

Jnerations

עמותת דור לדור
הפורום לחידוש מורשת יהדות אירופה, ע"ר



Report on the status of Klimontow's Jewish Cemetery

Prepared by Meir Bulka

דור לדור J-nerations

הפורום לחידוש מורשת יהדות אירופה European Jewish Heritage

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About J-NERATIONS

Dor L'Dor, or J-nerations, The Forum for the Renewal of European Jewish Heritage (a registered NGO), concerns itself with three major issues:

1. The renewal of European Jewish Heritage
2. The rectifying of injustices committed against the Jewish religion
3. Taking action in instances where the dignity of our dead Jewish ancestors has been desecrated

J-nerations is a recognized organization operating in Poland for the renewal of European Jewish heritage and the restitution of property belonging to those holy communities that were wiped out in the Shoah. For that purpose we operate in a wholly legal manner, employing those means that Polish law affords us in deference to existing constraints.

We are assisted by a staff of experienced lawyers, researchers, translators, genealogists, historians, videographers, as well as a Polish public interested in restoring Polish-Jewish relations to what they once were.

Our organization operates in many spheres: in the legal sphere, we employ lawyers who are expert in their fields and who possess the legal acumen to bring justice to light. In the political sphere, we maintain various contacts with both Polish and Israeli parliamentarians from a wide range of political affiliation; individuals we can call on to advance our agenda.

In the sphere of public opinion, we employ some of the finest public relation agencies both in Israel and in Poland so as to help promote our interests. We also make use of social media so as to raise awareness of issues at hand.

In respect to Klimontow's Jewish cemetery, we were asked to determine its original borders, its legal status, and the options available for reclaiming control or at least recognizing its Jewish provenance. We were assisted by historians, researchers, archivists specializing in the retrieval of documents, and local residents.

Information was gathered from various sources, such as aerial photographs taken by the German air force, Klimontow's city hall and municipal archive, the regional archive in Sandomierz, the Jewish Historical Institute and the offices of FODZ in Warsaw, Yad Vashem, and the holdings of various private individuals.

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KLIMONTOW – A GENERAL OVERVIEW

For a number of years descendants of Klimontow's former Jewish community have been trying to uncover information and documents regarding the town's unmarked Jewish cemetery, as well as the synagogue which still stands alongside it.

Klimontow's Jewish settlement apparently began at about the end of the 17th century. It tragically ended with the Second World War and the Nazi annihilation of its remaining residents.

Unlike many other towns with similar Jewish populations, Klimontow was never memorialized by its survivors and former residents through a Yizkor book. The majority of historical information available today is by way of the Virtual Sztetl website maintained by the new POLIN Museum in Warsaw: <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/k/337-klimontow>

Klimontow is in the Swietokrzyskie region of southeastern Poland, an area known for its dense network of provincial Jewish communities, such as Sandomierz, Ostrowiec, Opatow, Ozarow, Staszow, Chmielnik, Pinczow, and the regional capital of Kielce. The major southeastern town of Lublin is only 150 kilometers away.

According to early records, Klimontow's general population numbered 700 in the 18th century, half of whom were Jewish. By the middle of the 19th century, the Jews numbered 1,540 out of a total population of 1,740 residents. Having outgrown their small wooden synagogue, the Jews began building a new synagogue in 1848. Built from brick and concrete in the neo-Classical style, unique and novel for the time, the synagogue was finally dedicated in 1851 at the then astronomical cost of 30,000 zloty. A large plaza stretched out in front of the synagogue where weddings and other community events would take place.

Municipal records discovered in the course of our investigation indicate that by the beginning of the 20th century Jews comprised ¾ of the town's population. Property owned by the community included the synagogue, two schools, a mikveh, a food kitchen, a ritual slaughterhouse and the cemetery.

Although in the course of its history Klimontow saw its share of pogroms and blood libels, relations between the local Jewish and Christian populations appear to have been relatively benign prior to the upheavals of the 20th century. Indeed, the Jewish communal leadership enjoyed peaceful relations with the local Church heads, which helped to restrain any potential outbreaks of violent anti-Semitic behavior.

Klimontow's Jews earned their livelihood as traders, textile manufacturers, peddlers, grain millers, brick masons, lumber and iron producers. There were also craftsmen, such as tailors, carpenters, cobblers, and blacksmiths.

Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, Klimontow's Jewish community numbered 425 households, half of whom identified as Zionists (both religious and not), 37% of whom were Chassidim, and the rest socialists and communists.

When the Germans entered the town on September 13, 1939, they imposed an immediate curfew and prohibited its residents from venturing outside the town limits. All men between the ages of 16 and 60 were ordered to gather in the market square and warned that if anyone should accost a German soldier, the entire town would pay with their lives.



Eventually, a formal ghetto was set up in the town, housing over 4,000 inhabitants, including 900 refugees from surrounding villages and cities as far away as Lodz and Vienna. After 3 years of brutal oppression, including executions, forced labor, and pillaging of property, the remnants of the town's Jews were assembled in the market square on Erev Shabbat, October 30, 1942, and marched to the train station outside Sandomierz from where they were sent to the extermination camp in Treblinka.

Description of Jewish Properties in Klimontow Today .

The only Jewish properties known to survive in Klimontow today are the synagogue and the cemetery. As noted above there were other communal properties, such as the mikveh, the schools, the slaughterhouse and various welfare facilities. Alongside the cemetery there were facilities used by the Chevra Kadisha for the *tahara* ritual.



The Synagogue

Klimontow's synagogue is a uniquely designed structure, quite atypical of the synagogues constructed in Poland at the time. From documents gathered it appears that the synagogue was designed as such in order to provide an impressive architectural response to the local Church which was renowned for its beauty. The style is referred to as Neo-Classical with the white façade and supporting columns typical of ancient Greek buildings. This was often the style adopted for official state buildings. After 3 years of construction, the synagogue was dedicated in 1851.



According to historical records, a wooden synagogue preceded this new one and was demolished in 1862. The new synagogue had an area of 450 sq. m.: 27m in length and 16m in width. It is built out of various materials, perhaps indicating that additions were made over the years. The entrance to the building is from the west, with one leading to the main floor and the other to the women's gallery above. The entrance to the main floor is through a low arched portico, causing one to bow in a gesture of humility upon entering the sanctuary. The entrance to the women's gallery was by way of two exterior staircases on either side of the façade.



The main floor is divided into two sections: the large sanctuary facing east and some back rooms directly behind it that probably served as study rooms or perhaps as an additional women's gallery given the small windows that look on to the sanctuary. A large niche is built into the eastern wall, indicating the site of the Holy Ark.



During the Nazi occupation, the interior of the synagogue was destroyed and used as a warehouse to hold the pillaged property of the Jewish inhabitants. After the war, the locals used the space to store produce sold in the nearby outdoor market.

In the 1980s some renovation work was done for the purpose of converting the building into a cultural center, but work was stopped due to a lack of funds. In 2007 a group of young Poles, organized under the name “Kadisz for Our Neighbors,” held cultural events in the demolished sanctuary so as to raise money for rehabilitating the cemetery. The group disbanded a few years later and the synagogue was again abandoned.



Today the synagogue is entirely deserted and in a terribly derelict condition. From the discarded items found on a recent visit, such as bottles, old clothing, and cartons, it may be assumed that homeless vagrants have found their way in to the building and are the only ones to make use of it. The area in front of the synagogue serves as a bus stop for the local school children who are oblivious to the history of the building that stands behind them.



The Cemetery



A photo appearing in many archives showing the remnants of the cemetery sometime after the war. The back of the synagogue can be seen in the background, giving some indication of the cemetery's size and location relative to the synagogue.

Klimontow's Jewish cemetery was located directly behind the synagogue, an unusual arrangement for Jewish communities of the time. Most of the gravestones were removed by the Germans and probably used as building and paving material. After the war many graves were vandalized by the locals as they rummaged for the gold and silver that was assumed to be buried with their Jewish neighbors. In 1967, under Communist rule, the municipality appropriated the area, stripped it of its remaining gravestones and built a public school on a portion of the grounds. The fate of the removed gravestones is unknown, though some are known to be held by various locals.

We were unable to find any building plans whatsoever in the municipal archive or any other official Polish office. In 2001 the school underwent significant renovation and there is testimony from a municipal official with regard to the unearthing of gravestone fragments as well as human bones in the course of work. We were unable to obtain a copy of this testimony, but it was read over the telephone to one of our researchers as a personal favor by a woman working in the district archive. We must assume that officials are wary of handing over documents lest it facilitate legal measures being taken against the municipality.

In another testimony conveyed to us orally, Wiczek Przybylski told us that in the course of the renovation work the site was flooded with rainwater. He claims to have personally witnessed bones and stone fragments pouring into the construction site together with the floodwater. The ex-mayor, Majczlew Gradzek, also relates having seen such things during the course of work.

For many years, the outside grounds of the school, which included a large portion of

the denuded former cemetery, were left vacant and served as a playground for the schoolchildren. In 2018 the municipality converted a large part of these grounds into a sports complex, including a soccer field, basketball court and track lane. The cost of over 300,000 zloty was shouldered by both the municipality and the Polish Ministry of Sport.



No marker or monument was ever placed to indicate the nature of the site. However, at the far northeastern corner of the grounds there stands a fenced-in area of 4m by 4m with a sign that states “Lapidarium of the Jewish Cemetery.” A lapidarium is a place where stone fragments of architectural interest are displayed. If one looks hard enough among the weeds and overgrowth, one can find around 50 stone fragments with Hebrew writing testifying to their having once been Jewish gravestones.



In portions of the cemetery there are signs of drainage pipes having been laid underground. At various locations one can see the lids of reservoir wells, some of them weighted down with gravestone fragments so as to prevent children from lifting them. The evidence of this underground work almost surely points to the possibility of widespread grave desecration.



A reservoir well on the grounds of the cemetery



Signs of underground digging for laying pipes as seen from an aerial photograph

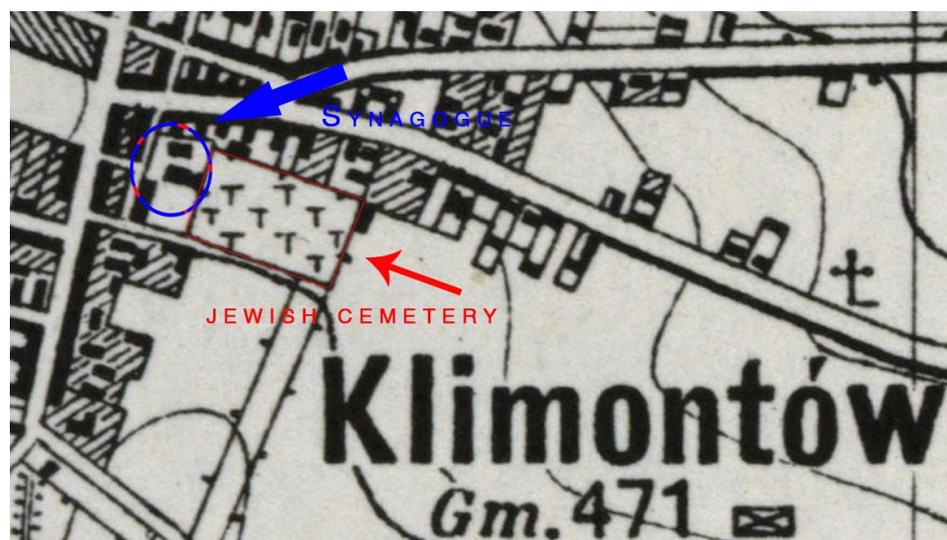
While touring the school I met with its principal, but she refused to discuss the cemetery with me, claiming that all inquiries should be directed to the municipality. The officials at the municipality refused to talk with us as well. Finally, after much imploring, we were told to contact FODZ (the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland), as they were now the custodians of communal Jewish property and would have all the documentation.

Findings in regard to the Cemetery's Boundaries

According to Jewish communal death records held in the district archive, some 4000 Jews were buried in Klimontow over the course of its settlement. This number would include Jewish inhabitants of the surrounding farms and estates, of which there were many.

Testimony from local inhabitants produced varying and often conflicting estimates of the cemetery's original perimeters. Nevertheless all agreed that the area upon which the new sports complex was constructed fell within those original boundaries.

Now, having obtained detailed German maps of the area from World War 2, it is possible to identify with certitude the boundaries of the cemetery. The aerial maps detail every structure and field including a cluster of T marks to indicate the area of a cemetery, as was standard in maps of this sort.



The location of the cemetery relative to the synagogue

Analyzing the map, one can see the synagogue abutting the cemetery from the west. There are structures on either side of the synagogue that will be addressed further on. The northern border of the cemetery follows the line of dwellings that still exist today. The eastern border would thus begin at the very spot where the lapidarium stands. What remains to be determined is the length of the eastern and western borders, which would then allow us to draw the southern border.

With the advent of satellite photos available through the Internet, the task may be easily accomplished by way of superimposing the war map over a satellite photo from Google Earth, using the adjoining roads as anchoring coordinates.



The boundaries of the cemetery outlined in red over the satellite image



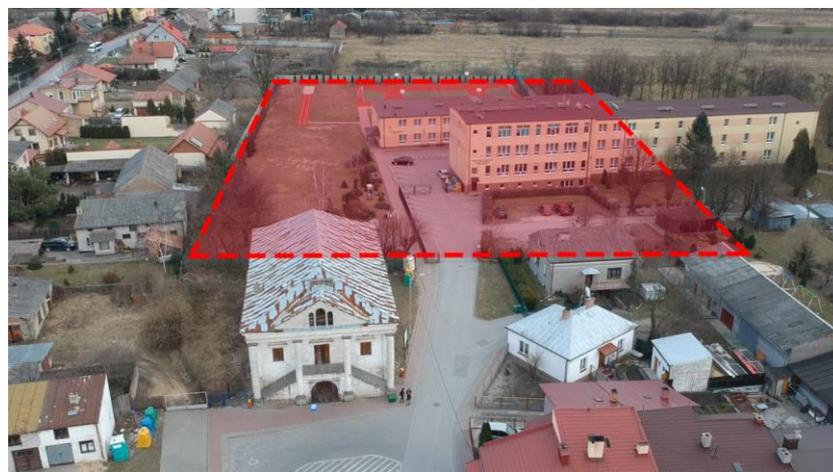
Those boundaries outlined in white after removing the war map

The western and eastern borders can now be clearly delineated and linked together by the southern border. The buildings that fall within the outlined space are those belonging to the public school. About 80% of the school structure lies in this area. The vacant area to the north and east of the school buildings are the grounds upon which the sports fields were recently constructed.

A survey of the area establishes that the northern and southern boundaries are about 132 meters long while the eastern and western boundaries are about 80 meters long. That would indicate a 425 meter-long perimeter and an area of 10,600 square meters, 40% of which appears to have been built upon by the school (not including the soccer and basketball fields). Considering that the average grave takes up 2 square meters, there would be space in this area for up to at least 5,000 graves, rendering the record of 4,000 burials wholly plausible.



An aerial view of the school facilities standing on the cemetery



A view from a different angle

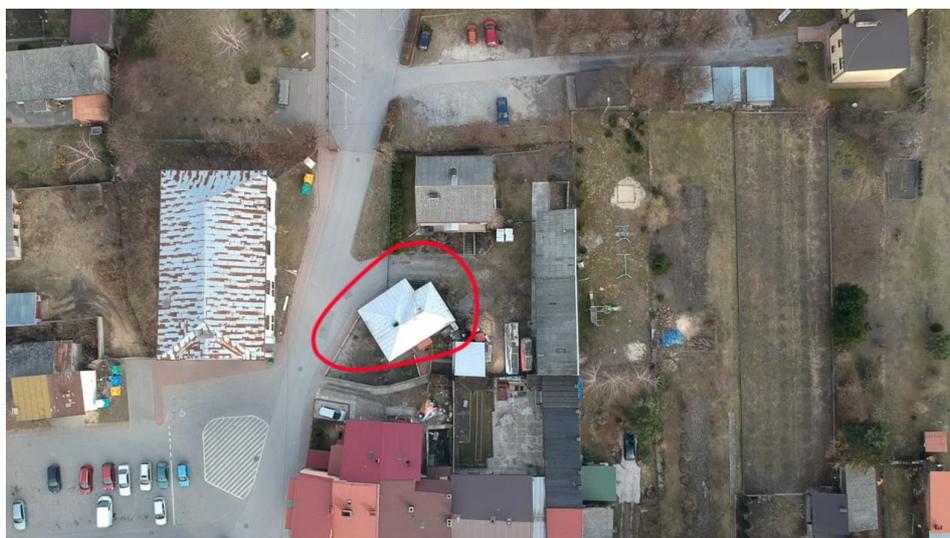
Buildings Adjacent to the Synagogue and Cemetery

There is a building standing to the right of the synagogue which may have belonged to the Chevra Kadisha for purposes of conducting the *tahara* (ritual purification) of the dead before burial. Such a building is known to have existed in that location and can even be seen in the post-war photograph of the cemetery.



The building circled in red thought to have belonged to the Chevra Kadisha

As can be seen, the building stood at an angle with its northeastern section slightly smaller than its southwestern section. This corresponds perfectly to the present-day building with the white roof that adjoins the synagogue, circled in red below.



The ritual cleansing of bodies would have required both water and drainage pipes. In examining the photographs, we found signs of underground infrastructure behind the building with the white roof, including a number of drainage wells.

Final conclusions:

An analysis of all the aerial maps and photographs confirms without a doubt that the area of the Jewish cemetery is as indicated in the above photos. These photos were taken by drone surveillance at a height of 100 meters with a 50mm camera. With the help of software that corrects angle deviations and interweaves multiple images so as to get the broadest possible exposure of one's target, we were able to produce the above evidence.

Correlating the perimeters of the cemetery to the photograph below taken in March 2019, we may conclude the present-day boundaries of the cemetery as follows:

1. The western border extends from the fence separating the school grounds from the lots on Sandomierska Street, past the back of the synagogue and the school parking lot, ending where a playground adjoins nearby buildings.
2. The southern border extends from this point through open ground, then cuts through the school buildings and continues until it passes to the right of the basketball court and is perpendicular to the eastern fence.
3. The eastern border follows the eastern fence until it hits the northern fence at the corner where the lapidarium stands.
4. The northern border runs along the northern fence until it ends at the point it began.



Klimontow's Jewish Museum

In Klimontow there stands a small Jewish museum, or "Chamber of Remembrance" as it is called, that is run by a local resident named Miroslaw Szelag. Begun as his own private initiative, the museum is housed in what was the home of Mr. Szelag's grandmother before her death. It contains various artifacts gathered or bought by Mr. Szelag over the years from local occupants of what were once Jewish homes, abandoned with much of the furnishings still in place.

Among the items in the collection are photos and drawings of former residents, scraps of notebooks and journals, postcards, articles of Judaica, and even what appears to be a cabinet for holding a small Torah scroll.

Mr. Szelag is in the possession as well of a gravestone fragment which he claims to have found in the vicinity of the cemetery. It appears to be a quarter the size of the original headstone, but is well preserved with the original pigments intact. Szelag claims that a considerable number of gravestones still exist in the possession of local poachers who perhaps thought they would be valuable one day. He has offered to seek out these monuments and redeem them for display in his museum. The "market value" of a matzeva is said to be 100 zloty, or around \$25.





The Legal Status of Jewish Communal Property in Klimontow

Ownership of the Synagogue:

The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) was established in 2002. Its main function is to protect and commemorate those surviving sites that are connected to the religious and cultural heritage of Polish Jewry. The foundation is active in those locales where there is either no surviving Jewish community or one that hasn't the resources to maintain its heritage sites. The foundation's mandate is grounded in the Polish court's resolution concerning the restoration of Jewish property to communal Jewish ownership.

The Klimontow synagogue appears on the list of properties whose ownership was sought and obtained by FODZ. The Klimontow municipality recognizes FODZ as the owner and custodian of the synagogue property. Over the years attempts were made at revitalizing the site by converting it into a cultural center with elements commemorating the Jewish past. The mayor was supportive but unable to finance the project alone.

FODZ claims not to have the resources necessary for a proper renovation of the building and has suggested that the mayor seek funds from the various national and international bodies that have funded such projects in the past. At some point the roof of the synagogue was renovated but no one seems to know who shouldered the expense.

Ownership of the Cemetery:

The Jewish cemetery does not appear on the list of properties claimed by FODZ or any other organization or authority. In fact no one has laid claim to the property, leaving it under the presumptive ownership of the Jewish community that purchased it as private land.

Polish law distinguishes between private cemeteries and public cemeteries. Public cemetery land belongs to an authority (state, district or municipal), and in accordance with Polish law may be barred from use once 40 years have passed since the last burial, even though it retains its designation as a cemetery. Polish law permits the reuse of burial plots once 25 years have passed on condition that no tax was paid toward the renewal of land. This law also prohibits rezoning the land for any other purpose.

Private cemetery land owned by a religious denomination enjoys special status insofar as no one may exercise control of the land aside from its owners. As regards the cemetery in Klimontow, the assumption is that, like other Jewish cemeteries, it was privately held by the community so as to ensure that burial would be conducted in accordance with Jewish law and be free of municipal interference. Indeed, the 13th century Statute of Kalisz, which enshrined Jewish liberties in Polish law, states as

follows: "Should a Christian desecrate a Jewish cemetery, he may be severely penalized by expropriating all of his assets."

Not only are we talking of private land, but the cemetery continued to be used for burial up to the very day the Jews of Klimontow were transported to their death on October 30, 1942. Survivors testified after the war that a number of Jews were shot in the market place during the final aktzia and buried by members of the Judenrat in the cemetery. That would mean that the construction of the school less than 25 years later was a violation of Polish law even if the land had not been private. The claim that Poland today is not responsible for what occurred under Soviet rule is irrelevant insofar as the violations continued even after the regime's collapse.

Two clauses in the Polish constitution may be relevant to reclaiming ownership of the cemetery:

1. Violating the dignity of the dead: The Polish constitution recognizes the dignity of the dead and prohibits any desecration experienced as such by a Polish citizen. This law applies under specific conditions, requiring proof that such an act was done intentionally and entailed a manifest dishonoring of the dead.
2. Deprecating religion: The Polish constitution upholds the honor due religious belief and recognizes the standing of religious groups who seek redress for offensive acts committed against their religion.

The Polish constitution accepts responsibility for enforcing these two laws when it can be proved that an intentional act took place. It must be understood that such acts are not litigable when they are suspected of occurring either under German rule or Soviet rule, for the State refuses to take responsibility for abuses that took place under foreign occupation. That being said, the State does address these kinds of abuses when they continue to occur in the period after Soviet rule. And in the case of Klimontow, these abuses are occurring now.

Options for Future Action

In order to pursue a course of action, a consensus of expectation must be arrived at by all the relevant players, especially the heirs and descendants of those buried in the cemetery. That means soliciting feedback regarding their wishes after having digested the information reported above and then examining options for helping materialize those wishes.

On the face of it there are three possible approaches where consensus may be found:

1. The maximal demand: Insisting on reclaiming Jewish ownership and control of the cemetery grounds not built upon, including those grounds upon which the sport fields have been laid. The chances of success are not great and would require financing a protracted legal struggle and public relations campaign.
2. The lesser demand: Municipal recognition of the site as a Jewish cemetery, including setting standards for proper comportment and incorporating elements into the school curricula recognizing the history and significance of the site. A memorial monument might be erected somewhere on the grounds and perhaps a ceremony held annually on an appropriate date commemorating the town's Jewish past.

The chances of success here would be much greater as the solution would be sought through respectful negotiation with the local authorities rather than in a court of law. It must be understood, though, that enforcing the agreed upon measures would be very difficult.

3. No demand: Reconciling oneself to the status quo while gnashing one's teeth over the inability to institute change in local attitude or action.

A final thought for consideration:

The synagogue is under the patronage of FODZ, although not high on its list of priorities. There is municipal interest in restoring the synagogue as both a cultural center and Jewish museum, building on Mr. Szelag's humble initiative. Such projects have been undertaken in other Polish synagogues and proved to have economic benefit as a tourist draw, as in nearby Chmielnik (www.swietokrzyskisztetl.pl). If FODZ were to encourage and guide such a project, we might be able to at least negotiate the return of the cemetery area directly behind the synagogue which is mostly vacant. Then the dignity of the place would be restored at least partially.

Respectfully,
Meir Bulka

