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Norman Ravvin

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Returning Canadian

Norman Ravvin

Concordia University 

norman.ravvin@concordia.ca

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Radzanów on the Verge of Change: Jews, Non-Jews, and a Returning Canadian

Norman Ravvin

Abstract:

This article examines changes in travel to Poland since the decade after the fall of communism. Using as its focus the author's ancestral village, Radzanów, located north-west of Warsaw, it traces patterns in Jewish return to such places, shifts in Polish attitudes about Jewish heritage and history, and the impact of key heritage institutions and tourism trends. In Radzanów, a derelict synagogue building and an unmarked burial ground desecrated by the Germans in wartime are the lasting markers of pre-war Jewish life.

Key words: Poland, Jewish return, synagogues, heritage organisations

Radzanów is a typical Polish village of a thousand or so people, an hour by car north-west of Warsaw. Twenty-five years ago, on my first visit, the infrastructure of the market square, along with the roadways leading into it from nearby towns, conveyed to the imaginative eye how the village would have looked in the years before World War II, when its Jewish population, most of it living around the central square, had made up a third of the total population. Streets retained their age-old names, marking the towns towards which they lead: *ulica* Mławska leading to Mława and *ulica* Raciążska to Raciąż. In the pre-war years, Jews rendered these in Yiddish-German, calling Mławska the *Mlawer Gasse*. The large white basilica named after St Francis of Assisi at one side of the square dwarfed the derelict red-brick Moorish-style synagogue on the other side, as it had since the church was built in the 1920s. Numerous single-storey wooden houses with gabled roofs, more than a hundred years old, remained, many of them once Jewish homes and businesses, now weathered but still appealing in their obvious poverty (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Radzanów village centre, 2025. © Norman Ravvin.

My first visit to Radzanów was remarkable, largely because of the impressive guide I travelled with. Zbigniew Polakowski, a Pole of impressive bearing, drew locals to us and was skilled at fielding questions about who I, an outsider, was and what we were doing in the village. One of the people questioning us was old enough to remember the pre-war home of my mother's family and my mother's elder brother, then nick-named Berek, with whom he had often played. Other younger men recounted, some with more, others with less detail, the story of the return of a single Radzanów Jew upon the end of World War II, a rare remnant of those who had been murdered in the Mława ghetto or at Auschwitz. Another local offered us the opportunity to view what he called an 'archive of the Jews'. Some of my interlocutors told me these stories as we sat over *Zywiec* beers in a *kufelek*, a small bar in a mobile home at the edge of what had been the market square. In this, our meeting was not unlike the business done before the war between Jewish artisans in their storefronts and the locals and agriculturalists who came from the countryside for market days.

As I do not speak Polish – Yiddish is my only Radzanów-relevant language – my guide and driver on that first visit translated all aspects of these encounters for me, thus mediating the knowledge gained. But I was inspired, even charmed, by what transpired during the time we spent in the village square. This was followed by a car ride to retrieve a set of keys that let us into the synagogue. In the late 1990s, the village had its public library in the building, including a section of books on the wartime, which happened to be shelved on the upper level, once the women's gallery – which my grandmother told me had collapsed during a wedding. After this we drove to the unmarked burial ground on *ulica Gorná* (High Street) where relatives on both sides of my mother's family were buried under wild grass.

When I returned to Radzanów a few years later, many things had changed. The Warsaw-based Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) had forced the removal of the library from the synagogue, which now stood derelict, its windows boarded up. The *kufelek* was gone. The locals who had previously remembered my family were not around. On a visit to an archive in neighbouring Mława, I ran up against an unhelpful archivist who claimed there were no documents that would be useful for my research into the pre-war years. In part, I felt, he took this approach because I was escorted by a guide who was less aggressive than and lacked the bearing of my former guide. This one sat passively as my questions were rebuffed with a repeated *nie* (no).

Radzanów has remained in my thoughts ever since, and I continued to return, including in May 2023 once the Covid-related restrictions were lifted. Nothing can stop me when it comes to revisiting Radzanów. Yet what drives this commitment to the birthplace of my mother, my grandmother, and three

of my great-grandparents, along with a host of cousins and relatives by marriage?

My goals in relation to Radzanów have not been scholarly, though I am a teacher and researcher of pre-war Jewish life and Holocaust literature. From my first visit, my goals were, almost unconsciously, creative. I wanted to explore what these visits might reveal; I also wanted to develop my own relationship with the village.¹ I did not want to view it solely through the eyes of others – even if I had, before my first visit, read all I could find in English and Yiddish on pre-war and wartime life in the area. I also had access to my grandmother’s substantial oral account of her youth, from early in the twentieth century up to her departure for Canada in 1935. My grandmother’s account of her childhood and young adulthood in Poland included nothing stereotypical or sentimental, only the facts of her traditional, middle-class upbringing. Her parents had lost previous babies to infant death, so she was named Chaya Dina, ‘sweet life’, to herald her healthy arrival. Over tea and honey cake at her Vancouver home, I heard that an array of family members lived in the vicinity of the village, some running businesses on the market square, others married and living in nearby towns, including Szreńsk and Drobin, a few in thrall to the Chasidic leaders of the Gerer and Aleksander courts. Leaving this world in the summer of 1935 was, for her, a tragedy. And yet she surely appreciated that if she had not left then, she, like almost all her family, would have been murdered by Germans in the Mława ghetto or at Auschwitz. We never spoke about those people as murder victims. Rather, they were living souls in the squares of Radzanów, Mława, Szreńsk, and Drobin.

The attention I pay here and elsewhere to Radzanów is not a ‘heritage’ study, per se, but a life study, one that includes what is rendered ‘heritage’ by the disaster that befell Radzanów’s Jews. The synagogue and the burial ground, the two remnants of a centuries-long Jewish presence in the village, are both endangered. Although it is fortunate that both are intact, their status in the village is at a crossroads. When the local library was removed from the synagogue, the expectation was that FODZ had a plan for what to do with the empty building; but it did not. Removing the building’s purpose as a library downgraded it to a shell, a tomb.

In 2016 an idealistic group of high-school students and their teacher, Barbara Zaborowska, aimed to ‘open’ the building to new uses for its own protection. They undertook a study of the building and mounted an event in Radzanów’s community hall to raise the building’s profile in the village and further afield (JHE 2016). The list of attending guests included the local priest, a Polish national government representative from the hard-right Law

1 Much of my published writing on this subject is non-fiction and autobiographical, but in 2019 I published a novel, *The Girl Who Stole Everything*, set in Radzanów and Vancouver (Ravvin 2019), which linked travel and research with personal concerns related to Jewish identity and history.

and Justice Party, FODZ representatives from Warsaw, and me, the lone descendant of Jewish Radzanowers, one generation removed by my Canadian birth. My role in the afternoon event was to talk about the pre-war Jewish community, which I presented in English, accompanied by a Polish translation by a capable interpreter from Warsaw. After the event some of us entered the synagogue building, with its ruined interior – the ark and other decorative work having been stripped, taken to the cemetery, and burnt by the occupying Germans. Later we gathered at a nearby skansen – an outdoor history museum, with buildings and artifacts meant to recall the area's past – for an outdoor meal prepared by a group of history reconstructionists who were prone to dressing up as Napoleonic-era gendarmes, old-time Polish farmers, or faux Jews. I sat next to the wife of a manager from Cedrob, a large local poultry-raising company, who supported a preliminary plan of repairs for the synagogue. After dinner, two young Radzanowers told me that friends of theirs now owned my family's former house, just off the market square. I did not press for the opportunity to visit the house where my mother and her mother had been born. I cannot properly explain why I took this approach but will live with this decision and accept that there will forever be a missing piece in the puzzle of recovery.

On my first visits to Radzanów, I focused on the area around what had once been the market square, named for Marshal Józef Piłsudski, and near to the synagogue, with the adjacent wooden houses, tethered now to electric wiring, their orchards of geraniums, and tattered curtains filling the window frames. On a recent visit, the skills of my guide led to discoveries related to life in Radzanów and to the general atmosphere around Jewish heritage in contemporary Poland. In 2023, my driver and interpreter was Witold Wrzosiński, director of Warsaw's sprawling Okopowa Street Jewish cemetery, where pre-war history, ongoing burials, and negotiations around governmental cultural policies form the challenges he tackles in his working life. Before Wrzosiński took the job at Okopowa, he was a tour guide, working on a field guide to Polish Jewish cemeteries for Polish readers (Wrzosiński 2016). At Okopowa he oversees the much-visited burial sites of I. L. Peretz, Ida Kamińska, Ludwik Zamenhof, S. Y. Ansky, to name a few, and a host of *ohels*, mausoleums marking the burial places of religious figures, which attract visits by the faithful all year round. Wrzosiński's willingness to drive me to Radzanów was a piece of good fortune. As we travelled up from Warsaw, I learnt about ongoing challenges at Okopowa – including the efforts by the Law and Justice government to tie heritage funding for the cemetery to the kinds of memorials it deemed worthy. Wrzosiński negotiated with the staff at the Radzanów mayor's office, fetched the key to the synagogue, and then drove us down *ulica Górna* to visit the burial ground that had served the pre-war Jews of the village. Though one can find it described in various post-

war accounts of sites in need to attention, it remains unfenced, without any remaining *matzevot* (grave stones) and unmarked by any memorial (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The historic burial ground in Radzanów, 2023. © Norman Ravvin.

Discussions in Canada about unmarked burials at residential schools, which came to the fore in the spring of 2021 (Meisner 2021), drew attention to the fact that I, too, had an unmarked burial ground in my heritage. Like sites at the Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia, where more than 200 unmarked graves are thought to lie, at Radzanów the dead have not been recognised; neither have the perpetrators who destroyed the cemetery. The location is not marked as a ‘heritage’ site. You could call it orphaned land, or stolen land. In a number of different ways, it is a crime scene. Established in the mid-1700s, the graveyard covered 7,500 square metres by World War II. In the spring of 1940, the occupying German army destroyed all burial markers and surrounding structures. Gravestones were destroyed, stolen, or used as paving stones, as in some nearby villages; one is said to be retained in the wall of a local school. The non-Jewish Pole named Ząbkowski, who maintained the graveyard and worked as its gravedigger, was murdered at the time of the cemetery’s destruction (Altman n.d.). Documentation suggests that the Germans used the burial ground as a killing site for some of those incarcerated in the nearby Mława ghetto. The site of the burial ground, as far as one can recognise its current perimeter, has shrunk by as much as four fifths owing to development along its margins (Altman n.d.).

Why the Radzanów cemetery has remained at all, in such a sad and unattended condition since the war, seems a mystery, though it is likely that lo-

cals could tell at least some of that tale. Many Jewish cemetery sites in Poland have been recovered, fenced, and marked with commemorative plaques and monuments. These now represent straightforward heritage sites and places where descendants can visit their ancestral past. An early version of this work, undertaken in the communist era, exists at Mława where the pioneering Nissenbaum Family Foundation took partial responsibility for the restoration, as it did with other early projects. A host of funds and organisations, including FODZ, remain dedicated to maintaining abandoned Jewish cemeteries in Poland. A long-standing and impressive example of these efforts is the ‘To Bring Memory Back’ project organised by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which motivates schools in towns and villages to involve students in the repair of cemeteries (AJHIP 2018).

All of this demonstrates the challenges related to repairing and properly marking Radzanów’s historic burial site. During the first years of my interest in the village, I did not focus on the burial ground. But more recently my interest has grown, following the confirmation by one of my uncles that at least two of our relatives are buried there. These are my mother’s paternal grandfather and his eldest son, both of whom died of natural causes before the outbreak of the war. They carried my mother’s maiden name, Eisenstein.

Discussions with various historical organisations and correspondence with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, have not led to concrete outcomes.² Though the village claims the land on which the burial ground sits, I have seen no documentation explaining how it passed from pre-war Jewish ownership to general communal property. It is the Chief Rabbi, the chief ritual expert in the country, who is responsible for staking out the ritual sanctity of a desecrated site. The mayor of Radzanów has stated his willingness to clear discarded farm implements and scrap that sit at the edge of the burial ground and to distribute a message to Radzanowers and others in the area via the village web site requesting the return of any gravestones they might have, anonymously if necessary.³ As of this writing no grave markers have surfaced.

For over twenty-five years, I have involved myself in Jewish Polish heritage as I tried to become part of Radzanów village life. Throughout this time,

2 My correspondence with Schudrich alerted him to the fact that the Radzanów burial ground was unmarked. He corresponded with representatives at Radzanów about the matter, without results.

3 The public notice was as follows: ‘Szanowni Mieszkańcy Gminy Radzanów, Żydowski potomek przedwojennych rodzin radzanowskich zwraca się za pośrednictwem urzędu do mieszkańców naszej gminy „aby każdy kto wie o pozostałości macew/nagrobków z przedwojennego cmentarza, zwrócił je anonimowo, jeśli czułby taką potrzebę. Proces zwrotu może być zorganizowany nieformalnie [...] odzyskanie kamieni nagrobkowych przyspieszy możliwość naprawy i godnego oznaczenia miejsca pochówku’. Bliższych informacji w/w sprawie udziela Sekretariat urzędu pok. nr 23.’

dramatic shifts have taken place in Polish political and social life, some of them only recognisable in hindsight. My earliest visits in the late 1990s revealed a hint of what I would call post-Soviet fiasco: at the same time that westernising political and cultural trends were gaining momentum, the Soviet years retained a subtle influence over personal interactions and institutions – even in such seemingly insignificant places such as the front desk of a student hotel. Old authoritarian ways of asserting dominance and resistance to independent motivation that might reek of ‘western individualism’ would suddenly erupt. Post-Soviet Poland was at times a kind of absurdist theatre that one had to contend with, considering that the power base supporting it had evaporated. In those years, travel in Poland had elements of dreamlike surprise; the country’s post-war past lingered in unexpected ways. Many of the remarkable monuments and commemorative sites dedicated to pre-war Jewish history were not yet in place. The dereliction of the two Radzanów sites, alongside the large graveyard memorial at Mława, represented the status quo response to Polish Jewish historical memory. I experienced these sites on my own, accompanied only by my guide-translator, as a tourist-scholar-writer might, recording and photographing them for my own purposes.

It was on later visits that I contacted representatives of heritage organisations in an effort to have an impact on my own ancestral places by seeking a use for the synagogue and the appropriate marking of the burial ground. It took a while for these efforts to show results. My meeting with Monika Krawczyk, then head of FODZ, left me with an unsettled feeling of misdirection. Our discussions were unfocused and I was unable to convince her to make resources available for restoring the Radzanów sites.⁴ Krawczyk’s successor, Piotr Puchta, who took over the position in 2019, proved to be an able and open collaborator as he honoured FODZ’s responsibility for the synagogue in Radzanów. FODZ was obliged, for instance, to buttress the synagogue’s outer wall when roadworks on Piłsudski Square damaged it.

It was through my discussions with FODZ representatives, as well as with Witold Wrzosiński, that I came to understand recent trends and challenges in the effort to manage Polish-Jewish properties left ownerless after the war: finished restoration projects are few and far between; major projects on significant buildings take years to complete; the general interest and funds for renovations of derelict buildings are declining; and the overall number of Jews who visit their ancestral places decreased dramatically during the Covid pandemic and has not recovered since. It is likely that in the near future no new cohort will be interested in undertaking this kind of travel or in engaging in the kind of philanthropic efforts undertaken by survivors and their children during the post-communist decades.

4 Krawczyk later moved on to more public-facing roles related to Jewish heritage in Poland. After the Law and Justice party lost power in 2023, she was dismissed from her position as director of the Jewish Historical Institute in 2024 (JHE 2024).

In the intervening years, the options for Jewish heritage travel in Poland have improved dramatically, as centres of attraction – including Auschwitz with its state museum; the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw’s Muranow neighbourhood; and Kraków’s Kazimierz district with the nearby Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory museum – attract audiences and philanthropic support. These major locations alone provide an array of historical and local contacts for international and Polish visitors. The centrality of Auschwitz in the mainstream public narrative of the Holocaust; the intactness and appealing scale and character of historic Kazimierz; and the opening of POLIN in 2013, a truly internationally inspired project, all point to the future of heritage travel in Poland.

POLIN is a notable success, dwarfing Nathan Rapoport’s adjacent monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a significant memorial to the Holocaust. The POLIN Museum’s site, once a large park surrounded by communist-era housing developments, is on a street named for ghetto fighter Mordechai Anielewicz, with modest commemorative plaques dating from as early as 1946. Visitors sitting on the plinth of the Rapoport monument, with its Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish plaques, can watch all sorts of groups enter the POLIN museum.⁵ These include large groups of Polish school kids and North American and Israeli tour groups, whose guides lead them from the sculpture of Jan Karski to the path honouring Irena Sendler, saviour of children in the Warsaw Ghetto. Upon entering POLIN, an impressive array of Polish Jewish heritage presents itself, even as the exhibition highlights a distinctive, even idiosyncratic focus: Jewish life in Poland over the course of some thousand years, rather than Jewish death in Poland at the hands of the Germans. Yet, however much I appreciate each visit to POLIN, and to a lesser extent to Kazimierz (to Auschwitz I have not gone, and will not go), the success of the museum contributes to the decrease of people exploring the country independently in search of their ancestral connections.

If people do make the trip to their ancestral place, they do it, for the most part, only once. Yet repeat visits are the best way to understand how Poland is changing and how these changes affect the potential for Jewish memory travel and tourism. On my first visit I encountered people who retained pre-war memories, as well as what can be called lore, heard from parents and grandparents. During subsequent visits I focused on the potential for restoring neglected sites and met with village administrators. It was on a visit in 2023 that I was forced to face the first substantial outward change in Radzanów in more than twenty years – the transformation of the square’s

5 The text on the plaques can be translated as ‘The Jewish People – its fighters and martyrs’. As was appropriate in 1948, the monument’s designers placed the text in Yiddish at the centre, with Polish on the left and Hebrew on the right. Groups often leave flowers at the base of the monument, choosing to place them in front of the Yiddish plaque, as if that version has no audience. When I visit, I make sure the Yiddish version is legible.

character as a communist-era time capsule of pre-war Polish Jewish life. Government funding had allowed the central square to be remodelled, which included the creation of a small pond not far from the synagogue, along with landscaping, a miniature walkway, benches, and, of all things, a fountain that spouted water. To me, the communist-era square, overgrown and a little seedy, was preferable to this European Union-style upgrade. Though the communist era's neglect was not an expression of sympathy towards Jewish history, it did, as it precluded change, prevent the removal of pre-war structures in favour of new developments. The transformation included the replacement of once-Jewish wooden houses, which for some eighty years had been owned by locals, by generic boxy, stuccoed two-storey suburban 'villas' of a style found throughout the country. Though the Jewish 'heritage' of Radzanów remains visible, especially because the synagogue still stands, the fuller sense of a pre-war Jewish village that I had encountered a few years earlier was fading from view.

If one is dedicated, haunted, or simply interested in these shifts over time, changes like this can lead to strange, even extreme ideas. I had one: if the houses of Radzanów Jews murdered during the Holocaust were gradually disappearing (Fig. 3), should I not look into the option of buying one of them, so that at least one house on Piłsudski Square would, at least in my lifetime, hedge against the trend? How many złotys would it cost? Could the house become a counterpart to the synagogue, in whose view it sits, and then, too, a part of a larger project of preservation and recovery in the village? This led me to consider my contacts at FODZ and elsewhere; perhaps I could find others interested in such a scheme.



Figure 3. Wooden house near Piłsudski Square, Radzanów, 2023. © Norman Ravvin.

Radzanów is a full and complete story in its own right. The stories of the lives of its Jews before the war are in great need of being told; their torture and murder in the ghettos and at Auschwitz is a worthy subject; as is the Jew-less ache of the post-war years under cynical, thieving, nationalising Soviet-style apparatchiks. Still, there are potential future chapters. After twenty-five years, my engagement has yet to lead to any substantial restoration. I have become part of the life of the village with my ramblings, my savvy guides, my letters to the mayor in Polish, rendered by friends dedicated to the cause. I have encountered rust-red hens at the burial ground and seen the long cracks on the synagogue's interior walls caused by the development of Piłsudski Square. Future visits may signal new possibilities, so I remain vigilant, ready to return, ready to be surprised, but also ready to be disappointed. One thing is guaranteed, though: when I am there next, the Jewish population of Radzanów will increase by 100%.

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Norman Ravvin was the Chair in Canadian Jewish Studies at Concordia University in Montreal for thirteen years. He is a writer of fiction, non-fiction, and scholarly work on North American and European Jewish literature. His most recent publication is the memoir *Who Gets In: An Immigration Story* (University of Regina Press). Previous books include a novel of Poland and Vancouver, *The Girl Who Stole Everything*; a collection of essays, *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity, and Memory*; and the co-edited *Canadian Jewish Studies Reader*. He has been travelling to Poland regularly since the late 1990s.