

Bagnowka Jewish Cemetery

Bialystok, Poland

Cemetery Tour

with

A First Look at the Mound Matzevoth



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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 in the Post-Holocaust years under Communism. At the turn of the 21st century, amidst the new climate of the Republic of Poland, efforts are underway to restore what remains of this cemetery to its former dignity. Efforts were first coordinated (2010-2017) 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, and the German-based, *Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste* (ASF). In 2016, the *Bialystok Cemetery Restoration Project* took up new strategies in restoration with the use of mechanized equipment to assist in restoration and receiving sanction for these strategies by the Chief Rabbi of Poland's Office in 2019. Since 2016, the BCRP has taken the lead in the restoration of this cemetery.

This guide also offers a first look at the mound matzevah just extracted from a mound on Bagnowka. They date from 1809-1852, suggesting their provenance is the Rabbinic Cemetery now buried beneath Central Park in Bialystok.

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, a third entrance was on the former Cemetery Street on its western border, and a service entrance at its northeast corner. This cemetery was established in December 1891 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. The very first tombstone, at right, on entering is the oldest extant tombstone on this cemetery. Dated 27 December 1891 for Ita Ribah, daughter of R. Tsvi Ari just three days after this cemetery’s first burial and dedication. This tombstone was discovered and restored this past August 2022. At the front corner of Section 3, stand three more elaborate burials (decorative sarcophagi and tombstones) for the mercantile Trop family of Bialystok. Avraham Trop purportedly made the clock that stands above Branicki’s Palace today.

Visitors are encouraged to consider the variety of tombstones in these sections and while exploring this cemetery. Granite obelisks contrast with traditional Ashkenazi sandstone tombstones, reflecting the

traditional world of early Bialystok as it came under influence of modernity. Note the variety of traditional Jewish funerary symbols, for example, candles remember women and two hands raised in prayers remember ancestors of the priestly (cohen) lineage. Broken trees and plucked flowers depict the end of life. Occasionally, folk-art symbols, such as the regional cornflower can also be seen.



The oldest tombstone extant today, 27 December 1891.

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 a tripartite brick structure is buried here, which functioned as both a Caretaker’s Cottage, typical of rural Jewish cemeteries, and 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 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, transferred in 2007. Beneath the tree’s canopy, the visitor can also see a tombstone from Bagnowka, reworked as a sharpening stone. In August 2022, this stone was returned.



Caretaker’s and Burial Society Cottages beneath hill.

4. **Section 1.** Restored from 2013–2017, 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 (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 slings and the bucket of an excavator. Standing at over seven-feet high and weighing almost 1.5 tons, it may be 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 Khwoles, died 25th December 1906 in the 72nd year of his charitable life.
Peace to your ashes,
Dear husband and father.”

5. **Section 7.** Restored from 2015–2018, this section (at near center) offers distinct rows for professionals. Inscriptions remember, for example, Dr. Zalman Flatte (d. 1921); Provizor (= Russian term, highly educated pharmacist) 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 several 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.



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.

In the very last row (middle) of Section 7 stands a small painted tombstone, dubbed ‘the Ali’, and now restored. Discovered in 2017 by volunteer Ali Flagler, such small painted concrete tombstones may have been used until the family could afford a formal tombstone.



‘The Ali’ stone remembers Eliyahu son of Nahum Helerstein, born 1895, died 1919.

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!
[D] 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 נצבחה.

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; her epitaph concludes 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 needed restoration in the woods and the grassy eastern sections are immediately apparent. Yet the restoration in the central sections by the BCRP in 2017-2019 have restored a hint of the cemetery’s former grandeur. 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.

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). In this section are also buried many rabbis and scholars. Two sections west of the *ohel*, the tombstone of Rabbi Halpern’s son, Yehoshua Yisrael (d. 1931) is found. He is remembered as a third-generation rabbi and scholar. His father Rabbi Halpern (d. 1921) and grandfather, Rabbi Yom Tov (Lippele) Halpern (d. 1879), were both Chief Rabbis in Bialystok.

One section north, the foundation of the former *ohel* of Rabbi Shmuel Mohilewer can be found. Rabbi 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. Mohilewer’s Beth Midrash still stands today on Ul. Branickiego in Bialystok. His 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. A symbolic *ohel* is planned for this site in his remembrance. Restoration efforts in 2018 revealed that the remaining extant tombstones in this section are also of rabbis and rabbinic scholars.



Ohel of Rabbi Chaim Hertz Halpern (d. 1919), who served as Chief Rabbi of Bialystok from c. 1900 to 1919. In the adjoining section once stood the ohel for 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 noon 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. The

Memorial Complex was restored in 2014–15, with recent restoration (August 2022) of the western rows of this section. Planned restoration of the pillar will begin in 2022, with additional research into this area, especially since new evidence questions the original location of this pillar and the site of the mass grave.



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.

On the NW corner of the adjoining section, beneath a copse of oak trees rests a simple boulder tombstone. It stands on a recent burial (August 2022) of human bones found with the recent extraction of 123 tombstones from a mound, located on far eastern unused Bagnowka land. Tombstones and human remains are most likely from the Rabbinic Cemetery now buried beneath Central Park in Bialystok. These matzevoth are described later in this guide.



Burial site of the remains from the Bagnowka mound.

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) Simenauer (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) Zabłudowsky, 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, in particular, tentatively suggest burials are related to the desolate time of war in 1919–20.



(Left) Monuments for siblings, Eliezer (front) and Golda (back) Zabłudowsky, 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 were made in the early 2000s but systematic restoration efforts are needed. Caution must be used when exploring these woods because of its disarray and the presence of wildlife. Deer, red fox, as well as ticks and mosquitoes discourage visitors. Eventually, this forest gives way to the 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 that appear to be nearly devoid of tombstones. Restoration efforts in 2018–19, 2022 reveal that tombstones may still recline beneath layers of grass and topsoil today. Restoration efforts will begin here in 2023 and continue until complete. 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. The Mound Matzevoth. The river of boulder-style tombstones and one megalithic granite stele temporarily stored along this southern wall were extracted from a mound in August 2022, located on Ul. Boya-Żeleńskiego, on the unused land that belongs to Bagnowka Cemetery. They date from 1809–1852, suggesting their provenance is the Rabbinic Cemetery (c. 1781–1900) now buried beneath Central Park in Bialystok. Prior to 1831, no other cemetery existed for Bialystok's Jewish community. This mound of matzevoth with human remains has long been known, dumped in this area in the 1960s amidst construction of the Communist Party Headquarters in Bialystok. Study of the inscriptions has begun by Dr. Heidi Szpek, revealing parallels with the inscriptions on Bagnowka as well parallels with tombstones in nearby Choroszcz and as far as the distant Biržia, Lithuania. The only surnames clearly recorded are Halpern, Lipshitz and Brestowicz, and three cities: Tiktin (Tykocin), Orla and Choroszcz, all regional towns.

The first tombstone extracted was for Tsvi Hirsh b. Avraham (d. 4 October 1831). The presence of a *tsvi* (=Hebrew *deer*) on the cemetery made this first discovery mystical. The oldest tombstone remembers Rachel, daughter of R. Yitzhak (d. 5 June 1809). This may be the oldest extant tombstone from Bialystok's Jewish community. Consider the historical setting of their lives in Bialystok just after the death of Countess Izabella Poniatowska Branicka (d. 1808) with Poland still under Russia, Prussian, and Austria hegemony, and Bialystok annexed to Russia in 1807.



The tombstone of Tsvi stands at the beginning of the river of mound matzevoth.



The tombstone of Rachel, daughter of Yitzhak, d. 1809, is the oldest extant mound matzevah.

In total 122 boulder-style tombstones were extracted. If you look to the section now adjoining these tombstones, you will see similar stones, suggesting this style of tombstone continued in use. Remember, too, that the oldest extant tombstone on Bagnowka, seen at the beginning of this tour, is also a boulder-style. And recall the boulder-style tombstone located beside the caretaker's mound, transferred from Central Park in 2007.

One megalithic rose granite stele was also unexpectedly extracted from the mound. It measures 3 m tall, weighing over 2 tons. Dubbed 'the Miriam' after the name of the deceased remembered in this inscription, Miriam was the daughter of a Jehuda from Orla; she died on March 26, 1840. Orla was one of two Jewish centers in the Bialystok region. Her epitaph also describes her as "a woman of valor" (Prov. 31:10) with excerpts from this proverb extolling Jewish women and concludes with a short prayer: "You will revive her in the resurrection of the dead with the remnant of your people, O Israel."



"The Miriam"

As you view these matzevoth, look also for these unique tombstones:

#68 Note the beautiful folk-art cornflower and decorative lines as well as the playful calligraphy. Cornflowers can be found on tombstones in Bagnowka and in the regional cemetery of Choroszcz.



"Here lies the modest woman, Mrs. Rivkeh, daughter of Osher Zelig. She died 1 Succoth 5583 (30 Sept 1822). May her soul be bound in the bond of everlasting life."

#109 Note the large, primitive letters for the inscription of Rachel, daughter of Joel (d. 27 March 1835). Overly large letters are noted in ancient epitaphs. But why?



#106 is the tombstone for "the wondrous God-fearing scholar, our teacher and rabbi, Chaim Moshe, son of our teacher and rabbi, Yehoshua Zelig (d. 19 Oct 1847). He is also described of as "the *maggid* of Choroszcz"! Choroszcz was a nearby town that also came under the jurisdiction of Tiktin (Tykocin) and may be where the early Jews of Bialystok buried their dead before the Rabbinic Cemetery was founded in c. 1781. A *maggid* is a type of Jewish traveling preacher and storyteller. Future research may reveal some of the details of his life and travels ... but for now imagine the Podlasie in the early to mid-1800s and the religious and mystical stories he might have told!



#29 Remembers Mrs. Ester Frajda, daughter of Josef Halewi, who died on 6 Passover 5609 (d. 20 April 1849). Her name is preceded by a special Hebrew term that designates a "woman-in-confinement". One other mound matzevah (#131 Slawe, daughter of Zev, d. 1842) is also designated as such. Recall the row of tombstones at the back of Section 2 that remembered women who also died in confinement at the turn of the 20th Century. Both the mound matzevoth and the Bagnowka inscriptions reveal the danger of pregnancy and childbirth in the 19th and early 20th Centuries.



The matzevah of Ester Frajda (d. 1849) remembers that she died in conjunction with childbirth. Also note the color of this stone is similar to the oldest stone on Bagnowka, near the entrance, and to stones in the section adjoining the river of mound matzevoth.

14. The Lions of Bagnowka. Section 5, restored by ASF in 2010–2013, 2017–2018 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 improvisations of the Lion of Judah.

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Virtual Shtetl – Bialystok [History | Virtual Shtetl \(sztetl.org.pl\)](http://History | Virtual Shtetl (sztetl.org.pl))

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