Visited by the author 27 August 2013.