

Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery

Bialystok, Poland

Cemetery Tour



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Guidebook at:
www.jewishepitaphs.org

Introduction

Located in Bialystok, Poland, Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery is the largest extant urban Jewish cemetery in northeastern Poland. In all its details, this cemetery reflects the nature of Jewish life and culture from the turn of the 20th century until its devastation during the Holocaust and in Post-Holocaust years under Communism. At the turn of the 21st century, amidst the new climate of the Republic of Poland, efforts are beginning to restore what remains of this cemetery to its former dignity. All efforts are coordinated by Lucy Lisowska, President of *Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej Polska-Izrael* in Bialystok, who also serves as the Bialystok representative to the Jewish Community of Warsaw. Local and international students and volunteers of all ages, including those with ancestry in Bialystok, come to learn about Jewish life in Bialystok and Eastern Europe while engaging in these efforts. In the process, Bagnowka has become a living museum.



A view toward the main entrance, with restored sections, 2017

1. Main Entrance. In Jewish tradition, a cemetery is frequently termed a *beth olam* “house of eternity.” Bagnowka is designated as such in the Aramaic prayer, written on the gray metal plaque, which is affixed atop the whitewashed, plastered gateway at this cemetery’s southern (main) entrance on Wschodnia Street:

House of eternity (*beth olam*), Bagnowka. Blessed are you, O Lord, Our God, King of the World, who fashioned you by right and sustained you by right and brought you to death by right and knows your total number [of years] and is ready to restore and bring you back to life by right. Blessed are you, O Lord, who revives the dead.

Beneath this plaque, reminding the visitor of the sacred realm that lies ahead, are the black wrought-iron gates through which the visitor gains access to and a first glimpse of the largest Jewish cemetery in northeastern Poland—forty acres (ca. sixteen hectares) in size, with the *potential* to cradle thirty-five-thousand burials at its peak in the early 1930s. Ahead, the panorama reveals about half of the one hundred nearly uniform-sized sections of this *beth olam*, with each section delineated by grassy alleys that run both north-south and east-west. Another secondary entrance is found farther east on Wschodnia Street with a third (service) entrance at its northeast corner. This cemetery was established in 1892 and functioned until 1969, with few burials, however, during WWII when burial was restricted to the Ghetto Cemetery. Today, about 15% of gravesites are still marked with tombstones.



Main entrance on Wschodnia Street features an Aramaic prayer.

2. First Sections of Restoration. Directly on entering, at right, are Sections 3–5. These were the first sections of intense restoration by the German-based, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* (ASF) from 2010–2013. In these sections, the visitor will find representative styles of tombstones, symbols and inscriptions that remember the varied nature of Bialystok’s Jewish community. At the front corner of Section 3, stand three more elaborate burials (decorative sarcophagi and tombstones) for the mercantile Trop family of Bialystok. Here, too, is found the humble gravesite of Moshe Wallach, father of Maxim Litvinov, Soviet diplomat, and Foreign Secretary and Ambassador to the United States (Section 5).



Three burials for mercantile Trop family (d. 1902). (Section 3)

3. Site of Caretaker’s House and Burial Society Buildings. Just within the main entrance, at left, is a large grass-covered hill. A recent test-trench as well as a 1937 map, found on the informational plaque on the exterior wall near the main entrance, reveal that two brick structures are buried here. One is a Caretaker’s Cottage, typical of rural Jewish cemeteries; the other may very well be the burial house used by the *Hewra Kadisha* (Burial Society) to prepare and care for the body until burial. An extant 1916 Postcard of the Cholera Jewish Cemetery on Bema Street in Bialystok records one such structure. The distance from the city of Bialystok and Bagnowka may have initially required a caretaker to live onsite, thus necessitating two structures. Beside this hill are stacks and individual tombstones returned from various locations throughout Bialystok. They probably once stood on the Old Rabbinic Cemetery or in the Cholera Cemetery in Bialystok. Here, too, is a large megalithic boulder, the last tombstone from the Old Rabbinic Cemetery, now Central Park. This tombstone was situated on the hill opposite the current Opera House. These fragments and tombstones will eventually be set within a memorial wall on Bagnowka’s interior wall.



Caretaker’s and Burial Society Cottages beneath hill. Just to the right are stacks of tombstones awaiting placement in a memorial wall, 2017.

4. Section 1. Restored from 2013–2016, this section holds some of the oldest gravesites of Bialystok’s most distinguished community members. Here we find, for example, the tombstones of Avraham Ber Gotlober (d. 1899), one of the original *maskilim* (intellectuals), who made Bialystok one of his homes; Naphtali Hertz Neymark (d. 1893), merchant and founder of the Neymark Beth Midrash, with the longest inscription on this cemetery that records his accident with a trolley in St. Petersburg and the resulting exaction that provided funds to establish his *beth midrash*; and Pelte Halberstam, eldest daughter of the foremost Bialystok entrepreneur and businessman, Izak Zabłudowsky, and wife of Eliezer Halberstam, who brought the *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) to Bialystok.



The small tombstone of merchant Neymark stands beside an informational tablet (at right, d. 1893). Behind his tombstone is the tall obelisk of maskil Avraham Ber Gotlober (d. 1899). (Section 1).

Near the front of this section is also the gravesite of Sora, wife of Josef Zamenhof (d. c. 1900), aunt-by-marriage to Ludwig (Lajzer) Zamenhof, the creator of Esperanto. The megalithic monument of the bank director Dor Chwoles (d. 1906), recently

restored, stands near the front of this section. After decades lying face down in the earth, this tombstone was re-erected in 2016. Using a small back hoe, a crew of five men re-erected this monument in place. Standing at over seven-feet high and weighing almost 1.5 tons, it is the largest extant monument on Bagnowka.



Chwoles’ bilingual Hebrew-Russian inscription reads:

“(Hebrew:.) *Matzevah* for the grave of Reb [Mr.] Dawid, son of Reb Aharon Chwoles, one of the remaining intellectuals of the former generation. A hand and name is his among the wise of Israel. He was born in the city of Vilna. He died 21st Tevet 5667 in the 72 years of the days of his life. His toil and the celebration of his work can undoubtedly be seen in his fruitful life. May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life. (Russian:.) Bank director, David Aron Khvoles, died 25th December 1906 in the 72nd year of his charitable life. Peace to your ashes, Dear husband and father.”

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5. Section 7. Partially restored in 2015–2016, this section (at near center) offers distinct rows for professionals. Inscriptions remember, for example, Dr. Zalman Flatte (d. 1921); Professor Eliyahu Shmuel Gluk (d. 1902); textile manufacturer Kopel Zabłudowsky (d. 1898); the merchant Nathan Faulkner (d. 1896), who hailed from Odessa and Taganrog; Lieutenant and medical student, Julian Heublum (d. 1920); and the bilingual inscription of a woman doctor, Dr. Sheyne Lea (Sophia) Garfinkel Kuricki (d. 1919). The visitor will also find a number of folk art panoramas that highlight a women’s domain. And, in this section, are also preserved several megalithic tree-style monuments that seem to be used for young women of Russian ancestry.



Partially restored Section 7 features the tombstone of Lieutenant & medical student, Julian Heublum (at right, d. 1920), megalithic tree-style monument for Ester Wolkomirskaya (d. 1908); the tombstone of Dr. Flatte (d. 1921), Bialystok physician for over 20 years.

Just to the left of Section 7, at the edge of Section 12 is also the restored tombstone of the merchant Tsvi, featuring two 12-point bucks (*tsvi*) in combat. His inscription is entitled “the land of Tsvi.” Tsvi Konica’s inscription is crafted as an acrostic poem that remembers his profession through the

language of travel, including his sudden death in a train station, the 20th century gathering place of merchants and of the affluent.



The land of Tsvi.

[TsV] The host of his days were filled while living on the road.
[Y] The road was great but the thread of his life was shortened.
[B] The train stations (houses of highways) were an eternal highway for him.
[N] He stretched out to rest there but from there he walked to his eternal life.
[MR] Bitterly his wife and sons wept and howled.
[D] His pride and progeny cannot be given compensation for their glory was taken.
[KhY] Alas, in the desolation of his days!
It is he the precious scholar, the honorable merchant, our teacher R. Tsvi, son of R. Mordechai of blessed memory, Konica, from the settlers of Slonim.
He died on the eve of the Holy Sabbath 17 Adar year 5671 [4 March 1911] as the abbreviated era/תבנה.

6. Section 2. Restored from 2015–2017. The last row of this section offers poignant commentary on one harsh reality of life for women – death related to childbirth. Here are eight tombstones that remember women who died while “in-confinement” at the turn of the 20th century, as recorded in their inscriptions. At the far left in this row, cause of death is unclear for a Nehama Lea Berenbaum (d. 1908), who is called ‘bubele’ (grandmother or precious one) and whose epitaph conclude with the admonition in Yiddish “Children remember your mother!” Two rows before this row of women’s burials is the tree-style tombstone for a Pinhas Topolski (age 18), who died in 1903. Adjoining the Memorial Complex, at the near center of the cemetery, the visitor will find another tree-style monument that tells the fate of Pinhas’s three younger brothers.



Women who died “in-confinement” at the turn of the 20th century. (Section 2) Background, right, is the main entrance.

7. Viewpoint. Standing on the knoll on the main north-south arterial, halfway between the main entrance and the ohel (mausoleum) of Rabbi Halpern, offers the visitor a most provocative 360° view of this cemetery and its surroundings. Areas of restoration are immediately apparent as are the extensive restoration efforts still needed. Nonetheless, a hint of the cemetery’s former

grandeur is present. Beyond the cemetery walls, the order of the Catholic Cemetery is readily apparent as well as the day to day life that transpires in the surrounding residential streets.



A view of the main entrance from the knoll, 2017.

8. Ohel of Chief Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern and burial site of Chief Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer. Upon this knoll is perched the *ohel*, the tent-like mausoleum, of Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern, a visual reminder of Bialystok’s traditionalist beginnings. Rabbi Halpern served as a rabbi in Bialystok for over fifty years and as Chief Rabbi of Bialystok from approximately 1900 to 1919. His followers erected this structure over his grave in 1922, as recorded in the once-faded inscription on the *ohel*’s whitewashed southern wall, an inscription replaced in 2013 by a granite plaque. Rabbi Halpern’s inscription is no longer extant within the *ohel*; however, it is preserved within Abraham Samuel Herszberg’s *Pinkos Bialystok* (Chronicle of Bialystok):

Our Master, our teacher, our rabbi, the *gaon*, righteous and humble, of the chain of distinguished rabbis, an awesome *gaon*, the splendor of the generation and its crown, the Ariel of measures and the seal of truthfulness, an image of discretion and of support, a wise mouth, compassionate, the dew (which) gives life to hard days and to humbled soul(s). His heart is pure, a fountain of love, compassion and loving-kindness for his people and for all creatures. At (more than) sixty years, God’s court welcomed him in comfort and into the plain. As an angel of God walked to and fro in his midst, God took him. Our Master, Chaim Hertz Halpern, a *tsaddik* of blessed memory, first head of the *Beth Din* of his congregation, son of the *gaon*, the righteous is the everlasting foundation, Our Master, Raphael Yom Tov Lipman, a *tsaddik* of blessed memory, father of the *Beth Din* of Bialystok. He was born 8 Shevat 5601 [18 January 1841]. He died 6 Iyar 5679 [7 January 1919] as the abbreviated era. תבנה.

Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer became Chief Rabbi of Bialystok from 1883 until his death in 1898. He dedicated this cemetery and served as an early advocate of religious Zionism. He was buried on Bagnowka in this same section near the *ohel* of Rabbi Halpern. Mohilewer’s advocacy of Zionism was remembered when his bones were disinterred from Bagnowka and reburied in Israel in the late twentieth century in Petah Tikva, the town in which he had first encouraged Bialystok pioneers to settle.



Ohel of Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern (d. 1919), who served as Chief Rabbi of Bialystok from c. 1900 to 1919. Nearby once stood the gravesite of Chief Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer (d. 1898), who served in this role from 1883 to 1898.

9. Memorial Complex. In the center of this cemetery stands a black pillar that serves as a memorial to the victims of violence in 1905 and 1906. The names on the pillar remember the eighty Jewish men, women and children, who were killed in the Pogrom of 1906. Those who died in the months preceding this pogrom, as anti-Tsarist forces struggled with the Polish and Russian armies in Bialystok, are also recorded on the pillar: forty-two Jews slain in the massacre of 30 July 1905, and five Jews killed in the storming of the city jail on 31 October 1905. On the western façade (main side), at top, is a historical description of the Pogrom:

A memorial of sorrow for us, inhabitants of Bialystok and for all the house of Israel, this pillar is a witness for us and for our sons that on the 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 to the month of Sivan year 5666 (1–5 June, 1906 [OC]) the inhabitants of this city fell upon our brothers, the sons of Israel, plundering at nighttime and plundering houses and possessions and they murdered about 80 men and women and children, by shooting, by *shehitah* (ritual cutting of throat, slaughter), by strangling, by burning, and for the remainder by dying from wounds.

At the bottom of this same façade is a poem of great pathos, entitled “Pillar of Sorrow” by Zalman Schneour, ancestor of Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of the Chabad (ultra-Orthodox) movement. In addition to this Memorial Pillar, memorial *matzevoth* (tombstones) stand before this pillar and in the adjoining Section 26, serving as symbolic gravesites to the victims. Before the pillar also stands a memorial to 25-year-old Bundist, Ester Riskind, who died in the June 1905 (Sabbath Nahamu Massacre), erected by her friends on the fifth anniversary of her death. Several deceased remembered on these memorial *matzevoth* are also remembered by epitaphs on tombstones in sections outside the memorial area, indicating that not all victims were buried in a mass grave beneath the pillar. The Memorial Complex was restored in 2014–15 but work still remains, especially in the adjoining Section 26, where preliminary work has revealed victims of violence after 1906.



Front façade of black pillar remembering victims of the 1905 Massacres and the 1906 Pogrom. Memorial *matzevoth* stand before the pillar; the memorial to Bundist Ester Riskind stands to the right of the pillar in this photo. This complex was (nearly) restored in 2014-15.

In the adjoining Section 31, stands the tombstone of Alfred Simenauer, a soldier who died in the Battle of Waniewo in 1915 but was not brought to Bialystok for burial until 1930. Nearby also stands a tree-style monument for the three young Topolski brothers, ages 4–8, who perished in a fire that may have occurred in their home above the family glassware factory in February of 1908. Future restoration may reveal that the

Memorial Complex extends to victims of other unnatural circumstances.



Tombstone for WWI soldier, Alfred (Aharon) Simenhauer (d. 1915). Back, left, tombstone for the three Topolski brothers "who burnt in a fire" (d. 1908).

10. Desolation of 1920. In Section 60 stand two tree-style monuments to siblings Eliezer (age 21) and Golda (age 17) Zabludowsky, whose epitaphs record their premature deaths amidst "desolate days." Their ages and the year suggest that they may have been members of a revolutionary group, set against the events of the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921). In the nearby Section 76, stands an inexpensive concrete tombstone that mimics the shape of the traditional Ashkenazi *matzevoth*. The inscription remembers the death of a nine-year-old girl in the August 1920 Pogrom:

A blossom is fresh; a flower is tender. / Before it has fully ripened, it was plucked off, it was killed...

Here lies—in the shadow of the field,/ the child Dabe, daughter of Reb Chaim Hachohen, Kaplanski, takes refuge, who died before (her) time in the ninth year to the days of her life on the 5th day of Elul 5680 [19 August 1920].

Section 60 has been undergoing restoration; Section 76 is seasonally engulfed by forest. These sections tentatively suggest burials are related to the desolate time of war and pogrom in 1919-20.



(Left): Monuments for siblings, Eliezer (front) and Golda (back) *Zabludowsky*, who died in the desolate times of 1920. (Section 60). (Right): Tombstone for the young girl, Dabe Kaplanski, who was killed in August 1920 Pogrom. (Section 76)

11. Woods and Cemetery Wall. Several years ago, a young growth forest covered nearly 50% of the cemetery. Progress in clearing today leaves about 30% still beneath a canopy of immature trees and ground cover. Beneath this dense array of forest and foliage, tombstones can be found in various states of disarray. Some attempts at documenting these tombstones was made in the early 2000s but systematic restoration efforts are needed. Eventually, this forest gives way to a recently renovated wall that separates Bagnowka from the adjoining Catholic Cemetery.



Toppled monuments, nestled in the cemetery's woods, await restoration.



Restored northern wall adjoins the Catholic Cemetery, 2010.

12. Empty Sections. From the secondary entrance on Wschodnia inwards toward the Memorial Complex are sections nearly devoid of tombstones. By the early 1940s these sections would have been packed with row after row of tombstones remembering the Jewish deceased who died (in most cases) a natural death. Tombstones may still recline beneath layers of grass and topsoil today. Today, the appearance of these empty sections offers an eerily compelling visual commentary on the absence of Jewish life and Jewish heritage in contemporary Bialystok.



Tombstones for relatives of early Bialystok textile manufacturer, Sender Bloch (Section 4), stand before nearly empty sections.

13. Oldest Matzevah. Just east of the main entrance to Bagnowka Beth Olam is a section that holds more than a dozen of the most ruggedly-hewn, Ashkenazi-style *matzevoth*. Carved out of sedimentary rock, the elements have done much to render illegible many of the inscriptions. One legible although worn inscription may hold the oldest extant words of remembrance on this cemetery today:

Here lies the God-fearing, prominent scholar, our teacher, the Rabbi Pinhas, son of Mordechai Ha-lewi. He died 4 Nisan 5652 [20 March 1892] according to the abbreviated era. תנצב"ה.

Rabbi Pinhas died about three months after the dedication of Bagnowka in late December 1891—early January 1892. The structure of his epitaph reflects the most basic formulaic pattern within the Bagnowka corpus of inscriptions, featuring just a name and date of death, conjoined with brief epithets praising the deceased. These words are framed by an opening abbreviation (פ"י), meaning "Here lies," and a closing abbreviation (תנצב"ה), meaning

"May his soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life." New strategies for reading inscriptions on worn stone will hopefully allow the other inscriptions in this section to be deciphered.



A cluster of the most rugged-style, roughly-hewn tombstones on Bagnowka contains the oldest extant burial site on this cemetery, dating to 1892, just a few months after the cemetery was dedicated. (Section 32)

14. The Lions of Bagnowka. Section 5, nearly restored by ASF in 2010-2013, offers a wonderful opportunity to examine how varied is the folk art on this cemetery. In this section alone, nine improvisations of the Jewish Lion of Judah can be found in this region. The Lion of Judah is a symbol derived from the biblical text. It can symbolize the strength of death over life when the lion stands beside a broken tree or just a branch, two flora symbols symbolic of life. A lion may also flank a book(s); the lion is seen as the protector of Torah (sacred Jewish literature and tradition), and may symbolically represent the deceased scholar. In some depictions, the lion scarcely looks like the proud yet terrifying animal it is, resembling rather a bovine. Such variation in depiction suggests a variety of artisans at work, some using the same template to which individual details were added.



Section 5, at right on entering the main entrance, preserves nine unique improvisation of the Lion of Judah.

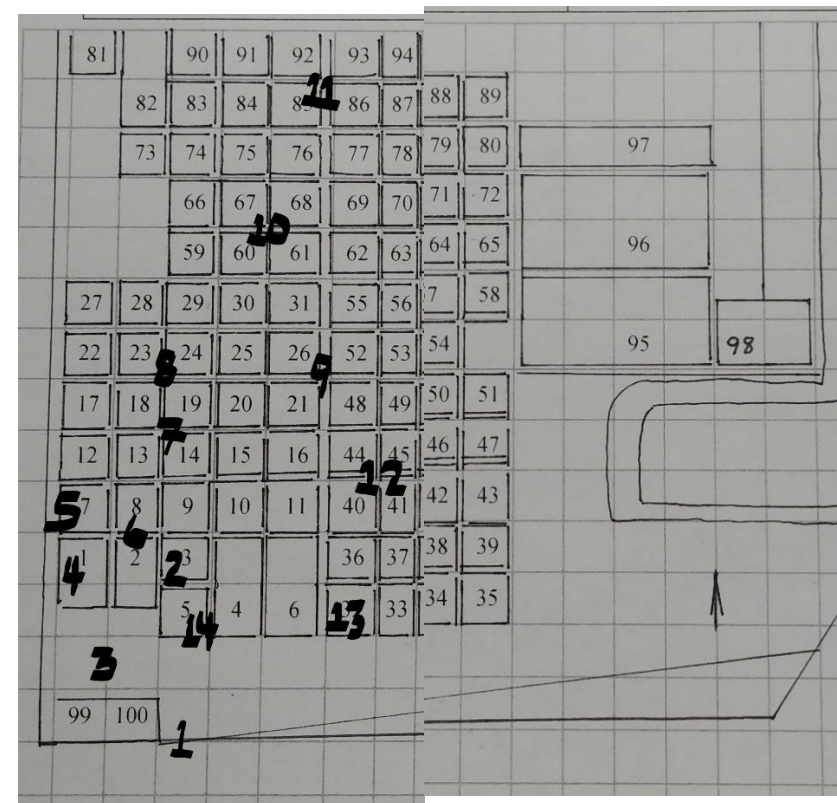


Two improvisations of the Lion of Judah. At left, the lion (the scholar) protects the book (Torah). At right, the inclusion of a broken tree, a symbol of life now gone, indicates that the lion also represents the strength of death over life. (Section 5).

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