

## Colored Tombstones in the Jewish Cemetery in Zduńska Wola

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The Jewish cemetery in Zduńska Wola is one of the largest surviving Jewish burial sites in Poland. This town of nearly forty-five thousand citizens is located some fifty kilometers to the southwest of Łódź. As early as 1788 there were eleven Jewish families in Zduńska Wola (then called Czekay).<sup>1</sup> The decree issued by Emperor Alexander I in 1825 refers to Jews as longtime residents of Zduńska Wola and limits their settlement to the former Stefana Street (now Sieradzka Street) and Ogrodowa Street, as well as an area next to the Rynek (The Market Place). This decree ordered the municipal government to allot a parcel of land for a Jewish cemetery.<sup>2</sup> The one in Zduńska Wola is mentioned in a letter, dated October 1826, of the Kalisz District Commission for Religious Confessions and Public Enlightenment, now in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw.<sup>3</sup> It is also possible that

Alexander confirmed the right of the Jews in Zduńska Wola to a burial place that was previously allotted to them rather than a new parcel of land.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish burial society, formally established in the town in 1828, was charged with the maintenance of the cemetery.<sup>5</sup> Almost the entire community was murdered in the Holocaust, and only two or three families of Jewish origin still live in Zduńska Wola.

During an investigation of the Jewish cemetery in Zduńska Wola from 2003 to 2007,<sup>6</sup> colored Jewish tombstones were found and documented. The research, conducted by Prof. Hanoach Daniel Wagner of the Weizman Institute in Rehovot, Israel, and the present author, was carried out with the kind assistance of many volunteers and students from Zduńska Wola, Dąbrowa Górnicza, and Israel.<sup>7</sup> As a result, 3,505 tombstones or their fragments

1 Jacob Goldberg, "The History of Jewish Settlement in Zduńska Wola," in *Yizkor Book Zduńska Wola* (Tel Aviv, 1968), 7.

2 *Stulecie Miasta Zduńskiej Woli 1825–1925* (The 100th Anniversary of the Town of Zduńska Wola), ed. Leszek Wicher (Łódź, 1925), 68–71 (Polish).

3 "Z powodu wyniesienia przywilejem rządowym z daty 25 października 1825 wsi Zduńska Wola w obwodzie sieradzkim na miasto, osiadło w tymże nowem mieście [...] już 65 familii starozakonnych. Gdy ta gmina już ma dla siebie urządzoną bożnicę i cmentarz [...]" (Due to the government decree of 25th October 1825, which proclaimed the village of Zduńska Wola as a town of the Sieradz District, already 65 Jewish families settled down in that new town. As this community already has established a *synagogue* and a *cemetery* [...]) "Jewish Community in Zduńska Wola, 1826–57," Warsaw, The Central Archives of Historical Records (AGAD), cat. no.1574, card 1 [emphasis mine – K.K.].

4 Jacob Goldberg explained that Jews in Poland were often required to attain renewed permission for a cemetery existing for years: "With the confirmation of the settlement as a town, the Jews received from

the Paritz [a Hebrew and Yiddish term for Polish estate owner] a piece of land for a cemetery and for this also it was necessary to get a Government permit [...]. At that time it was also necessary to obtain a permit from the head of the Polish church, a thing which entailed much effort and expense. During the period of the Polish monarchy a permit from the official authorities was sufficient." Goldberg, "History of Jewish Settlement," 10.

5 *Almanach Gmin Żydowskich w Polsce* (Almanach of Jewish Communities in Poland), 1939, p. 269 (Polish).

6 For a preliminary review of the cemetery, see Kamila Klauzińska, "Cmentarz żydowski w Zduńskiej Woli" (The Jewish Cemetery in Zduńska Wola), M.A. thesis, Łódź University, 2000 (Polish). A preliminary report about a few colored tombstones was published by Daniel Wagner and Kamila Klauzińska, "Polychromatic Tombstones in Polish Jewish Cemeteries," *Avotaynu* 20, 2 (2004): 39–40.

7 See "Photographic and Topographic Census Project in the Jewish Cemetery of Zduńska Wola," at [www.yachad.pl](http://www.yachad.pl) (accessed 28 Nov. 2008).



**Fig. 1.** Tombstone (B59) with remnants of a painted epitaph and decoration, boulder. All photographs, taken between 2003 and 2007, of tombstones from the Jewish cemetery in Zduńska Wola are from the author's collection, unless otherwise noted



**Fig. 3.** Tombstone (C170) with remnants of a painted epitaph, between 1740 and 1839, boulder



**Fig. 2.** Tombstone (C181) with remnants of a painted epitaph, boulder

were documented.<sup>8</sup> A number of tombstones are made of local boulders.<sup>9</sup> More or less tall boulder stones with a rounded or wavy short side were chosen for the tombstones (figs. 1–3).<sup>10</sup> Only a few of the boulder tombstones were somewhat chiseled in order to prepare a flat surface for the

8 The Jewish register books of Zduńska Wola record 11 deaths during the years from 1808 to 1825 (“Akta Stanu Cywilnego Parafii Rzymskokatolickiej w Zduńskiej Woli” [Metrical Books of the Roman-Catholic Parish in Zduńska Wola] [Łódź Archives, cat. number 1743/0]) and more than 7,600 deaths from 1826 to 1942 are registered in “Akta Stanu Cywilnego Gminy żydowskiej w Zduńskiej Woli” (Metrical Books of the Jewish Community in Zduńska Wola); the books for 1826–1907 are in Łódź Archives, cat. no. 1745/0, while those for 1908–1942 are in the Registry Office in Zduńska Wola. Consequently, only about half of the tombstones have survived in the cemetery.

9 The tombstones made of boulders are frequent in the Podlaskie region in northeast Poland. They can also be found in the Jewish cemeteries in Bielsk Podlaski, Boćki, Choroszcz, Ciechanowice, Jeleniewo, or the recently restored cemetery in Wysokie Mazowieckie.

10 The inventory numbers of the tombstones and their fragments that appear in the photographs reproduced here are given in the captions.



**Fig. 4.** Tombstone (D379) of Haya, daughter of Ya'akov, with remnants of a painted epitaph, boulder



**Fig. 5.** Tombstone (K 48) of Bluma Reyzl Borzikowska, daughter of Avraham Aba, deceased 3 May 1935, carved and painted sandstone

epitaph (e.g., fig. 4). The other tombstones were made of imported sandstone and limestone.<sup>11</sup>

Paintings or traces of paint were identified on 307 tombstones, most of which dated to the period from 1904 to 1935, and only on a few of them has the paint survived almost in its entirety (e.g., fig. 5). Further painted tombstones from this cemetery are pictured in photographs generously provided us by Jews originating from Zduńska Wola (fig. 6). The old black-and-white prints are, naturally, devoid of color, but they clearly indicate



**Fig. 6.** A man standing by the tombstone of Leah, daughter of Ya'akov, deceased 18 April 1931, and other painted tombstones in the cemetery in Zduńska Wola. Photograph, before 1939, from the private archives of Elżbieta Bartsch

<sup>11</sup> The sandstone quarries nearest to Zduńska Wola are in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains and in Roztocze. Sandstone slabs and stonework from Roztocze was sold at fairs and supplied to both Jewish and Christian cemeteries in the area. The so-called Józefowski workshop and sandstone mine in Roztocze was in Jewish ownership; see Danuta Kawalko, "Józefowski ośrodek kamieniarski" (The Józefowski Stonework Center), in *Przyczynki do etnografii Zamojszczyzny* (Contribution to the Ethnography of the Zamość Region) (Zamość, 1995), 57 (Polish). Limestone is found in quarries near Wieluń.



**Fig. 7.** Tombstone of Shmuel Brokman, deceased 29 December 1935, carved and painted sandstone, Łask, Jewish cemetery. Photograph, 2004



**Fig. 8.** Shmuel and Hymie Reich of Bełchatów designing the tombstone of their father Levi, son of Simḥa Reich, deceased 17 July 1912. Photograph, ca. 1923. Courtesy of Lisa Webne-Behrman (Levi's great granddaughter)



**Fig. 9.** Fragment of the tombstone (A146B) of Yocheved, daughter of Moshe Aharon, carved and painted sandstone



**Fig. 10.** Tombstone (G22A) of Zvi Eliezer, son of Yehoshua Mordechai Hacoen, deceased 27 September 1910, carved and painted sandstone

that a great deal of paint faded in the course of time.

Painted tombstones are occasionally found in Jewish cemeteries throughout Eastern Europe (e.g., fig. 7), of which no comprehensive research has as yet been carried



**Fig. 11.** Tombstone (A93A) of Haya Klein, daughter of Avraham, wife of Kalman, deceased 20 December 1930, carved and painted sandstone



**Fig. 12.** Tombstone (E64) of Shlomo, son of Menahem Mendel, deceased 17 May 1916, carved and painted sandstone



**Fig. 13.** Tombstone (H207) of Ya'akov, son of Meir Halevi, deceased 21 September 1916, carved and painted sandstone

out. Twenty years ago, Andrzej Trzciński described a small number of colored tombstones, the earliest of which dates from 1543, in the Jewish cemetery in Lublin (southeastern Poland).<sup>12</sup> Recently, Dariusz Rozmus found additional, though also scanty, information about the remains of color decoration on Jewish tombstones.<sup>13</sup> Jan Jagielski asserts that colored tombstones are more frequent in Jewish cemeteries in the territories of the former Polish Commonwealth than in other countries.<sup>14</sup> The documentation of hundreds of colored tombstones in Zduńska Wola corroborates this assumption.

There were probably several modes of coloring tombstones. Sometimes, they were painted in the

carver's workshop. This is evident in a 1912 photograph from Bełchatów (fig. 8) showing two carvers posing for the photographer with their chisels touching a newly carved tombstone before it was set on the grave. The Hebrew inscriptions are clearly painted with black on a scroll and a heart-like shape sculpted in low relief. On the tombstones in Zduńska Wola, colors also highlight the inscriptions, either – like in Bełchatów – stressing the letters with black or dark paint (e.g., at the top of the tombstones in figs. 5, 9) or with a golden tint (e.g., fig. 10), or by creating a contrast between the lighter letters and the dark – usually black – background (e.g., figs. 5, 11–13).

12 Andrzej Trzciński, "Polichromia nagrobków na cmentarzach żydowskich w Polsce południowo-wschodniej" (Paintings on the Tombstones at Jewish Cemeteries in Southeastern Poland), *Polska sztuka ludowa* 43, 1–2 (1989): 63–64 (Polish); idem, "Polichromie nagrobków żydowskich" (Paintings on Jewish Tombstones) *Zeszyty muzealne muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego we Włodawie* 6 (1997): 3–9 (Polish).

13 Dariusz Rozmus, *De Judeorum arte sepulcrali: Motywy artystyczne w żydowskiej sztuce sepulchralnej* (De Judeorum arte sepulcrali: Artistic Motives in Sepulchral Jewish Art) (Cracow, 2005), 141–48 (Polish).

14 Jan Jagielski, "Cmentarze żydowskie w Polsce" (Jewish Cemeteries in Poland) in *Studia z dziejów Żydów w Polsce* (Studies of Jewish History in Poland), vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1995), 174 (Polish).



**Fig. 14.** Yeshaya Margolin renewing the epitaph of the tombstone of Aharon Hacoheh Bisberg (deceased 15 June 1919) in the Jewish cemetery of Strzegów in the Mazowieckie region

At times, tombstones were painted at the cemetery, as evidenced by the post-war photograph (fig. 14) of the tombstone restorator, Yeshaya Margolin. Margolin is repainting an older painted inscription in the Jewish cemetery of Strzegów in the Mazowieckie region.<sup>15</sup> In Zduńska Wola, we also found more than one layer of paint on a few tombstones. A similar practice was revealed in the Jewish cemeteries of Lublin and the region by Andrzej Trzciński, who found fragments of an epitaph, including personal details of the deceased, that were originally painted in yellow and later repainted in silver or gold. He concluded that the renewal of paint on the tombstones was probably a family tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Traces of painted epitaphs were found on thirty-one of 129 documented boulder tombstones in Zduńska Wola. The upper rows of the painted inscriptions on all but one of the boulders tombstones have disappeared, but the only surviving example (fig. 4) testifies that these epigraphs followed the common formulae comprising the abbreviation פ"נ, epithets for the deceased, his or her

name, and the date of death. Painting these tombstones, the artists usually first laid a layer of black or brown paint on the stone's raw surface,<sup>17</sup> and then drew the letters in red, yellow, or white (figs. 2–4). There were also black letters written directly on the stone (fig. 1) and “negative” shapes of the letters on the bare yellowish or reddish stone surface surrounded by a dark background color (see the upper rows in fig. 4). Probably, the brighter orange and yellow colors highlighting the deceased's name (e.g., fig. 4), date of death, and the abbreviations תני צ"ה (may his or her soul be bound up in the bundle of life; e.g., fig. 3) and פ"נ (here is buried) are later repaintings. To the extent that our conclusions, derived from examination of the poorly preserved painted boulder tombstones, may be correct, there were simple plant images beside several epitaphs (fig. 1). The readily available material ready for use or demanding little elaboration, paintings rather than engravings, and modest decoration suggest that the painted boulder tombstones were ordered by indigent or middle-class people.

In contrast, the sandstone and limestone tomb stele imported from afar, chiseled all around, and bearing engraved inscriptions and carved reliefs on their facial side would have been much more expensive. In this type of tombstone, paintings accentuated the engraved letters<sup>18</sup> and illuminated the reliefs. The images of tombstones from Zduńska Wola, which illustrate this article, show animals, such as deer (fig. 10), lions (fig. 15), and sheep (fig. 16); human hands: two palms in the gesture of the priestly blessing (figs. 10, 15) and a hand throwing a coin into an almsbox (fig. 11); and vegetative images, such as broken trees or flowers (figs. 9–10). Other attributes and symbols include: the Torah scrolls in the ark (fig. 17), books in a bookcase (figs. 12–13, 17), curtains (figs. 5, 9, 11–12),

15 *Stshegove yizkor-bukh* (Memorial Book of Strzegowo) (New York, 1951), 146 (Yiddish).

16 Trzciński, “Polichromia nagrobków”: 64. It seems that this tradition is also popular nowadays. For example, at the Jewish cemetery in Pabianice, near Zduńska Wola, we can find many tombstones on which both the letters and symbols were repainted, probably during the past ten years.

17 We found only one epitaph engraved – with no traces of paint – on the boulder stone: the tombstone of Maḥla (מחלה) bat (daughter of)

Moshe, who died in 1873 (tombstone no. D59).

18 This kind of painted reliefs was mentioned by Andrzej Trzciński, who found carmine or vermilion letters on a black background in several tombstones in the Jewish cemetery in Lublin. The earliest example of these colored epitaphs bears the date of 1543. Texts in later tombstones, from 1617 are in white or black against a white background (Trzciński, “Polichromia nagrobków”: 63). It should be borne in mind that the tombstones could have been painted many years after they were carved.



**Fig. 15.** Tombstone (D131) of Ya'akov, son of Avraham, deceased 9 September 1904, carved and painted sandstone

crowns (figs. 13, 15, 17), candlesticks (figs. 5, 9, 11, 16, 18), a well and a house (fig. 16). Borders and frames were also painted (figs. 5, 11).<sup>19</sup>

The painters favored black, white, and gold as well as primary colors such as yellow, green, and red. Various

<sup>19</sup> The symbolism of Jewish sepulchral art in Poland, which is beyond the scope of the current report, is discussed in Monika Krajewska, *Time of Stones: Jewish Cemeteries in Poland* (Warsaw, 1983); idem, "Symbolika płaskorzeźb na cmentarzach żydowskich w Polsce" (Symbolism of the Carved Reliefs at the Jewish Cemeteries in Poland), *Polska sztuka ludowa* (Polish Folk Art) 43, 1–2 (1989): 45–59 (Polish); Andrzej Trzciniński, *Symbol i obraz: Treści symboliczne przedstawień na nagrobkach żydowskich w Polsce* (Symbols and Images: Symbolic Contents of the Depictions on Jewish Tombstones in Poland) (Lublin, 1997) (Polish); Izabella Rejduch-Samek and Jan Samek, *Old Jewish Art in Poland* (Warsaw, 2002); Rozmus, *De Judeorum arte sepulchrali*.



**Fig. 16.** Detail of the tombstone (D54A) of Freydl, daughter of Yisrael David, deceased 26 August 1872, carved and painted sandstone



**Fig. 17.** Fragment of a tombstone (A204), carved and painted sandstone



**Fig. 18.** Tombstone (E165) of Yoseph, son of Moshe, deceased 11 August 1846, with remnants of a painted epitaph and decoration, limestone

shades of blue – light and dark or grayish blue, ultramarine, turquoise – and brown rarely appeared on their palette. Most likely, they used oil paints intended for commercial rather than for artistic purposes. Very few tombstones were decorated with more than two or three colors.

As a rule, each color filled the entire surface of the projecting image or recessed background. Such a rendering of colorful silhouettes without an illusion of shading is characteristic of folk art. In some cases, painters achieved a more picturesque effect by merging tints into the dominant color as, for example, the *alla-prima* touches of green and red in the yellow paint covering a lion (fig. 15).

The tombstone painters sought a sense of reality in the coloring of images. The lion has a yellow body and red tongue (fig. 15), the candlesticks and candles are yellow or white (figs. 9, 18), a red flower and turquoise leaves emerge from yellow vases (fig. 15), the dark color of books

(figs. 12–13) bring to mind old leather bindings, and the grass is green (figs. 9–10, 15). Sometimes, spots of paint were added as color accents increasing the decorative effect of the image. Thus the yellow lion has a bright blue eye (fig. 15), and the yellow sheep's ears are emphasized with intense orange patches (fig. 16). When the natural colors of the depicted object were not available, the artists tried to approximate them as closely as possible from their limited stock of paints. Blue, red, yellow, and grey (or black) color the candlestick in a cartouche, while sheep, a well with a bucket, parts of the house, and grassy hills (fig. 16), all contribute to the artist's rendition of a lively, true image.

The documentation of the Jewish cemetery in Zduńska Wola is a step towards the analysis of the tradition of coloring tombstones in its artistic, ethnographic, and historical contexts.