

# Symbolic policy in small towns of Zamojszczyzna region, Poland, in the post-socialist period

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## Abstract

Small cities have attracted less attention from researchers of transformation processes, although in some countries they are an important part of the social landscape, as they are in Poland. I present the results of research on the public space and symbolic politics in three small towns in Zamojszczyzna, a region in southeastern Poland. All are characterized by interrupted or disturbed historical continuity due to the extermination of their Jewish communities, which made up the majority of the population until World War II. After 1945, the Jewish past was silenced, while the symbolic space was dominated by the memory of the resistance movement. I show in my text that since the 1990s there have been significant transformations in the aforementioned towns. In some of them, firstly, interest in Jewish heritage and efforts to preserve it are becoming more apparent. Second, there is a noticeable shift from commemorating anti-fascism to promoting the so-called struggle against communism, a reflection of the current politics of remembrance at the central level. I argue that the use of cultural heritage in small towns serves largely to gain recognition. Local authorities often use not only elements of the past that fit into national narratives, but also local traditions or even fictional literary heroes, for this purpose.

## Keywords

Zamojszczyzna, local heritage, symbolic policy, Jewish heritage

## Introduction

Following the collapse of the socialist system, taking place since the early 1990s, the socio-cultural and economic processes taking place in small towns have taken a different path in small towns than in large city centers (Novotný et al 2019). I argue that apart from its socio-economic aspect, equally important appears to be the redefinition of the local community as a community of identities, values and goals. This is a process that cannot be seen as a revolution, a rapid change, or as an opposition between the old

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order and the new (Ira and Janáč 2017). Different actors clash in defining the community, using available narratives or symbolic objects. It should be added that political reforms in the 1990s gave local governments much more power than before, which offered them the possibility of shaping symbolic policies and choosing the tools for the formation of local identity.<sup>1</sup>

In my text, I analyze the process of using the past and elements of cultural heritage in shaping local symbolic policy and the recognizability of the town (cf. Bérubé 2002). I argue that the most important changes in the symbolic space of towns in Eastern Poland concern both the intensification of a right-oriented nationalist ideology and the presence of Jewish heritage. As I will show later in this text, the most important changes, compared to the symbolic policy of the state socialism in Poland, can be seen in both of these areas.

I conduct my research in small towns: Tyszowce, Łaszczów, and Szczepieszyn, located in Zamojszczyzna, a region in south-eastern Poland bordering with Ukraine. All of these towns are local centers, serving the area of the commune (*gmina*), the smallest local government unit, with populations between 1,500 and 5,000. I am interested in local strategies and actions taken by local governments and other important actors in the public space that are aimed at creating symbols that on the one hand integrate the local identity of the place, while on the other creating the recognition of the town in a supra-local dimension. I adopt the key category of heritage because of its importance in defining the past, both in terms of identity and in terms of the attractiveness of a given center in the eyes of both residents and potential visitors from outside (Pomian 1996; Kusek & Purchla 2017; Falski 2022).

This article will refer to towns where cultural and social reproduction has been interrupted or severely affected, mainly by extermination of the Jewish population and the installation of the new regime controlled by communists. As I will explain further on, these are towns without clear historical landmarks that are architectural or urban embodiments of continuity and tradition. The transformations of the 1990s have resulted in further profound changes for local symbolic policy. This phenomenon has so far been little analyzed with regard to small cities, as researchers' attention has mainly been directed toward large urban centers (cf. Bunnell & Maringanti 2010; Klusáková 2017). Meanwhile, it seems that symbolic policy at the local level does not necessarily reflect processes at the national level.

In this paper, I ask the question of how, in such a situation, in the years following the political transformation of the 1990s, the identity of a place is

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1 On local government reform and the extension of the competences of local governments as a result of decentralization, see Wytrzązek (2004).

created, and how the narrative about its past is carried out. I put forward the thesis that the aim of both processes has become to build up the recognizability of a given town. Recognizability translates into the strengthening of the community on the one hand, and its positioning in the symbolic space of the country on the other, which can contribute to income in the form of tourism or external investment.

### The region

The Zamojszczyzna region has no clear boundaries or unambiguous identity. By convention, this name covers the region of four districts, or *poviats*, for which Zamość is an important center of cultural, social and economic practices. Today it is part of the Lubelskie Voivodeship, while between 1975 and 1999 it was a separate voivodeship.<sup>2</sup> The only major city is Zamość (approx. 65,000 inhabitants), the towns being centers of *poviats* with populations of between 15,000 and 20,000 (Biłgoraj, Tomaszów Lubelski, Hrubieszów). The localities I studied, however, have a population of around 2,000.

Several socio-historical factors can be distinguished that have influenced the constitution of the region's small-town specificities. After the fall of the Rzeczpospolita (1795), the Zamojszczyzna region came under Russian rule. This did not contribute to urban development, and with a lack of capital and political will to develop industry in the area, the region retained its agricultural character. The area that was incorporated into the Russian empire also became a space of an intensive Jewish settlement. Jews, as a result of many discriminatory regulations, were not allowed to own land, so they settled in towns and cities, becoming a dominant element in the population.

Zamojszczyzna also used to be a borderland between Polish and Ruthenian (Ukrainian) ethnic spaces until the 20th century and was inhabited by Roman Catholics, identifying themselves as Polish, and Greek Catholics, or Orthodox, identifying themselves as Ukrainian. Having on mind Jewish presence, such an ethnic mosaic characterized the region until the end of the Second World War. During the German occupation, the entire Jewish population was murdered in mass executions or concentration camps, and after 1944 the Ukrainian population fled to Ukraine, or was deported to northern Poland in 1947–1951. The towns of the region lost their multi-ethnic character and their demographic potential declined. During the communist period, the dynamics of their development were insignificant; they maintained

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2 Ewa Lecka (2013) emphasizes precisely that, despite the lack of obvious borders, the awareness of the existence of the region and belonging to it is very clear among Zamojszczyzna residents.

their character as small centers for an agricultural microregion with limited industry in some areas.

An outline of historical factors is necessary to understand the specificity of the location of the small towns of Zamość region. These are centers with, in many cases, interrupted continuity of development, that were burdened with the loss of a significant part of their population and the obliteration of traces of their culture. They are now are faced with the task of defining their identity and setting out a strategy for cohesion and development. This seems particularly important in modern times, where the category of cultural heritage, seen precisely as a key factor in the identity and value of a place, plays an important role (cf. Blake 2000). In borderland cities it is not easy to define what “heritage” is, and this can raise doubts and disputes.

### Local and national perspective

Every community needs identity symbols—symbolic elements around which social bonds can be formed, and which are recognizable as belonging to the group. Sharing the same symbols is one of the most important distinctive features of a culture; at the local level, it is responsible for creating a sense of community. Without such a bond, it is difficult to maintain the cohesion of imagined communities, making them less effective (During 2011). Such cohesive symbols are never unambiguous and “natural”; they are subject to definition and negotiation on the part of various social actors who are interested in defining identities, and therefore in imposing values and goals on the community. Consequently, the definition of the symbolic sphere can be understood as the creation of a community norm.<sup>3</sup> A key tool of this identity policy is recognizing objects (but also persons and events) as part of the historical heritage of a given group. In this part of the article, I will determine what strategies local actors adopt in the process of defining heritage, while discussing the particular historical and cultural conditions faced by the small towns of Zamojszczyzna (cf. Klusáková 2017).

Tyszowce lost its municipal rights in 1869 and only regained them in 2000. According to the 1921 census, the town had a population of over 4,400 at the time, 55% of which were Jews; by the 1950s, after the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and the catastrophe of World War II, less than 1,000 people remained. Today, the population of the town is around 2,000. The layout of the market square, a Roman Catholic church from the 19th century, traces

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3 I understand national culture, or at another level, local community identity, as a norm, more as a project imposed (or proposed) on the target group than as an effect of description; it is a matter of ascription rather than descriptiveness (cf. Čačić-Kumpes 2004).

of new and old Jewish cemeteries, and one town house have been preserved in the town. Otherwise, the town looks like a larger village; typical urban elements such as compact buildings, street frontages, taller and representative buildings, and street layout are missing. The urban space is unrepresentative—in the sense that it does not contain many place-specific elements, distinctive in some way.

If an element is supposed to gain significance or recognizability, it must stand out, cut off from a set of similar elements, or be distinguishable from the given sequence. The space of human existence, on the other hand, is marked by signs in order to acquire meaning: through semiotic activity, the natural landscape is transformed into a cultural one. I would add that in this way, the “ordinary” landscape is also transformed into a “unique” one. How does this happen in Tyszowce, where semiotic anchor points are not easy to find?

Two significant places can be distinguished in the center of Tyszowce: The market square—the focal point of the urban layout—and the park in front of the church (an undeveloped place in front of a sacred object, drawing, as it were, on its *sacrum*). There are two monuments in the market square; the first, erected in 1965, is dedicated to events on the level of “great history” and national history, namely the Tyszowce Confederation in 1665. This event has not entered the collective imagination, however, and the monument is associated with the martyrological history, characteristic of school curricula and policies of remembrance pursued in Poland virtually without major changes after 1990; events and figures associated with the struggle, the war, and Tyszowce’s heroism are singled out, and therefore the general formula placed on the monument, “To the Tyszowce Confederates and heroes of the struggle against fascism on the twentieth anniversary of the Polish People’s Republic - the Compatriots”, fits effortlessly into the landscape as a typical site of national remembrance.



Figure 1. Il. 1. Monument to Tyszowce confederation and antifascist struggle (on the left) and the monument of tyszowiaki (right). Photo by the author.

The second monument, erected in 2019 “on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the town”, depicts a pair of shoes; they commemorate *tyszowiaki*, i.e. shoes made by local craftsmen famous throughout the region prior to the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The inscription on the monument reads: “Tyszowce, once upon a time famous for its shoemaking craftsmanship”, and indeed shoemaking was the dominant craft for which the town was known. Despite the broken tradition, to which, for example, none of today’s factories refer, shoes have become an important part of the town’s identity, a sign of its uniqueness.

As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have demonstrated, virtually anything can be considered a tradition, and any element with certain semantic potential can be recognized as heritage and thus find its way into the identity narrative. It is important to emphasize that both monuments set up in the market square refer to local history, to a heritage unique to the locality, even if the resources of the local past do not offer many choices. The shoe monument is doubly interesting. Firstly, it can be seen as a tool for creating a town’s image, or branding of sorts, i.e., building recognition on a wider, provincial or national scale (on urban branding, see Rehan 2014). On a national scale, there are many towns and cities recognizable specifically through a certain characteristic element; recognition can result in tourist revenue, but also in

<sup>4</sup> For more information about *tyszowiaki*, see Marszałec (2015).

local activities related to a given cultural element. The shoemaking monument could also indicate a growing interest in non-martyr heritage, unrelated to national, “festive” history; in this sense, it would be a counterbalance to the Confederation monument. Shoemaking conditioned the livelihood of a significant proportion of the population, and merchants and fairs helped to stimulate the economic activity of a wider group than just shoemakers and their families. It is reasonable to think that the shoemaking, rather than the Confederacy of a distant era, was of greater importance to local society, so why should it not merit commemoration? Contemporary reflection is increasingly concerned with practices rather than just static objects, creating fertile ground for promoting the heritage of this type locally (Mydland and Grahm 2012).

The semiotic space in front of St. Leonard’s Church has a different character. A monument was erected there in the 1990s, which can be seen as an essence of the Polish nation-centered narrative. At the top is a sculpture depicting an eagle (the Polish national emblem) and below it the inscription “God, honor, homeland”; this is a slogan associated with an exclusivist identity narrative, linking Polish national identity to the Roman Catholic faith. The site is dedicated to the memory of the “Heroes of Tyszowce Land”; this slogan links it to the local heritage. The words on the plaques refer to a nationwide right-wing tradition, which has intensified since the 1990s re-interpretation of recent history.<sup>5</sup>

Among the meritorious heroes mentioned are the defenders of the homeland in 1920 (against the invasion of communist Russia), the soldiers of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa) and WiN (Wolność i Niepodległość) who fought for Poland’s independence between 1939 and 1956, as well as the Tyszowce confederates. The commemoration of the so-called “cursed soldiers,” which includes the WiN, is significant; these were paramilitary, former partisan units that fought against left-wing partisans during the war and, after 1945, against the Polish government. Their activities are judged ambivalently, to say the least, as the movement was clearly nationalist or even chauvinist in character, while many of the units carried out pacification actions against the Orthodox population (Belorussian in Podlasie and Ukrainian in southern Poland), against surviving Jews, as well as against civilians. Meanwhile, the right-wing government in Poland recognizes these troops as undisputed heroes, inscribed in the nationalist-Catholic interpretation of history. Such

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5 It can be thought that the two monuments, the one in the market square (dedicated to the ‘heroes of the struggle against fascism’) and the other in front of the church (“heroes of the Tyszowce area”), represent a shift from the narrative about the past that dominated during the socialist period to a narrative dominated by the right-wing, which has been created since the 1990s, where the emphasis shifts from anti-fascism to anti-communism. See Rawski (2019).

heritage content is supported by the Roman Catholic Church, which is a powerfully influential institution, especially in small towns and rural regions. The illustration shows a spring 2022 exhibition, on the fence of St. Leonard's Church, about 200 m away from the monument, dedicated to the "cursed soldiers." It is interesting to note that both the monument and the exhibition attempt to combine a "high" narrative, a story of national history, with a local identity: the monument does this through the label ("heroes of the Tysowce area"), while the exhibition does so through panels dedicated to the local paramilitary units of 1945-56.<sup>6</sup>



*Figure 2. Il. 2. Exhibition about the "cursed soldiers" on the church's fence, Tysowce. Photo by the author.*

The example of Tysowce shows how the space of a small town can become a site for the presence of two perspectives: the local (from "below"), and the national or nationwide (from "above"). From the local perspective, one looks for what is unique, what can be shown as authentic, and what could be inscribed in the identity of the community. Meanwhile, the perspective from

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6 The relationship between the politics of the Catholic Church in Poland, nationalism, and the nationalist right has been the subject of many studies. Cf. Zubrzycki 2006; Meyer Resende and Hennig 2021.

“above” involves the implementation of a national narrative, interiorized as a norm or canonical (normative) identity. Two institutions play a key role in the imposition of a top-down interpretation: the school and the Church. Another important tool for maintaining identity practices is the official calendar of national holidays, with the Day of the Cursed Soldiers celebrated on 1 March.<sup>7</sup>

### Recreated and invented heritage

Another example of identity policy based on the category of heritage and recognition, comes from the town of Szczepieszyn, located about 20 kilometers from Zamość. Szczepieszyn never lost its municipal rights and developed slowly from the 15th century onward as a trade and service center. After the foundation of Zamość at the end of the 16th century, however, Szczepieszyn lost its importance and remained a small center of local influence. Until 1939 it was inhabited by a significant Jewish population, which accounted for more than 40% of the town's population and had its own cultural center and representation in the town council. Today, Szczepieszyn has a population of approximately 5,000 (for a concise history of the town, see Szczepieszyn, s.d.).

In the process of defining the category of “heritage,” it is important to assign a value to the objects in question (practices, people, etc.), perceived as a value relevant to the group in question. Although such objects are presented as if they have intrinsic, inherent value, simple examples make it clear that this value results from a process involving negotiation of meanings (Szacki 2011). This is well illustrated by what is known as intangible heritage, i.e., activities and ways of doing, which have long been overlooked and have more recently become the focus of interest, codification and protection. External rather than internal sources of value are also revealed by disputes about the objects in question; examples include discussions about the preservation (or demolition) of post-industrial buildings, former factories or barracks. Objects associated with a particular ideology, such as the Communist Party (the Buzludzha congress center in Bulgaria or the World War II memorials in the former Yugoslavia) or religion (the Bamiyan Buddha statues, pre-Christian places of worship, etc.), are also subject to discussion. The factors influencing the recognition of something or someone as a heritage item are, of course, many. The key question is always who assigns the value, and for whom, and whether it will play a significant role in the imagined and practical sphere of a community. In Szczepieszyn, two levels of recognition-building through

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, reports on the website of the town and municipality of Tysowce (<https://www.tysowce.pl/?page=blog&id=607>, accessed 17.04.2022).

heritage become apparent. I believe that in one, actions from the outside and from the top are revealed, while in the other, the initiative comes from local actors.

There are few representative buildings in the Szczebrzeszyn; although the urban layout of the center has been preserved, the townhouses are in poor condition. Only the town hall building has been renovated, as well as four shrines: two Roman Catholic churches (St. Nicolas, in the market square, and St. Catherine of Alexandria), an Orthodox church (Dormition of the Virgin Mary), and a synagogue.

Firstly, one can see in these decisions the importance of selecting “monuments,” i.e., buildings that are significant as examples unique in their form, (representative objects of worship). Less attention has been paid to the urban whole as a certain cultural value. Both non-Catholic buildings were renovated after Poland’s accession to the European Union and largely or entirely with external funds (projects financed by EU programs and funds from the Kingdom of Norway). Both buildings, the synagogue and the Orthodox church, are part of the policy of restoring the memory of the multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism of the region, including the town, and were renovated as elements of local heritage, despite the fact that there has been no Jewish nor Orthodox community in the town for a long time. The impression is created that these monuments belong to “everyone,” that they are the heritage of humanity; however, it is worth noting that they have been restored to their splendor by external intervention. The restoration of the shrines, some of which have been inscribed on the tourist “Lublin Renaissance Route,” makes it possible to create a narrative of Szczebrzeszyn as a center of multiplicity; these buildings, irrespective of the realities of known social history, generate meanings that are currently popular.

This perception of the past and of the city’s identity is reinforced by a monument to the three cultures, located near the market square and the Orthodox church, unveiled in 2020. It depicts figures of priests of the three faiths present locally: a Roman Catholic priest, an Orthodox pope and a Jewish rabbi. The figures give the impression of growing from a single trunk; they are therefore an illustration of “multiplicity in unity,” a multiplicity that is complementary rather than competitive, a property of the local community rather than an expression of fragmentation and conflict.



Figure 3. Il. 3. Monument to three religions, Szczepietyn.<sup>8</sup>

At the second level, local initiators have reached for an interesting artefact. In 2002, a statue of a beetle was erected at the spring at the foot of Castle Mountain, and a second, more representative one was set up in 2011 on the main square in front of the town hall. Szczepietyn gained nationwide recognition thanks to a children's poem written by the popular author Jan Brzechwa. The poem is entitled "The Beetle" and begins with the phrase: "*W Szczepietynie chrząszcz brzmi w trzcinie i Szczepietyn z tego słynie*" ["In Szczepietyn the beetle sounds in the reeds and Szczepietyn is famous for it"]. The text of the poem does not have any deeper meaning, and does not refer to any real connection between the city and insects. The poem is an amusing linguistic quibble, and is used as a kind of speech therapy exercise due to its accumulation of difficult-to-pronounce bits of the phonemes "szcz" "chrz" and "brz"; there is no other meaning behind the poem. However,

8 This picture is available on the website with the very evocative title *Szczepietyn – miejsce, gdzie przenikają się kultury* ["Szczepietyn, a place where cultures interfere"]. <https://parki.lubelskie.pl/aktualnosc/szczepietyn-miejsce-gdzie-przenikaja-sie-kultury> (retrieved October 14, 2022).

Brzechwa's poems have been very popular children's reading for generations and are also liked by adults. It can be said with little exaggeration that almost every child knows them, and thus Szczecbrzeszyn—an unremarkable little town in the Zamojszczyzna region—has become known throughout the country. The homage to the insect is in fact a way of building recognition; it is a kind of branding, based on what makes the town stand out. It is also interesting to note that the town's association with the Polish language gave Piotr Duda and Tomasz Pańkow the idea of organizing a local festival, which they called the "Capital of the Polish Language Festival." Since 2015, the festival, which usually is during the first week of August, has brought together a large audience of writers, poets and cultural activists from all over Poland. The city thus benefits from the poem, not only symbolically, but also economically. The city's recognition is consolidated or even strengthened, as the festival is one of the largest and most important Polish literature-related events of this scale.

The choice of the beetle as the city's emblem and visual representative is interesting insofar as it is completely arbitrary. Local activists, wanting to promote the city, began to create a distinctive brand based on the recognition created by the poem. In a sense, an image of Polish heritage is being created, associated with a city with a name that is difficult to pronounce. The iconic sign of the beetle itself, on the other hand, has a positive association. Visually, it strikes a sympathetic figure, thanks to its anthropomorphization in Brzechwa's poem. What is more, it is an icon devoid of any ideological associations. It can therefore perform an integrative function for the local community and represent it externally much more effectively than symbols of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a non-specific feature, characterizing in principle most of the localities in the region. Moreover, locally, multiculturalism is non-functional because it does not belong to the authentic experience of the inhabitants, but is associated with the newly introduced discourse represented by "monuments."

### **Jewish heritage**

Different strategies have been adopted by various localities concerning Jewish heritage. After 1945, there was no longer a group interested in protecting sites classified as "Jewish," and most of them were left to their own fate; devastation befell all cemeteries that were not cared for or even kept in order. This is the case of such sites in Szczecbrzeszyn, Tyszowce and Łaszczów.

The attitude toward the Jewish past is a complex issue, so the subject of my analysis is only its presence in selected towns from an empirical perspective,

and I will not discuss it in the context of the politics of remembrance in the region as a whole. The situation began to change after 1990 and especially after Poland's accession to the EU in 2004, not only with the inflow of funds to the regions, but above all with the growing awareness of its diversity of cultural heritage. Multiculturalism as an attribute and distinguishing feature of a place has become a component of the self-presentation of centers such as Zamość, Szczepieszyn and Biłgoraj, where the Jewish quarter is being reconstructed.<sup>9</sup>

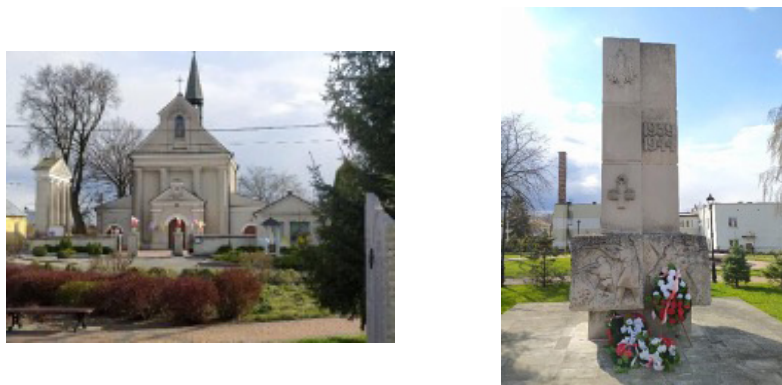
Łaszczów presents a particular challenge to the practice of memory. The town was founded in the 16th century as a private town and remained in the hands of magnate families until the 19th century. Until the Second World War, the land estates in and around Łaszczów were owned by the Szeptycki family, who had their family residence in the town. The development of the town was halted by the Tatar and Cossack invasions, and finally by the Swedes. In the 18th century, the owners supported Jewish settlement, and Jews soon became the dominant religious group. According to the 1921 census, they made up 91 per cent of the population; the town had the character of a typical shtetl. In 1942, some of the inhabitants were murdered on the spot and the rest of them were deported to the Bełżec camp (Łaszczów).

On what foundation can new residents build an identity of place? In my research, I examined the spatial expressions of the creation of material heritage, which is, after all, the binding point for narratives and the imaginary world. Very little material evidence has survived in Łaszczów; the wooden buildings often succumbed to fire, with the entire town having been burnt down by Ukrainian partisans in 1944. As always, the most durable aspect of the town is its street layout: the central square and the outlying streets, as well as the extension of the buildings along the main Tomaszów-Dołhobyczów road.

There are symbolic landmarks in the square, repeated in most towns of the region. The first one is the Roman Catholic parish church of Saints Peter and Paul, a Baroque temple that was founded in the mid-18th century, partly survived the destruction of the Second World War, and was rebuilt in 1945. The church building and the parish buildings dominate the town's skyline, as it is still the largest building in the town, setting the symbolic tone for the small town center. There, in the nicely landscaped market square, stands a second landmark, a monument erected "in tribute to the fallen and murdered for the freedom of the fatherland" in 1939-1944; next to it are two plaques dedicated to "the fallen in the Łaszczów area in the fight for the freedom of

9 For a brief discussion on multiculturalism as an option in place-policy-making in relation to the cities of the Lublin region (Zamość and Lubartow), see Wraca & Fitta (2015).

the fatherland.” Both refer to the soldiers of September 1939 (fighting the Nazi invaders) and the soldiers of the resistance movement of 1944 (partisans). The monument is well maintained and renovated, and traces of regularly held commemorative ceremonies can be seen; the space around the monument is landscaped and designed as a representative space.



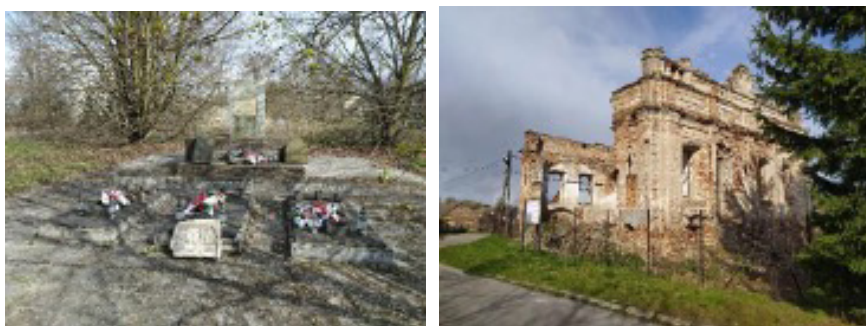
*Figure 4. Il. 4. Main square in Łaszczów with a Roman-Catholic church (left) and monument of antifascist struggle (right). Photo by the author.*

The dominance of the martyrdom narrative is characteristic of the post-1945 era and continued until the end of the Communist Party's domination of the symbolic sphere, which concerned official narratives and, above all, the labelling of public space. In the Zamojszczyzna region, many villages were affected by persecution during the Second World War; the region was designated as a settlement space for Germans relocated by the Third Reich, causing a significant part of the local population to be displaced. Finally, the partisans were very active here from the first days of the war, including peasant partisans (*Bataliony Chłopskie*), right-wing partisans (*Armia Krajowa*) and later, and to a lesser extent, left-wing partisans (*Gwardia Ludowa*). In the Zamojszczyzna area, there was a death camp in Bełżec and an execution site in the *Rotunda* in Zamość. The experience of war thus came to dominate personal and public memory; the central authorities constructed a legitimizing narrative around wartime martyrdom, while at the local level, struggle and suffering were framed as a unifying experience, a symbolic keystone of identity, at the same time uniting both levels around shared perceptions (cf. Wawrzyniak 2015).

There are two more sites classified as monuments in Łaszczów, both related to the town's Jewish past. The first is the former cemetery, located opposite

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the palace park. The site was rebuilt in 1994 and is now well maintained, cleaned and secured, and is looked after by the municipality. There are several surviving *matzevot* in the cemetery, not only from Łaszczów, but also from the surrounding villages. A monument has also been erected to commemorate the martyrdom of the Jews during the war, with inscriptions in Polish and Hebrew; the inscription on the monument reads: "To the blessed memory of the Jewish martyrs of Łaszczów murdered by the cruel Nazi murderers during the Second World War 1939-1945. Association of Łaszczówians in Israel." The starting point was the initiative of local Jews who had survived the war and were living abroad. However, the cemetery came to be a protected, legible sign in space conveying the identity of the place and local heritage.



*Figure 5. Il. 5. Jewish cemetery (left) and ruins of a synagogue (right) in Łaszczów. Photo by the author.*

The second significant memorial is the ruins of the synagogue. This temple was built at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; the community bought the building of the former granary and armory of the destroyed castle from Count Szeptycki and converted it into a religious building. The two-story synagogue had a representative appearance and was covered with polychrome inside. It was devastated during the Nazi occupation; after the war, in the 1960s, it was taken over by an agricultural cooperative and used as a warehouse. The building gradually deteriorated until the roof collapsed, and it was put out of use (Łaszczów Synagogue, n.d.). Today, only the exterior walls and traces of the former interior layout remain; the synagogue site has been cordoned off and protected from further devastation. An information board stands beside it, and the site is also looked after by the local government. Both the synagogue and the cemetery are mentioned in information materials as local monuments and heritage features.

In Tyszwce, no trace remains of the houses of prayer destroyed by the Nazis. The site of the old cemetery, located in the center of the town, did not live to see any commemoration in the post-war years; a municipal park and a kindergarten area were built on the site, and a monument dedicated to the memory of the Jews was only erected in 1988, on the private initiative of David Laks and Abraham Burg. Interestingly, the obelisk also commemorates the burial place of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century tzaddik Ben Yosef (according to Virtual Shtetl, s.d.). The new cemetery, established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is already outside the town; it was cleaned up, fenced off and restored in 1988 through the same initiative. The cemetery contains fragments of surviving tombstones as well as memorial tombstones erected by Borg and Laks.

There is not enough space here to discuss the overall symbolic policy towards Jewish heritage in the period between 1945 and 1989. However, examples from the “lowest” level of cultural practices, from a local perspective, show the most important attitudes towards this symbolic complex during Communist Party rule. Jewish heritage was subjected to active forgetting, which is defined as more than mere abandonment, and is accompanied by deliberate actions (cf. Connerton 2014). Surviving sites were taken over for the benefit of local organizations and were certainly not seen as valuable symbolic resources worthy of preservation, which often led to their devastation, as in the case of the Łaszczów synagogue. Some of the surviving sites met a better fate, such as the one in Szczepieszyń, which housed the municipal cultural center in the 1960s, which saved it from destruction, or in Józefów, where the renovated synagogue building was used as a grain warehouse, then renovated in the 1980s and later used for a municipal cultural center.

Julia Machnowska analyzes the official policy of the state authorities towards the restitution of Jewish property between 1945 and 1950, also looking at the local ownership of specific objects (Machnowska 2019). She sees an ambivalence in the post-war situation. On the one hand, documents at the state level show a certain awareness of the importance of places of worship (synagogues, cemeteries), which they did not want to use for purposes that were incompatible with their character. On the other hand, local authorities were faced with the task of tidying up urban space, eliminating ruins and dangerous places. Thus, at the local level, efforts were usually made to take over former Jewish buildings for economic purposes, and the area of devastated cemeteries was most willingly converted into green areas or land for buildings.

At the same time, it must be remembered that state law did not establish a legal continuity between the pre-war Jewish communities and their counterparts

formed by survivors of the war, especially as those survivors were mainly concentrated in large cities, and reluctant and fearful to return to towns such as Łaszczów or Szczebrzeszyn (Machnowska 2019). The unclear legal status of properties and the lack of legal guarantees for the few Jewish communities facilitated the seizure of properties by local institutions, and thus local politics determined the fate of sites such as cemeteries and synagogues. Meanwhile, the heritage policy, which continued until recently, shows that artefacts and elements of Jewish tradition were not seen as having their own heritage from a Polish perspective (Lehner & Murzyn-Kupisz 2019). Preservation care has been extended to buildings that are significant as “comprehensible” monuments, meaning that their architecture fits into aesthetic habits and they are symbolically legible as monuments. Two examples are the beautiful Renaissance synagogue in Zamość (which housed the provincial library until the 1990s) or the late Renaissance synagogue in Szczebrzeszyn (the town’s cultural center). Almost universally, however, cemeteries, places of symbolic alienation par excellence, have been devastated.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, the semiotic landscape of the towns of Zamojszczyzna has been changing. In such a context, one can notice and distinguish several strategies of building the recognition of a place. We can speak, firstly, of the local creation of a town “brand,” based on elements that do not belong to the high tradition but are connected with a given locality: an example of this is the beetle and shoes, which are the basis of symbolic practices connected with Szczebrzeszyn and Tyszowce, respectively. Secondly, activities motivated by identity concepts created “from above” or by external actors and implemented in the local community are also prominent. Examples of such activities include materializing multiculturalism in monuments and information boards in Szczebrzeszyn, as well as the presence of a right-wing politics of remembrance in the public sphere in Tyszowce.

The case of Łaszczów is interesting in that it reveals a third strategy, namely the integration of all elements of the past that can be given the status of “monument” and testify to a location’s uniqueness. One explanation for the careful preservation of all traces of history in Łaszczów is the fact that it regained its municipal rights late (2010) and thus is trying to prove its urbanity by rooting it in the past.

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10 The issue of the foreignness of Jewish heritage in the perspective of the Polish cultural heritage narrative is discussed by Magdalena Tarnowska using the example of museums (Tarnowska 2016).

The space of the small town is therefore strongly influenced by wider processes that frame social change locally. Two of these in this case would be the political change that began in 1989 and Poland's accession to the European Union, two major processes with long-term effects. It is indisputable that for the local community the most important issue remains recognition, i.e., the creation of a specific brand on the imaginary map of Poland. Of course, it must be remembered that this is a dynamic process involving various actors, so the content of the symbolic policy may change. However, I believe that the strategies described may have explanatory value at the level of a small town, and not only in the Zamojszczyzna region.

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