

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

WITHIN SPACE WE FEEL TIME: THE CREATION OF AUTHENTICITY AT
AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU STATE MUSEUM, 1944-2004

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Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation examines how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum transformed from a hastily preserved crime scene into a global symbol of Holocaust memory. When Poland's interim government declared in 1947 that the former camp would be “preserved for all times,” it launched decades of complex conservation efforts that reshaped how atrocity is remembered worldwide. I investigate several key questions: How did the commitment to preserve this violent site emerge? What meaning did this act hold for survivors, Poland, and Europe? How did conservation practices influence Holocaust memory globally? Through extensive archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, I reveal the paradoxical nature of authenticity at memorial sites: maintaining an appearance of unmediated historical presence requires extensive technical intervention that transforms the very materials it seeks to preserve.

My research shows how two distinct commemorative paradigms developed at the site. At Auschwitz I, museum professionals created a curated presence through exhibitions and restored structures that presented a coherent historical narrative. At Birkenau, by contrast, a commemorative grammar of absence emerged—initially from material constraints but eventually as deliberate aesthetic principle—where ruins themselves became testimony.

The dissertation makes three scholarly contributions. First, it demonstrates how authenticity functions as a constructed mode of historical truth-making rather than an inherent quality, revealing how conservation choices shaped Holocaust understanding through technical procedures, institutional authority, and commemorative ethics. Second, it illuminates how Auschwitz-Birkenau's preservation became a transnational project after 1989, with Jewish organizations and European governments providing unprecedented financial support that reframed conservation as a moral obligation rather than merely a Polish responsibility. Third, it

advances theoretical understandings of authenticity by showing how this concept's strategic ambiguity allowed it to mobilize diverse constituencies while concealing underlying tensions. Through five chronological chapters, I trace how authenticity was negotiated, constructed, and redefined over time—from early postwar improvisation to sophisticated preservation techniques, from national commemoration to global heritage status. This analysis reveals not only the history of a pivotal memorial site but also the complex interplay between material preservation and the politics of memory that continues to shape how we confront difficult pasts.

*This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents: Shloime and Miriam, and Chaim and Lili,
who are always and forever with me.*

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List of Abbreviations

AAN – Archiwum Akt Nowych (Polish Central Archives of Modern Records)

ADK PMA-B – Archiwum Dokumentacji Konserwatorskiej Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Conservation Documentation Archives, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum)

APMA-B – Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum)

IAC – International Auschwitz Committee

ICCROM – International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property

ICOMOS – International Council on Monuments and Sites

GKBZNwP - Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce (Polish Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland)

KL – Konzentrationslager

OSPR – Oświęcimski Strategiczny Program Rządowy (Oświęcim Strategic Government Program)

OUV – Outstanding Universal Value (UNESCO terminology)

PMA-B – Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau (museum name after 1997)

PMO-B – Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka (museum name before 1997)

PLN – Polish złoty

PRL - Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa (People’s Republic of Poland)

PZPR – Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (Polish United Workers Party)

ROPWiM – Rada Ochrony Pomników Walki i Męczeństwa (Council for the Protection of Monuments of Struggle and Martyrdom)

SS – Schutzstaffel

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

USHMM – United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

ZBoWiD – Związek Bojowników o Wolność i Demokrację (Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy)

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Opening Vignette: The Question of Authenticity

In 2017, I visited the Mauthausen memorial site, located next to a small, sleepy town by the same name, about ten miles from Linz—the town where Adolf Hitler was born. The monumental entrance to the camp, constructed from heavy granite stones, made the entire terrain seem like a fortress. After touring the camp area, our guide Daniel led us around the camp perimeter, encircling the vast terrain overlooking the valley, with the stone slabs of the high camp walls behind us.

Beyond focusing solely on the prisoners' experiences, Daniel wanted us to consider the people who lived around the camp. We wondered together how much they knew about camp conditions, whether they supported the regime, remained apathetic, or offered resistance. The question of how the local population related to the camp—seeing its prisoners march daily through their streets and witnessing the "Stairway of Death" where exhausted, malnourished inmates carried heavy stone slabs up and down the quarry steps—lingered throughout our visit. Intrigued by the relationship between the town of Mauthausen and its neighboring camp, I told Daniel I was interested in exploring it further. He kindly offered an extended tour of the area that afternoon, after finishing his remaining scheduled tours, promising an enlightening experience.

Daniel's interest in the camp's environs aligned with research questions that were already central to my work. A few months earlier, I had decided to visit Mauthausen to examine firsthand the complex relationship between the camp space and its perpetrators. At that time, I was writing my MA thesis, which focused on the daily and family life, as well as dwelling conditions, of SS officers who lived adjacent to both Mauthausen and Auschwitz. By then, I had developed a methodology for approaching memorial sites, one that entailed an embodied, experiential dimension. My intellectual focus arose from walking around the site and

"stumbling" upon questions and paradoxes. This embodied approach to sites of memory guides each chapter of this dissertation. Each chapter was initially developed through encounters between my body and the memorial space.

Daniel and I met that afternoon. As we walked down the hill together toward the southeast, he explained that we were descending toward the terrain of a former Mauthausen subcamp called Gusen. Yet instead of the familiar sight of a camp frozen in time, at the bottom of the hill lay a sleepy neighborhood. We walked further down the road, stopping next to the entrance to a groomed, tree-lined villa. It looked Italian.

"Do you recognize this stone?" Daniel asked. I looked closer, and I did. The entrance was made of the same quarry stone used for the camp.

"Look further, at the house," Daniel suggested. "Does it look similar to anything else you've seen today?"

The realization dawned on me quickly: I was looking at a monumental camp entrance, just like the one I had seen up the hill at Mauthausen—except this one was gated and now served as someone's private estate.



Figure 1. Gusen's monumental entrance, circa Spring 1943. Courtesy of Museu d'Història de Catalunya, Barcelona: Fons Amical de Mauthausen.



Figure 2. Gusen's monumental entrance, 2017. Now a private estate. Photograph by author.



Figure 3. The entrance to the villa/Gusen camp entrance, 2017. The wall and the entrance building were built by prisoners with stones from the quarry. Photograph by author.

Daniel explained: when the Americans arrived at Mauthausen in 1945, they found a terrain replete with corpses. The situation was especially acute in Gusen. This subcamp of Mauthausen was just as large as the one up the hill and housed just as many prisoners. But fear of infectious diseases led the Americans to decide to raze the camp to the ground. By the early 1950s, only a handful of stone structures remained, the monumental entrance among them. The land was eventually leveled, and a local housing estate was built in the camp's place. A local family purchased the entrance, transforming it into a manicured, tree-lined villa.

With the construction of a neighborhood, the site where so much suffering and death had taken place was practically erased. But one camp remnant remained untouched: the camp

crematorium. Perhaps its function as a de facto burial site prevented its destruction. In the early 1960s, survivors transformed it into a small, modest memorial.

Visiting the camp-turned-neighborhood that day, I entered the structure with the furnaces. When I turned to leave, I could gaze from the building's exit into someone's bedroom on the second floor of a house painted green. The curtain attached to the window was blowing in the summer wind, caressing the neat flowerbox placed on the sill. The ordinary domesticity of the scene—the careful tending of flowers, the gentle movement of fabric in the breeze—stood in stark contrast to the space I occupied, where human bodies had once been reduced to ash. I turned to Daniel. "How strange," I said, "how very strange and eerie." That was the extent of my words, which seemed to truly fail me. Why did I take for granted that a former camp must be marked and commemorated where it once stood? I had always assumed it was simply the logical course of events. I examined my assumption: I thought it evident that cataclysmic violent events should be memorialized, their victims remembered, and preferably where these things happened. How could it be any other way? How can a place simply revert—return to itself—after being touched by so much suffering?

I recognized the naivety of this assumption. What of all the horror that is never commemorated, neither in the place it occurred nor anywhere at all? How many enslaved people are buried in the oceans of the world, graveless, nameless, with no one to remember them or the unimaginable violence they endured? If they had a grave or a monument, would it be easier to reflect on the meaning of their torture and to act to counter its legacies?

Standing next to the small crematorium memorial, I wondered: what happens when we *don't* commemorate violent events in their authentic locations? This question would eventually guide my research. I began wondering: Why do I take for granted that commemoration should

take place at authentic sites of violence? What is an authentic place of violence, and wherein lies its power? What is the extent and what are the limits of this power?

To explore these questions, I decided to return to the place where the coupling of authentic site and commemoration as a paradigm was conceived: Auschwitz-Birkenau. While Majdanek was declared a museum at the same time, as early as 1947, and even had more authentic artifacts, it was Auschwitz that eventually emerged as the symbol of the Holocaust. How and why did it become such a symbol?

My simple, intuitive answer was that its power lay in the survival of the original camp and the intuitive understanding that these remnants should serve as lesson and warning. When I delved deeper into my hypothesis, the picture became more blurred, far more complex. The realpolitik of commemoration eventually emerged from the fog: over eight decades, stakeholders and interest groups pursued in-situ commemoration for political and cultural reasons. The project was not just a cry for humanity, but an endeavor meant to produce political, cultural, and even financial capital. Various stakeholders had vested and often contradictory interests in the site. They struggled not only against its material decay but those who rejected material preservation altogether or preferred it materialized on a smaller scale than the form it eventually took.

Throughout the museum's existence, the mission to protect the original remains of the site became entangled in larger historical contingencies: Cold War politics, survivor global networks, the diverse and often competing ethnicities of the victims, and national and global frameworks of research, museum work, and heritage conservation. This diverse set of circumstances and actors informed and shaped the museum's mission to protect, commemorate, and educate the public about events of unconscionable organized, state violence.

People often ask me: So, what's your conclusion? Do these sites need to be commemorated, or not? Is commemoration effective?

These questions lie beyond the work of a historian. This dissertation does not aim to prescribe how commemoration should be pursued or how to make it "work," though these questions linger at its backdrop. Rather, it aims to expose the complex set of circumstances that led to Auschwitz-Birkenau becoming one of the most famous and toured heritage sites in the world—and how the treatment of its original remains contributed to this development. It aims to show the contingent factors and many divergent messages its creators meant to convey to the public, and how these transformed over the years as memory and its political stakes transformed, too. Finally, it aims to expose Auschwitz-Birkenau's own contribution not only to the global memory of the Holocaust, but to the very idea of an authentic site of memory—one that has become central to how societies remember and work through violent pasts today.

Introduction. The Material of Memory: Conservation as Meaning-Making at

Auschwitz-Birkenau

In 1957, the International Auschwitz Committee and Polish authorities launched a global design competition for a monument at the site of former extermination and concentration camp Auschwitz II-Birkenau. From over 400 entries, the jury, headed by renowned sculptor Henry Moore, selected a radical design by Polish artists and architects Oskar and Zofia Hansen, Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, Julian Pałka, and Lechosław Rosiński. Their proposal centered on a radical spatial intervention: a “Monument Road” (Droga monumentalna)—a 70-meter-wide, one-kilometer-long diagonal path cutting across Birkenau from the guard watchtower to the ruins of crematorium II. Rather than build a symbolic structure atop the camp's terrain, the team proposed to make the site itself the monument. The camp's Gate of Death would be sealed forever, allowing no one to enter through it again. The road would embed surviving fragments of barracks and camp infrastructure into its black asphalt surface, while the rest of the terrain would be left to decay. Visitors would traverse this vast route on foot, engaging in a ritualized movement through absence and erasure.¹

The project was never realized. Despite the jury's endorsement, it met strong opposition from survivor organizations and museum officials. Their objection was not to the design's abstraction, but to its physical intervention in the authentic terrain of Birkenau.² As the memorial-museum's priorities shifted toward material preservation and non-intervention in the

¹ Julia Kozakiewicz, “Konkurs Na Międzynarodowy Pomnik Ofiar Obozu Birkenau,” *Miejsce: Studia nad sztuką i architekturą polską XX i XXI wieku*, no. 3 (2017): 123–24; Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, “Open Form, Public Sculpture and the Counter-Memorial: Encounters between Henry Moore and Oskar Hansen,” in *Oskar Hansen: Opening Modernism: On Open Form Architecture, Art and Didactics*, ed. Aleksandra Kędziorek et al., Museum under Construction: Books, no 8 (Warsaw: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 206–11.

² Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 158.

material composition of camp remnants, the Hansen proposal was abandoned. In its place, a more modest monument was built at the western edge of the site—symbolic in form and spatially contained.³

This rejected design marked a critical juncture in Auschwitz-Birkenau's commemorative history. In choosing to conserve the existing terrain rather than transform it architecturally, the museum affirmed an emerging commemoration paradigm: one in which preserving authentic structures and spaces, rather than erecting newly constructed forms, became the preferred medium of commemoration. Today, this emphasis on authenticity may seem natural, even inevitable. But in 1958, this standard has yet to form. The unrealized monument reminds us that things could have turned out otherwise—and that the meanings we now associate with authenticity were forged in moments of conflict, compromise, and institutional choice.

This dissertation examines how preservation emerged as the central task of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum—and how, over time, the value of authenticity came to dominate the preservation and representation of the site. I ask: How did conservation practices evolve from improvised repairs to a full institutional mandate? What made authenticity an ethical, commemorative, and evidentiary imperative guiding this work? And how were political pressures, national conflicts, religious disputes, technical challenges, and global heritage frameworks negotiated on the terrain of a former concentration and death camp?

Crucially, I investigate how the centrality of preservation fundamentally reshaped other aspects of the museum's presentation and interpretation of the original site. As conservation became a dominant institutional practice, it influenced curatorial decisions, exhibition design, and the framing of historical narratives through signage and spatial organization. The growing

³ For more on the winning design, see *Ibid.*, 150–69.

emphasis on authentic remains as bearers of historical truth gradually shifted curatorial approaches—moving from primarily ideological narratives toward presentations that centered the materiality of the camp, increasingly framed as witness to the crimes. Exhibition spaces privileged original artifacts and structures, while interpretive frameworks highlighted the material authenticity of these remnants. By analyzing these dynamics, I demonstrate that preservation was not merely a technical function running parallel to exhibition and commemoration, but rather a governing paradigm that redefined how the museum mediated between visitors and the physical site.

I argue that the contemporary status of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a preserved landscape of atrocity is not the inevitable outcome of survivor wishes or historical necessity. Rather, it is the product of decades of infrastructural, political, and conceptual labor—decisions made by former prisoners, curators, architects, conservators, and international actors who debated what to protect, what to restore, and how to frame the remains. Over time, conservation became not only a technical activity but a moral and historical commitment. As the educational mission of the museum expanded, and as the last witnesses began to pass, the material remains of the camp—ruins, objects, terrain—came to be treated as irreplaceable bearers of historical truth.

While previous scholarship has predominantly focused on Auschwitz-Birkenau's symbolic meanings and memory politics, I shift attention to the material and institutional labor that made these symbolic meanings possible. Rather than treating conservation as a technical or secondary concern, I demonstrate that it played a constitutive role in shaping what Auschwitz-Birkenau came to represent—both for local actors and in the eyes of the world. This dissertation shows that Auschwitz-Birkenau's historical resonance was not simply inherited but produced, through acts of preservation, interpretation, and spatial framing that changed with political

circumstance. In doing so, I recast Auschwitz not just as a symbol of atrocity, but as a working institution whose history reveals broader shifts in how societies reckon with the material remains of mass violence to understand, commemorate, and educate against their recurrence. By examining preservation as a meaning-making practice, my research illuminates how material traces of violence are transformed into vehicles for historical understanding and moral education.

From Memorial to Preservation: The Rise of Conservation as Institutional Mandate

The emphasis on authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau cannot be understood without examining the emergence of preservation as the museum's central institutional task. When the museum was founded in 1947 with the goal of commemorating the victims and educating the public, it was also charged with preserving of the site's material remains. The July 1947 Sejm resolution mandated the terrain "with all its buildings and facilities" will be "preserved for all times," yet left no directives on how to achieve this monumental task.⁴ The 1950 statute similarly required "maintenance and conservation of the post-camp buildings of the Museum," but again offered little concrete guidance on how this work should be carried out.⁵

Faced with ambiguous directives and fluctuating state policies, early museum professionals had to articulate their own preservation procedures and conservation priorities. They viewed camp remnants as both sacred and evidentiary, developing practical approaches to conservation through the interplay of improvisation, professional judgment, and the cultivation of institutional memory, often working against a backdrop of political uncertainty and limited

⁴ Polski Sejm, *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu*, Dz.U. 1947 nr 52 poz. 265 (1947), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19470520265/O/D19470265.pdf>.

⁵ Ministra Kultury i Sztuki, *Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Sztuki z dnia 17 stycznia 1950 r. w sprawie nadania statutu Państwowemu Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka*, Monitor Polski 1950 no. 13, item 132, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WMP19500130132/O/M19500132.pdf>.

resources. This creative navigation of unclear mandates established foundational practices that would evolve into more formalized conservation protocols in later decades.

Because the law left the meaning and practice of protection undefined, initial conservation work was largely improvised. Between 1947 and the early 1960s, interventions were guided by immediate, often acute needs: stabilizing collapsing chimneys, shoring up barracks, and salvaging ruins. Conservation existed alongside other museum functions but was not yet dominant. This began to shift in the late 1950s, when the museum initiated its first long-term conservation planning process. By the late 1960s, a preservation logic grounded in minimal intervention and ongoing stabilization began to take hold. At Birkenau, this logic was often expressed through non-interventionist methods that sought to retain the camp's ruined state, while at Auschwitz I, preservation often entailed selective reconstruction to stabilize buildings for visitation and exhibition.

The institutional status of conservation grew steadily in the decades that followed. As the camp's wooden and brick structures continued to deteriorate, conservation work became more routine, systematized, and central to the museum's identity. The fall of communism in 1989 and the rise of global Holocaust memory discourses accelerated this development. As new funding streams and international partnerships emerged, Auschwitz-Birkenau was increasingly treated not only as a Polish site of martyrdom, but as a world heritage site whose ruins needed to be maintained as physical witnesses to genocide. The 2003 establishment of professional conservation laboratories at the museum marked a turning point, enabling the development of systematic conservation protocols and object-based preservation. This process culminated in the creation of the Global Plan for Conservation (*Globalny Plan Konserwacji*), which began implementation in 2012 through the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation. This ongoing initiative

preserves the terrain, structures, and moveable objects of the camp through internationally funded conservation work, with the objective of prolonging the lifespan of Auschwitz's materiality for decades to come.⁶

As a result, conservation work at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum came to eclipse traditional museum functions such as curating, education, and exhibition—becoming the most sophisticated, elaborate, and costly mission the museum pursues. This shift is reflected in institutional rhetoric, funding priorities, and staffing structures. Today, many of the museum's public communications, especially those addressed to international donors, highlight the material fragility of the site and the technical skill required to preserve it, emphasizing it is the site's authenticity which guides this work.⁷ Appeals to authenticity are inseparable from this conservation framework: they not only reinforce the site's moral authority but help justify its preservation as a globally shared ethical project.

At Auschwitz-Birkenau, then, authenticity is not only an aesthetic or commemorative value—it is the object of work. It is something that must be secured through the coordinated efforts of conservation professionals, architectural historians, chemists, engineers, and educators. The museum's shift toward long-term preservation as its defining mission is not simply a pragmatic response to physical decay, but the result of an evolving institutional understanding of what it means to remember atrocity through material remains. This transformation—from improvised postwar repair to preservation as the primary institutional function that shapes all other museum activities—forms the arc of this dissertation.

⁶ Jolanta Banaś-Maciaszczyk and Rafał Pióro, "Problematyka konserwatorska i założenia ochrony obiektów dawnego KL Auschwitz-Birkenau," *Ochrona Dziedzictwa Kulturowego*, no. 3 (2017): 27.

⁷ Wojciech Soczewica and Adam Szpaderski, eds., *The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation: Genesis, Development, and Future*, trans. William Brand (Fundacja Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2019), 9, 11, http://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/fundacja/en/foundation_folder/fab-folder_informacyjny_ang.pdf.

Situating the Site: From Symbolic Weight to Material and Institutional History

Scholarship on Auschwitz-Birkenau since 1945 has overwhelmingly focused on the site's symbolic and social meanings. Across academic and public discourse, “Auschwitz” has transformed into a powerful cultural and moral metaphor, often detached from its historical location and specificity. As Joanne Pettitt observes, the word “Auschwitz” often “masks a complex and difficult history, functioning as a linguistic and historical reduction that relies on its symbolic currency over and above historical accuracy.”⁸ In this mode, the site becomes a philosophical shorthand for human evil, a metonym for the Holocaust as a whole, or a stand-in for Nazi violence, thus displacing the complex history of the site itself.

Since the end of the war, different groups have imbued Auschwitz-Birkenau with divergent commemorative meanings. For Jews, who comprised ninety percent of the camp's victims, Auschwitz is the central symbol of the Holocaust.⁹ For Poles, it represents the suffering of the nation's cultural and political elite under Nazi occupation.¹⁰ For the Sinti and Roma, it stands as a major site of racial persecution, even if their place within its memory was belatedly recognized.¹¹ Other national groups, including Russians, Germans, and political prisoners of a

⁸ Joanne Pettitt, “Introduction: New Perspectives on Auschwitz,” *Holocaust Studies* 25, no. 2 (June 21, 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2019.1625110>.

⁹ Jonathan Webber, “The Kingdom of Death as a Heritage Site: Making Sense of Auschwitz,” in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, ed. William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 116–17; Stanislaw Krajewski, “Auschwitz at the Threshold of the New Millennium,” in *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, ed. John K. Roth et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2001), 322–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-66019-3_155; Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: historia, polityka i pamięć: wokół Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980-2010* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2016), 87–97; Piotr Trojański, “Upamiętnianie Ofiar Auschwitz Na Terenie Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka w Latach 1947–2000 [Commemoration of Auschwitz Victims on the Territory of the National Museum Oświęcim-Brzezinka in Years 1947–2000],” *Krakowskie Studia Małopolskie* 17 (2012): 66, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ksm201205>.

¹⁰ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 97–102; Trojański, “Upamiętnianie ofiar Auschwitz,” 66–67; Webber, “The Kingdom of Death,” 116; Krajewski, “Auschwitz at the Threshold,” 323.

¹¹ Sławomir Kapralski, “The Consequences of the Genocide for Roma Memories and Identities,” in *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945*, ed. Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft (London: Routledge, 2021), 286–87, 292–97; Trojański, “Upamiętnianie ofiar Auschwitz,” 67; Webber, “The Kingdom of Death,” 123.

variety of nationalities, also developed distinct symbolic associations with the site. Russian memory emphasizes the liberation of Auschwitz as a triumph in the Great Patriotic War; among Germans, especially postwar generations, Auschwitz functions as a site of historical guilt and moral reckoning.¹² Jonathan Webber characterizes Auschwitz today as “a symbol, a cemetery, a museum, and a theater for the enactment of multiple memorial events,” and that these meanings coexist without a master narrative to unify them.¹³ Similarly, Stanisław Krajewski argues that Auschwitz is both a “unified symbol” of genocide and a deeply divided one, whose meanings reflect national and ethnic experiences that frequently resist peaceful coexistence—at the site itself and beyond.¹⁴

Auschwitz's symbolic status has also expanded beyond particular group identities. The site's status as an international symbol was codified with its 1979 inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, described as a “monument to the deliberate genocide of the Jews by the German Nazi regime and to the deaths of countless others,” and memorialized on behalf of “the whole of humankind.”¹⁵ This process gradually undermined Poland's exclusive framing of the site as one of national martyrology, contributing to its universal framing within a global discourse of human rights and historical justice.¹⁶ Taking all symbolic meanings together, what emerges is a site of fractured memory: overlaid with divergent ethnic, national, and transnational

¹² Trojański, “Upamiętnianie ofiar Auschwitz,” 67; Jonathan Huener, “Antifascist Pilgrimage and Rehabilitation at Auschwitz: The Political Tourism of Aktion Sühnezeichen and Sozialistische Jugend,” *German Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2001): 513–32.

¹³ Webber, “The Kingdom of Death,” 11–12.

¹⁴ Krajewski, “Auschwitz at the Threshold,” 322–23.

¹⁵ Quoted in Pettitt, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁶ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979*, 2003, 183; Julia Röttjer, “Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer Narrative in internationalen Kontexten: Das Staatliche Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau als UNESCO-Welterbe seit den 1970er Jahren,” in *Re-konstruktionen: Stadt, Raum, Museum, Das Gemeinsame Kulturerbe – Wspólne Dziedzictwo* (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2019), 271–81.

narratives, animated by ritual performance, and burdened with the challenge of representing both the particular and the universal.

Despite this rich scholarship on Auschwitz's symbolic meanings, few studies have focused on the material labor and institutional logic of preservation itself. I argue that while Auschwitz's symbolic weight is crucial for understanding the site, its emergence as a global symbol can be traced to a unique set of material conditions. As Piotr Trojański notes, Auschwitz-Birkenau's symbolic saliency results from several converging factors: the unprecedented scale of the crimes committed there, its multinational composition of victims and survivors, the vast physical size of the camp complex, and crucially, the survival of its material remains.¹⁷

In his seminal 1993 study *The Texture of Memory*, James E. Young argues that the evocative ruins of former camps have come to stand in for the totality of destruction, the fragment coming to represent the whole. The visual and emotional power of such remains, he warns, can obscure the complex histories embedded in them. These remnants are never neutral; they are framed by curators and institutions in ways that shape how visitors interpret both the object and the event it signifies.¹⁸ This dissertation excavates exactly such framings, focusing on how surviving structures and landscapes were mobilized to construct a visual and spatial image of Auschwitz that came to symbolize the Holocaust itself.

In histories of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, conservation is often treated as background maintenance rather than as a foundational, meaning-making practice. In his foundational monograph *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945–1979*, Jonathan Huener traces shifting memory politics in the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era,

¹⁷ Trojański, “Upamiętnianie ofiar Auschwitz,” 65.

¹⁸ James E. Young, “The Rhetoric of Ruins: The Memorial Camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz,” in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 127-8.

highlighting tensions between Polish martyrdom narratives, Jewish absence, and the site's internationalization, but rarely treats conservation as a core institutional task.¹⁹ Similarly, Zofia Wóycicka notes the importance of geography, buildings' condition, and financing, yet her analysis remains focused on how symbolic meanings were imposed on material traces.²⁰ Likewise, Tomasz Cebulski, writing on the post-1989 period, highlights the increasing internationalization of Auschwitz's meaning after 1989, emphasizing how global political pressures, mass tourism, and highly-publicized disputes transformed the site into a contested global memory arena. While he critiques the dominant focus on Polish national memory in Auschwitz scholarship and calls for a more transnational approach that accounts for the site's evolving global resonance, Cebulski largely bypasses the “preservation boom” of the 1990s.²¹ Despite his analysis of key spatial controversies and his recognition of the rising importance of conservation discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, his focus is on religious conflicts and land disputes rather than examining how conservation became a central institutional task and international obligation during this period.²²

My work departs from these approaches by attending to how the fragility of the site's materials—the decay of wooden barracks, the instability of ruins, the erosion of landscape—imposed practical limits and generated ethical imperatives that shaped commemorative decisions. Preservation, in this sense, was not simply a response to symbolic frameworks or political pressures; it actively participated in the construction of those frameworks. By tracing the interplay between symbolic meaning and physical matter, I approach material culture not as a

¹⁹ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979*, 203.

²⁰ Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*, vol. 2 of *Warsaw Studies in Contemporary History* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2013), 165–81.

²¹ Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: historia, polityka i pamięć: wokół Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980-2010* (Wydawnictwo “Libron,” 2016), 44, <https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/13259299?sid=62068137>.

²² *Ibid.*

neutral repository of memory, but—following the work of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennet—as an actant in its own right; one that constrained, redirected, and sometimes resisted the ideological narratives imposed upon it.²³

Framing Authenticity: A Conceptual Framework

Today, authenticity is perhaps the most powerful value attached to Auschwitz-Birkenau. On the museum's main website, visitors are told at the landing page that “the authentic memorial site consists of two parts of the former camp: Auschwitz and Birkenau.”²⁴ Similarly, its UNESCO World Heritage listing emphasizes that “the site and its landscape have high levels of authenticity and integrity since the original evidence has been carefully conserved without any unnecessary restoration.”²⁵ PMA-B's self-published conservation volumes *Zachować autentyczność* (*To Preserve Authenticity*; 2012, 2013, 2019, 2021) describe authenticity as a moral imperative: a duty to victims, a promise to future generations, and a standard for intervention.²⁶ Yet as this dissertation shows, this was not always the case. The centrality of authenticity today conceals a more fractured history—one shaped by contingent decisions, shifting techniques, and evolving ideologies of preservation.

²³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii; Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996): 373–75, 379–80.

²⁴ “Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. Former German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp,” accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/>.

²⁵ UNESCO World Heritage Convention, “Auschwitz Birkenau German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945),” accessed May 6, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31/>.

²⁶ Kamil Będkowski, Bartosz Bartyzel, and Jolanta Banaś-Maciaszczyk, *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja baraków murowanych dawnego KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau / To Preserve Authenticity: The Conservation of Brick Barracks at the Former KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau*, trans. William R. Brand (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2019); Jolanta Banaś-Maciaszczyk, Jarosław Mensfelt, and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja pięciu drewnianych baraków dawnego KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau / To Preserve Authenticity: The Conservation of Five Wooden Barracks at the Former KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2012); Olivia Juras, Bartosz Bartyzel, et al., *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja dwóch bloków dawnego KL Auschwitz I / To Preserve Authenticity: The Conservation of Two Blocks at the Former Auschwitz I*, trans. William Brand (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2013); Aleksandra Papis and Nel Jastrzębiowski, eds., *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja muzealiów i archiwaliów / To Preserve Authenticity: The Conservation of Museum Collections and Archival Materials*, trans. Marta Świętoń (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2021).

Throughout this dissertation, I approach authenticity not as a stable property, but as the historically contingent outcome of institutional practices that confer meaning, authority, and emotional resonance onto material remains. I build here on Achim Saupe's distinction between what he terms 'authentication' and 'authentification': the twin processes through which authenticity is produced and made legible. Authentication refers to the technical verification of origins or truth-value, often grounded in forensic or archival authority. Authentification, by contrast, encompasses the spatial, rhetorical, and affective strategies that render material fragments experientially credible.²⁷ Together, these processes illuminate how authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau emerged not as an inherent quality, but through the interplay of documentation, material conservation, and narrative framing.

Yet the work of producing authenticity, whether technical or affective, is never free from contradiction. As Jonathan Culler has observed, authenticity exists in a paradox: "the dilemma of authenticity, is that to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself, and hence lacks the authenticity of what is truly unspoiled, untouched by mediating cultural codes."²⁸ In other words, the very processes that render authenticity visible—through conservation, spatial arrangement, or narrative framing—necessarily mediate it, making the authentic always, to some degree, a constructed effect.

Since the 1960s, authenticity has become a powerful keyword in debates across philosophy, anthropology, tourism, and cultural studies.²⁹ Lionel Trilling famously described it

²⁷ Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, "Einleitung," in *Handbuch historische Authentizität*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022), 11.

²⁸ Jonathan D. Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions*, 1st ed., vol. 3, Oklahoma Project for Discourse and Theory (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 164.

²⁹ Martin Jay maintains that the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, saw a proliferation of cultural and academic engagements with the topic. Martin Jay, "Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity: Adorno's Critique of Genuineness," *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 16.

as “part of the moral slang of our day [which] points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition,”³⁰ a term used to express existential anxieties in a dislocated modern world. This characterization highlights authenticity's function not merely as a descriptive category but as a profound existential yearning—a search for truth, originality, and unmediated experience in an increasingly uncertain and artificial world. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe link its prominence to the destruction of cultural property in World War II, which generated both a conservation ethic and a nostalgic yearning for uncorrupted origins.³¹ Others, like Miles Orvell, see the rise of authenticity as a symptom of late-capitalist consumerism, in which commodified authentic experiences are manufactured for mass consumption.³² These perspectives reveal authenticity as a situated value—both a response to modern alienation and a cultural force that shapes institutional practices and individual experiences.

Memorial sites built around authentic relics reflect these tensions intensely. The remains of atrocity—ruins, objects, bones—are treated not only as evidence but as anchors of historical and emotional truth. Yet their “authenticity” is never simply inherent. It is constructed, stabilized, and framed through spatial arrangements, conservation protocols, curatorial decisions, and perhaps most crucially, the politics of commemoration. In this sense, authenticity is both a legitimating device and a representational challenge: it grounds the site's authority while prompting profound questions about the processes through which historical truth is produced.

These tensions—between constructedness and emotional force, between yearning for the unmediated and the inevitability of mediation—play out acutely at sites like Auschwitz-

³⁰ Quoted in Richard Handler, “Authenticity,” *Anthropology Today* 2, no. 1 (1986): 3.

³¹ In which the historical relic takes central stage. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, *Historische Authentizität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 11; for a similar claim see David Lowenthal, “Material Preservation and Its Alternatives,” *Perspecta* 25 (1989): 67–69.

³² Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

Birkenau. The processes of authentication and authentication, introduced earlier, illuminate how material remains at Auschwitz are preserved, staged, and made to signify—as evidence, as witness, and as affective traces.

This theoretical framework is grounded in critical approaches to authenticity, initially developed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Benjamin's 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” explores how reproducibility undermines art's traditional value through the loss of what he calls aura—the unique presence and authority of an artwork grounded in its singular origin. “The presence of the original,” Benjamin writes, “is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”³³ Reproduction threatens this aura, detaching the object from its context of ritual and history. When a work is no longer a testament to history, “what is really jeopardized... is the authority of the object.”³⁴ Thus, authenticity here is not a timeless essence, but a historically embedded effect of originality, uniqueness, and authorship.

Notwithstanding, Benjamin does not claim authenticity is intrinsic to objects; rather, he historicizes its meaning.³⁵ This insight is deepened by Theodor Adorno in his work *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1967), a critique of mid-century existentialist uses of the term and its relationship to identity.³⁶ Adorno targets philosophers such as Heidegger who associated authenticity with uncovering an inner, essential self. He argues that such ideas reify the self and reduce authenticity to an empty slogan. Rather than an essence to be unearthed, the self is, for Adorno, a sedimentation of historical processes.³⁷ In his account, the notion of an unmediated, genuine core becomes an ideological projection. He suggests that the pursuit of authenticity

³³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) in *Reading Images*, ed. Julia Thomas (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁶ For more on how Benjamin influenced the work of Adorno see Jay, “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity.”

³⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 5–22.

masks its own constructedness and turns into what Martin Jay later called “a false infinity of desire for a reality as elusive as the Kantian thing-in-itself.”³⁸

Together, Benjamin and Adorno highlight a central paradox: authenticity is imagined as innate and universal, especially through the aura, but is in fact produced through mediation, history, and discourse.³⁹ It appears simultaneously as a quality of the object (what Saupe would term authentication) and a product of the processes that mark it as such (authentification). These scholars’ critiques offer a conceptual grounding for understanding authenticity’s centrality in memorial spaces. While Benjamin focuses on object authenticity—rooted in material uniqueness and temporal fixity—Adorno critiques subject authenticity, revealing how it becomes a moralized shorthand for unexamined identity claims. Both are crucial for understanding how sites like Auschwitz-Birkenau position authentic relics as tools for education and commemoration, operating on an objective and subjective level: they serve as authoritative traces of violence and catalysts for emotional and moral engagement.

Building on these theoretical insights, throughout the dissertation I use authenticity in three overlapping ways. First, as an analytical concept that helps me examine how material and spatial elements of Auschwitz-Birkenau were mobilized to produce claims to historical truth or emotional gravity. Second, as a historical actor’s category that appears in postwar sources as a term used by curators, conservators, and policymakers to legitimize their interventions and articulate the site’s moral mission. Third, I approach authenticity as something produced through ongoing labor: the physical and symbolic work of making relics appear meaningful, stable, and authoritative, and experienced by visitors as direct encounters with history. These uses overlap

³⁸ Jay, “Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity,” 21.

³⁹ Julia Straub, *Paradoxes of Authenticity: Studies on a Critical Concept*, Cultural and Media Studies (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2012), 12.

but do not collapse into each other. Taken together, they allow me to ask how authenticity's centrality emerged at Auschwitz-Birkenau—how it was defined, stabilized, and contested over time. In doing so, this study meets Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe's call to historicize authenticity: not as a stable essence, but as a process and a problem.⁴⁰

Situating Auschwitz-Birkenau in the History of Heritage Conservation

Understanding authenticity's evolving significance requires historicizing its application within international heritage conservation. This framing is crucial for understanding the material conservation of the site and its shifts after Auschwitz-Birkenau's inscription as a World Heritage Site in 1979.

Heritage conservation has grown into a globally influential field since the mid-twentieth century,⁴¹ yet sites of atrocity have remained peripheral to its core debates.⁴² As noted by Bohdan Rymaszewski, renowned Polish conservator and head of the Conservation Subcommittee of the International Auschwitz Council in the 1990s, the conceptual frameworks developed for monuments, cathedrals, and urban ensembles often falter when applied to places where death, desecration, and trauma are embedded in the terrain.⁴³ In such contexts, material remains are not only historical documents but also fragments of violence, and conservation decisions carry distinct ethical and political stakes.

⁴⁰ Sabrow and Saupe, *Historische Authentizität*, 15.

⁴¹ For histories of the conservation movement see: Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999); Miles Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement: A History of Architectural Preservation: Antiquity to Modernity* (Routledge, 2013).

⁴² Of notable exception are two recent discussion papers by ICOMOS, to which I will return in the dissertation's conclusions. ICOMOS International, *Evaluations of World Heritage Nominations Related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts*, discussion paper (France: ICOMOS International, 2018), <https://publ.icomos.org/publicomos/jlbSai?html=Pag&page=Pml/Not&base=technica&ref=7EBA7A13DECF9E793C979CBF94A746BA>; ICOMOS International, *Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention: Reflection on Whether and How These Might Relate to the Purpose and Scope of the World Heritage Convention and Its Operational Guidelines*, discussion paper (France: ICOMOS International, February 2020), <https://whc.unesco.org/document/184969/>.

⁴³ Bohdan Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember* (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2003), 85.

Modern conservation theory emerged in 19th-century Europe amid debates over how to treat historical structures. A central question underpinned these discussions: how to intervene in the inevitable decay of historic buildings. French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's model of stylistic restoration advocated for returning structures to an ideal form, prioritizing architectural unity over historical layering. In response, a philosophy of non-intervention emerged primarily in England and Italy, emphasizing minimal interference and the preservation of original material. This approach, advanced by figures such as John Ruskin and William Morris, underscored the value of historical layers and material integrity, framing ruin and decay as a vital element of historical authenticity.⁴⁴

The results of discussions around these competing approaches were codified at the international level in the early 20th century. The 1931 Athens Charter, drafted by an international forum of architects and preservation specialists, reflected growing consensus around abandoning total stylistic restoration in favor of minimal intervention. It recommended that the “historic and artistic work of the past should be respected, without excluding the style of any given period,” and advocated for regular maintenance to prevent the need for drastic interventions.⁴⁵

The Athens Charter primarily addressed longstanding philosophical tensions within the heritage conservation movement, but it was also framed as a response to the destruction of the First World War and the need for drafting international standards of heritage protection.⁴⁶ It was the unprecedented devastation of the Second World War, however, that fundamentally reshaped attitudes toward cultural heritage. The systematic destruction of cities, monuments, and cultural institutions helped catalyze international cooperation around cultural protection as a political and

⁴⁴ Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, 137–56, 174–86.

⁴⁵ “The Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments - 1931,” accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.icomos.org/en/167-the-athens-charter-for-the-restoration-of-historic-monuments>.

⁴⁶ Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, 284; Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 199–200.

ethical imperative. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) founded in 1946, fused science, education, and culture in an attempt to build peace “in the minds of men.”⁴⁷ Its broader civilizing mission sought to decenter Europe and recast civilization as a plural, transnational project, stripped of imperial, racial, and military associations.⁴⁸ For UNESCO, cultural heritage was not just about safeguarding the past—it was a moral and political resource for promoting tolerance, international cooperation, and the reintegration of former Axis powers into a reconstructed global order. These principles were further codified through the formation of conservation institutions, with the establishment of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) in Rome in 1956, and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965.⁴⁹

This institutionalization culminated in the 1964 Venice Charter, which framed cultural heritage as a “common patrimony” to be protected “in the full richness of its authenticity.”⁵⁰ It codified minimal intervention and reversibility as core principles.⁵¹ The Charter’s most controversial contribution was its emphasis on authenticity as the primary value guiding conservation work.⁵² Crucially, despite presenting a set of guidelines for conservation, restoration, and excavation work, the treaty did not define this authenticity. Herb Stovel argues

⁴⁷ Paul Betts, “World Civilization,” in *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe after World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 313; Christina Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” in *Conserving the Authentic: Essays in Honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price and Joseph King (Rome: ICCROM, 2009), 17.

⁴⁸ Betts, *Ruin and Renewal*, 327–28.

⁴⁹ Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, 281–91; Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 390–414.

⁵⁰ *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964)*, ICOMOS, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

⁵¹ Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 398–99; Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, 288–89.

⁵² Randolph Starn, “Authenticity and Historic Preservation: Towards an Authentic History,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2002): 1–16.

the Charter left the term purposefully vague so that local actors could find their own working definition of the concept.⁵³

The 1972 World Heritage Convention extended these principles by formalizing a global framework for the designation and protection of sites deemed to possess “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV). This framework sought to define and protect the “common patrimony” for humanity, but debates over what constituted universal significance—and how to assess it—persisted from the outset.⁵⁴ The Convention's Operational Guidelines initially outlined six cultural criteria meant to identify properties “highly representative of the culture of which [they] form part,” yet these criteria proved vague and were repeatedly refined with each new nomination.⁵⁵ Similarly, the Convention required that cultural properties pass a “test of authenticity,” which was defined through material attributes such as design, materials, workmanship, and setting.⁵⁶ This emphasis on material authenticity aligned with European conservation traditions but was increasingly critiqued as Eurocentric, especially in cases like Japanese shrines, where routine replacement of original materials conflicted with Western preservation norms. These critiques culminated in the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, which reframed authenticity as a culturally relative concept, emphasizing intangible values such

⁵³ Herb Stovel, “Origins and Influence of the Nara Document on Authenticity,” *APT Bulletin* 39, no. 2/3 (2008): 11.

⁵⁴ Julie Williams Lawless and Kapila D. Silva, “Towards an Integrative Understanding of ‘Authenticity’ of Cultural Heritage: An Analysis of World Heritage Site Designations in the Asian Context,” *Journal of Heritage Management* 1, no. 2 (December 2016): 148–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455929616684450>; Vaughn Schmutz and Michael A. Elliott, “World Heritage and the Scientific Consecration of ‘Outstanding Universal Value,’” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology (Sage Publications, Ltd.)* 58, no. 2 (April 2017): 140–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715217703778>; Jukka Jokilehto, “What is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties,” *Monuments and Sites* 16 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.11588/monstites.2008.0.21802>; Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value”; Glendinning, *The Conservation Movement*, 429–32.

⁵⁵ Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” 128; Jokilehto, “What is OUV?”; Schmutz and Elliott, “World Heritage and the Scientific Consecration of ‘Outstanding Universal Value’”; Lawless and Silva, “Towards an Integrative Understanding of ‘Authenticity’ of Cultural Heritage.”

⁵⁶ Christina Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” *Conserving the Authentic: Essays in Honour of Jukka Jokilehto*, 2009, 133.

as use, function, and spiritual significance—attributes deemed more inclusive of non-European heritage traditions.⁵⁷ While the Nara Document aimed to address Eurocentrism by expanding the definition of authenticity beyond material values, it also further relativized assessments of OUV, prompting fears of diluting the very concept of universal significance that underpinned the World Heritage List.⁵⁸

Auschwitz-Birkenau was nominated to the World Heritage List as a site of negative significance based on Criterion VI, which recognizes places “directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.”⁵⁹ Unlike most heritage sites, Auschwitz was nominated primarily for its intangible values—its function as a symbol of atrocity and a site of historical witness—rather than for its material attributes or architectural significance.⁶⁰ This nomination highlighted a conceptual tension within the World Heritage framework, which had predominantly focused on monumental architecture and material continuity rather than sites defined by their historical associations or symbolic importance.

While it posed a conceptual challenge by emphasizing intangible values, PMA-B nevertheless fulfilled the authenticity criterion due to its preserved state. As Julia Röttger notes, the entire museum complex was nominated, explicitly including both preserved wartime structures and postwar additions such as the museum archives, all framed as part of a coherent

⁵⁷ Jukka Jokilehto, “What is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties,” *Monuments and Sites* 16 (2008): 43, <https://doi.org/10.11588/monstites.2008.0.21802>; Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” 134.

⁵⁸ Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” 135.

⁵⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, 1972, accessed May 10, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/>.

⁶⁰ Krzysztof Pawłowski, “Pierwsze dylematy Komitetu Dziedzictwa Światowego UNESCO,” in *Polski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS: 1965–2015: 50 lat w służbie ochrony zabytków*, ed. Katarzyna Pałubska, Katarzyna Sroka, and Łukasz Urbański (Warszawa: Polski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS; Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, 2015), 72–74.

historical landscape. The nomination document presented Auschwitz as a site of pristine protection—one that had been carefully stabilized and conserved, fulfilling the 19th-century definition of material authenticity while also incorporating postwar interventions as part of its evidentiary value.⁶¹

Within this evolving heritage landscape, Auschwitz-Birkenau's status was further complicated by Cold War politics and the institutional limitations of the Polish state. As this dissertation shows, its conservation practices developed in relative isolation, shaped more by local improvisation and martyrological imperatives than by emerging international norms.⁶² While Auschwitz was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 1979 due to its preserved state and institutional continuity, its designation as a “unique case” effectively limited the nomination of other atrocity sites that lacked comparable material integrity or political consensus.⁶³ As Julia Röttjer has demonstrated, this logic of exceptionalism was formalized through the nomination process itself. French heritage official Michel Parent explicitly framed Auschwitz-Birkenau as an exceptional case that should, in his words, “stand alone among cultural properties... bearing witness to the depth of horror and suffering, and the height of heroism,” with all other comparable sites symbolically represented through it.⁶⁴ This exceptionalism further entrenched Auschwitz as a symbolic reference point, reinforcing the notion that atrocity sites should be commemorated primarily as moral and political symbols (i.e., for their intangible values) rather

⁶¹ Röttjer, “Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer narrative in internationalen Kontexten,” 274–75.

⁶² Bogusław Szmygin, ed., *Miejsca pamięci – definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona = Places of Memory – Defining, Interpretation, Protection* (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 172; Jakub Lewicki, “Polskie miejsca pamięci – zmiany interpretacji i problemy ochrony w XXI wieku,” in *Miejsca pamięci – definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona = Places of Memory – Defining, Interpretation, Protection*, ed. Bogusław Szmygin (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 105–6.

⁶³ Röttjer, “Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer narrative,” 122; Szmygin, *Miejsca pamięci*, 168.

⁶⁴ Julia Röttjer, “Authentizität im UNESCO-Welterbe-Diskurs: Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: Die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 41.

than as objects worthy of conservation because of their aesthetic and historical merit. As I demonstrate in the chapters that follow, this logic of exceptionality shaped not only how Auschwitz-Birkenau was preserved, but how its authenticity was constructed, leveraged, and contested within broader struggles over historical authority and the representation of mass violence.

While the conceptual focus on Auschwitz-Birkenau's nomination continues to dominate scholarship, far less attention has been given to the practical and material aspects of the site's preservation as it relates to the World Heritage initiative. As Cameron notes, the World Heritage Committee now faces a crucial challenge: to more closely integrate conservation practice with the assessment of Outstanding Universal Value, emphasizing that “World Heritage Sites need careful conservation and management to ensure their ongoing health.”⁶⁵ This dissertation addresses that gap, examining how Auschwitz-Birkenau developed its own approach to conservation over time, ultimately shaping broader frameworks for preserving sites of mass violence.

Comparative Frameworks: National Traditions in Authenticity Scholarship

German and Polish scholarly approaches to authenticity at memorial sites reveal contrasting frameworks for understanding how sites of atrocity are preserved and interpreted. These different national traditions have shaped my approach to analyzing conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

⁶⁵ Cameron, “The Evolution of the Concept of Outstanding Universal Value,” 135.

In German scholarship, authenticity is treated with pronounced skepticism.⁶⁶ Unlike Auschwitz-Birkenau, where preservation was institutionalized relatively early, many German memorial sites underwent extensive postwar modifications, often erasing or obscuring original structures. Ironically, this loss of historical structures coincided with a memory boom commemorating the Nazi past.⁶⁷ German scholars argue that “authenticity” at memorial sites is less an inherent quality than a constructed effect, produced through layers of historical transformation.⁶⁸

The skeptical stance toward authenticity also reflects a broader pedagogical orientation in German memory work that emphasizes critical engagement with perpetrator history over affective resonance. Scholars caution against the fetishization of aura, arguing that the emotive power of authentic relics can risk sacralizing historical remnants and overshadowing critical examination.⁶⁹ This approach is grounded in interdisciplinary analysis across philosophy, tourism studies, and memory studies, particularly through the Leibniz Research Alliance Value of the Past.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See especially the collected volume by Alex Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf, *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: Die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019).

⁶⁷ Thomas Schaarschmidt and Irmgard Zündorf, “Gedenkstätten,” in *Handbuch Historische Authentizität*, ed. Martin Sabrow, Wert der Vergangenheit (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2022), 171.

⁶⁸ Schaarschmidt and Zündorf, “Gedenkstätten,” 173; Thomas Lutz, “Materialisierte Authentifizierung: Die Bedeutung authentischer Gebäude und Objekte in Gedenkstätten und Dokumentationszentren der NS-Verbrechen,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, by Alex Drecoll et al. (Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 59; Achim Saupe, “Authentizitätskonflikte in Gedenkstätten. Umstrittener Begriff, Zuschreibung und Erfahrungsdimension,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecoll et al. (Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 201–7.

⁶⁹ Saupe, “Authentizitätskonflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 199–200; Insa Eschebach, “Blutgetränkte Erde. Die Sakralisierung historischer Orte des Massensterbens,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 17–33; Schaarschmidt and Zündorf, “Gedenkstätten,” 174–75.

⁷⁰ “Leibniz Value of the Past: About the Leibniz Research Alliance,” accessed May 9, 2025, <https://www.leibniz-wert-der-vergangenheit.de/en/about-us/about-the-leibniz-research-alliance>.

In contrast, the study of authenticity at Polish memorial sites has been largely confined to issues of conservation, with limited critical engagement beyond material preservation. Polish discourse continues to emphasize physical continuity as the primary marker of authenticity, aligning with traditional conservation principles that prioritize material integrity.⁷¹ This stance persists even as world heritage increasingly acknowledges symbolic and intangible dimensions of culture.⁷² Unlike German scholars who interrogate the performative construction of authenticity, Polish scholars largely maintain a continuity-oriented approach, framing physical substance as the primary vector of memory transmission.⁷³

This dissertation bridges elements from both traditions by bringing German theoretical frameworks into conversation with the Polish focus on material preservation. I aim to demonstrate how material preservation itself can function as a constructed mode of producing historical truth, while expanding inquiry into the broader meanings and politics of authenticity as both a preservation value and a narrative device.

Sources and Methods

This dissertation draws upon a combination of archival, institutional, and ethnographic sources to analyze the conservation and memorialization practices at Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1945 to the present. The core archival sources include internal reports, conservation plans, and policy documents produced by the PMA-B, as well as documentation held at Polish state archives. Files from the former Director of the United States Holocaust Museum, Miles Lerman,

⁷¹ Szmygin, *Miejsca pamięci*, 172–73.

⁷² Janusz Krawczyk, “Miejsce pamięci jako przedmiot refleksji teoretyczno-konserwatorskiej [Places of memory as a subject of theoretical reflection in heritage conservation],” in *Miejsca pamięci – definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona = Places of memory – defining, interpretation, protection*, ed. Bogusław Szmygin (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 91–92.

⁷³ Wojciech Kowalski, “Zagadnienie ochrony miejsc pamięci w teorii i praktyce,” in *Miejsca pamięci – definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona [Places of memory – defining, interpretation, protection]*, ed. Bogusław Szmygin (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 84–85.

held at the museum's Institutional Archives, were crucial for reconstructing conservation procedures after 1989.

Additionally, ethnographic methods were employed to capture contemporary conservation practices. In 2021-2022, I interned at PMA-B's conservation laboratories. I became acquainted with Auschwitz-Birkenau's terrain through embodied experience, walking around and dwelling next to the site for six months. My choices about which spatial aspects of the terrain to analyze were informed by being in the space and encountering its most perplexing questions firsthand. During this period, I conducted semi-structured interviews with conservators, and observed and participated in the treatment of artifacts—focusing on how conservators approached material remains as both forensic evidence and symbolic relics.

My research process was shaped by significant constraints in accessing sources. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was initially unable to access the PMA-B archives or conduct fieldwork. Access was only granted once I secured an internship at the conservation labs. Despite multiple requests, I was denied access to internal correspondence and administrative files, repeatedly redirected to state archives that were themselves inaccessible. These obstacles restricted my ability to reconstruct the full institutional context of conservation decision-making.

To address these gaps, I supplemented my analysis with external archival materials, media coverage, scholarly accounts, and oral histories. This triangulation of sources allowed me to trace the ideological and material transformations at Auschwitz-Birkenau over time, while accounting for the persistent archival silences that shaped my research.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation traces the evolution of conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau chronologically while examining key thematic tensions that developed across time. The first

chapter establishes the institutional foundations, exploring how two distinct commemorative paradigms emerged during the museum's first two formative decades. The second chapter investigates peripheral spaces, revealing how the physical and narrative margins of the site expose contested memorialization practices. The third and fourth chapters analyze the transformative post-communist period, examining first how financial support for conservation became internationalized, and then how conservation practices themselves evolved under new political circumstances. The final chapter shifts to ethnographic analysis of contemporary conservation practices, exploring how the handling of ambiguous objects reveals deeper epistemological and ethical questions about Holocaust collections and representation.

Between each chapter, I incorporate brief ethnographic vignettes drawn from my fieldwork experiences. These reflective interludes serve as bridges between the historical analysis and contemporary practice, connecting the chapters while foregrounding the broader questions and stakes of the dissertation. Through personal reflections on my experiences visiting memorial sites, my entry into the field through the conservation laboratories, and my position as a researcher at the museum, these vignettes provide moments of methodological transparency and embodied knowledge that complement the archival and institutional analysis. They reveal how my understanding of authenticity and conservation was shaped not only by documents and interviews but also by sensory encounters with the site and its material remains. These interludes also allow me to acknowledge the emotional and ethical dimensions of researching atrocity sites, dimensions that often remain unaddressed in conventional scholarly analysis but that inevitably shape how we approach, perceive, and interpret such places.

Chapter 1, “‘Preserved for All Times’: The Institutional Emergence of Two Commemorative Paradigms, 1947-1979,” examines how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

operationalized its 1947 mandate to preserve the camp “for all times,” focusing on the development of two distinct commemorative paradigms: presence at Auschwitz I and absence at Birkenau. While Auschwitz I became a site of evidentiary presence, where structures were restored and narrative coherence was crafted through spatial reconstruction, Birkenau evolved into a site of absence, marked by decay and minimal intervention. The chapter explores how the museum employed forensic evidence, survivor testimonies, and selective conservation to construct institutional authority, and how the concept of authenticity evolved from a forensic framework focused on factual integrity to a commemorative logic emphasizing affective resonance.

Chapter 2, “On the Edges of Memory: Peripheral Spaces and the Politics of Preservation,” examines how the spatial peripheries of Auschwitz-Birkenau were shaped through contested commemorative practices. By analyzing zones that remained structurally and symbolically unsettled—specifically the incineration pits and first gas chambers behind Birkenau and the SS Kommandantur near Auschwitz I—the chapter demonstrates how memory is negotiated not only through monumentalized spaces but also through sites of ambiguous status. These marginal areas, where early killing operations occurred or perpetrators lived, reveal tensions between physical preservation and narrative emphasis. The chapter traces how early camp zones associated with mass killing were physically preserved but narratively marginalized, while perpetrator spaces were repurposed and symbolically distanced from the core memorial functions of the museum. These peripheral spaces expose the dynamic boundaries of memory at Auschwitz-Birkenau, showing how landscape, infrastructure, and institutional policy collectively shaped what was included in and excluded from the official commemorative frame.

Chapter 3, “The Return of Jewish Auschwitz and its Europeanization: Funding Conservation after 1989,” examines how Auschwitz-Birkenau's physical conservation became a transnational project after communism's fall. The chapter opens with Ronald S. Lauder's 1987 visit to PMA-B, which catalyzed international efforts to fund preservation during Poland's economic crisis. It traces the rise of Jewish and international influence over the site as Lauder organized the Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, positioning Auschwitz as a European site of collective responsibility. While Jewish organizations provided crucial initial funding and expertise, European governments, led by Germany, ultimately assumed primary financial responsibility for the site's conservation. This process transformed Auschwitz-Birkenau from a Polish national site into a European symbol of Holocaust remembrance, with conservation funding becoming a mechanism for negotiating historical responsibility and collective memory in a newly unified Europe after the Cold War.

Chapter 4, “Preservation, Authenticity, and the Changing Meaning of Auschwitz-Birkenau after 1989,” examines how international financial support enabled extensive preservation efforts that reshaped the site's representation. Beginning with the pivotal 1990 state-of-conservation report, which highlighted the site's deterioration and proposed substantial interventions, the chapter analyzes how conservation became a battleground for negotiating historical narratives throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Through the case studies of the gas chambers, wooden barracks, and victims' hair, the chapter reveals the complexities of maintaining authenticity while engaging in necessary conservation work. It traces how Auschwitz-Birkenau's status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site intensified the emphasis on authenticity as a guiding principle, while also exposing inherent contradictions in preserving a site marked by impermanence and deliberate destruction. The chapter demonstrates how

conservation practices became intertwined with broader questions of Holocaust memory, political responsibility, and international moral stewardship.

Chapter 5, “The In-Between Object and the Value of the Unknown: Conservation and Representation at Auschwitz-Birkenau Today,” marks a methodological shift to ethnographic analysis of contemporary conservation practices at the museum. Based on fieldwork in the conservation laboratories, the chapter identifies a previously unexamined category of artifacts: “in-between objects.” This new type of forensic object is neither anonymous mass objects nor fully traceable personal belongings—ambiguous items that provide only speculative insights into victims' lives. Objects like a bean found in a baby's shoe or banknotes hidden in clothing linings highlight the opacity of certain material traces and their potential to evoke narratives without fully disclosing them. The chapter argues that preserving and exhibiting such objects challenges dominant modes of Holocaust representation by foregrounding the limits of historical knowledge and embracing uncertainty as an ethical position. By examining conservators' daily practices and decision-making, the chapter demonstrates how material preservation can acknowledge rather than overcome the fundamental unknowability of certain aspects of mass atrocity.

Collectively, the chapters reveal how preservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau evolved from improvised postwar repair to sophisticated institutional practice, transforming not only the physical site but also its symbolic meaning and educational function. The dissertation demonstrates that authenticity at PMA-B is not an inherent quality but the product of ongoing material and conceptual labor negotiated over decades—a fragile achievement that requires constant maintenance and negotiation among competing stakeholders, material constraints, and evolving commemorative demands.

1. “Preserved for All Times”: The Institutional Emergence of Two Commemorative Paradigms, 1947-1979

Introduction

In July 1947, the Polish Sejm passed the resolution that the terrain of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp, “together with all buildings and facilities,” was

to be “preserved for all times.”¹ This legal declaration gave the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, or PMO-B) its formal mandate, but offered little guidance on what such preservation might entail. Should buildings be stabilized in their current state, reconstructed to reflect wartime conditions, or left to decay? Should landscape, debris, and postwar damage be maintained as part of the historical record? And which parts of the vast, dispersed camp complex deserved protection? Beneath its declarative clarity, the 1947 resolution embedded a profound conceptual uncertainty—one that would shape the museum’s institutional, curatorial, and conservation practices for decades to come.

This chapter examines how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum interpreted and operationalized the 1947 mandate during the first three decades of its existence. While scholars such as Jonathan Huener have emphasized the political uses of Auschwitz in the People’s Republic of Poland,² this chapter approaches the site as a locus of evolving institutional epistemologies. It focuses not on the state’s symbolic appropriation of Auschwitz, but on how museum professionals, often former prisoners themselves, navigated the conceptual, material, and ethical dilemmas of preserving a site of mass atrocity—grappling with its partial ruin, operating under political oversight, and facing an unprecedented challenge: the simultaneous enormity of the crimes and the absence of prior models for preserving and presenting their material traces in a museum space. These dilemmas unfolded within both national and international contexts, as Polish institutional practices at Auschwitz-Birkenau evolved in dialogue with—and sometimes in tension with—emerging global conservation norms.

¹ Polski Sejm, *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1947 nr 52 poz. 265, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19470520265>.

² Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003).

At the heart of this chapter’s analysis is a conceptual distinction developed by Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe between two intertwined processes: authentication (*Authentifizieren*) and authentification (*Authentisieren*). The former refers to juridical or scientific validation—such as forensic analysis, authorship verification, or the material dating of objects—and aims to establish factual integrity. The latter, by contrast, involves affective and narrative strategies that make something *feel* real: eyewitness accounts, ritual forms, spatial design, and embodied gestures. While authentication secures historical authority through evidence, authentification cultivates a sense of truth through experience. As Sabrow and Saupe note, memory institutions like museums operate at the intersection of these modes, tasked both with verifying the past and staging its emotional legibility. In both modes, authority plays a central role, yet one that is always relational and open to contestation.³

In this chapter, I draw on the interdisciplinary field of scholarship that treats authenticity not as a stable quality but as a historically situated mode of staging and relating to the past.⁴ My use of the term is analytical: I trace how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum conferred authority, affect, and meaning onto its material environment, whether or not historical actors themselves used the language of authenticity. Where they did, I attend to the rhetorical and institutional function of such usage. While historical actors seldom invoked authenticity as a self-evident quality of the site during its early years, this chapter demonstrates that institutional

³ Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, “Einleitung,” in *Handbuch historische Authentizität*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022), 11.

⁴ See key texts: Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, *Historische Authentizität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016); Helaine Silverman, “Heritage and Authenticity,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, ed. Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 69–88; Randolph Starn, “Authenticity and Historic Preservation: Towards an Authentic History,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15, no. 1 (2002): 1–16; Kathryn A. Burnett, “Heritage, Authenticity and History,” in *Quality Issues in Heritage Visitor Attractions*, ed. Bruce Prideaux and Dallen J. Timothy (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001), 39–54; Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, eds., *Handbuch historische Authentizität: Wert der Vergangenheit* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022).

practices—through both authentication and authentication—nonetheless produced and stabilized that authenticity as both evidentiary and affective truth.

As scholars have shown, the concept of authenticity has evolved considerably over time: from a premodern association with juridical or theological legitimacy to a modern semantic field shaped by aesthetics, historiography, and cultural theory. In historical discourse, authenticity commonly denotes qualities such as source-verifiability, documentary reliability, and faithful representation. This chapter builds on these insights to examine how authenticity was produced and debated not only through language, but through material form, institutional structure, and spatial design.⁵ Crucially, I approach the material environment of Auschwitz-Birkenau not as a passive backdrop, but as an active agent that shaped institutional decisions, constrained commemorative practices, and generated meaning in ways that sometimes exceeded curatorial or political intent.

The chapter argues that between 1947 and 1979, the museum developed two commemorative paradigms. At Auschwitz I, the curatorial approach emphasized evidentiary *presence*—structures were restored, objects were displayed in thematic exhibition blocks, and the narrative arc was stabilized through both documentary authority and spatial coherence. At Birkenau, by contrast, the dominant logic became one of absence. The camp’s partial destruction, rapid postwar decay, and limited resources prevented full curatorial intervention, and out of this inaction grew a powerful aesthetic of non-intervention. Ruins, open fields, and collapsing barracks themselves became the testimony. What began as neglect evolved into an affective and ethical grammar of commemorative minimalism. Taken together, these two

⁵ Sabrow and Saupe, “Einleitung,” 10–11.

paradigms—presence at Auschwitz I and absence at Birkenau—came to structure how the Shoah would be represented, taught, and remembered far beyond the borders of Poland.

The chapter unfolds in three parts. Part I traces the museum’s early efforts to establish historical and commemorative authority through evidentiary collection, architectural preservation, and exhibition design. It examines how curators and staff employed forensic methods and testimonial protocols to transform the site into a historical document and construct a credible narrative of the crimes committed there. Part II explores the early challenges of conservation and land protection, revealing the tensions between commemorative aims, local reconstruction, and physical instability. It details how the museum navigated unclear legal mandates, competing land claims, and postwar material scarcity to define what could be preserved and why. Part III turns to the codification of conservation practices in the late 1950s and 1960s. It analyzes the museum’s evolving internal conservation plans, the gradual emergence of authenticity as a preservation value, and the convergence of site-based practice with international heritage norms, culminating in Auschwitz-Birkenau’s inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979.

While this chapter attends to how different victim groups were represented or neglected through the museum’s curatorial and conservation decisions, it does not provide a comprehensive account of the hierarchies that structured these representations. The predominance of Polish political martyrdom in the museum’s early institutional culture, shaped by survivor networks, political constraints, and the commemorative framework of the postwar state, often limited the explicit representation of Jewish and Romani victims. Although the belongings of Jewish victims, displayed prominently in Blocks 4 to 6, made their presence materially visible, these traces were not incorporated into a historical narrative that centered their

Jewish owners. A fuller analysis of these representational asymmetries and their evolution across the postwar decades will be taken up in subsequent chapters. This chapter, however, traces how Jewish victimhood was simultaneously made visible and marginalized, revealing the tension between material presence and political erasure that shaped early commemorative practices.

Throughout this chapter, I use the terms *preservation*, *conservation*, *restoration*, and *reconstruction* in distinct ways, reflecting both professional practice and historical usage in the field of heritage management. *Preservation* denotes the broader effort to maintain historical integrity over time, whether through technical intervention, legal protection, or symbolic framing. As G.J. Ashworth notes, preservation is “the protection from harm,” grounded in a moral imperative to safeguard such assets permanently and which has been standardized through legal and professional frameworks.⁶ In contrast, *conservation* refers to technical interventions aimed at stemming decay and stabilizing original material, often carried out with minimal change to form or substance.⁷ *Restoration* is applied when conservation is no longer feasible, and involves returning a structure or object to a state in which it can be exhibited, based on conjecture.⁸ *Reconstruction*, by contrast, refers to the physical rebuilding of lost or damaged elements using mostly new materials.⁹ While these terms were not always clearly distinguished in postwar Polish usage, I retain them here as heuristic tools to analyze the museum’s evolving approaches.

By grounding its analysis in archival documentation, conservation plans, exhibition scenarios, and theoretical reflection on authenticity, this chapter seeks to illuminate the

⁶ G. J. Ashworth, “Conservation as Preservation or as Heritage: Two Paradigms and Two Answers,” *Built Environment* 23, no. 2 (1997): 93.

⁷ Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), xi.

⁸ Jokilehto, xi; Pamela Jerome, “An Introduction to Authenticity in Preservation,” *APT Bulletin: Journal of Preservation Technology* 39, no. 2–3 (2008): 3.

⁹ Jerome, “An Introduction to Authenticity in Preservation,” 3.

commemorative grammar that took shape at Auschwitz-Birkenau not by design alone, but through a layered process of improvisation, constraint, and historical imagination, in which each intervention built upon and reshaped those that came before.

Part I: Drafting the Commemorative Blueprint (1945-1955)

Establishing Authority and Authenticating History

In March 1948, at the inaugural meeting of the newly formed Council for the Protection of Monuments of Struggle and Martyrdom, one concern stood out among state officials: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, they insisted, must strive for “the most far-reaching authentication of the areas surrounding the complex of buildings of the museum itself.”¹⁰ The choice of language was precise and revealing. “Authentication” signaled not only a need to confirm the factuality of the camp’s structures and terrain, but also a deeper imperative—to establish the museum’s authority to speak for and about the historical truth of the site. It also implicitly acknowledged that such authority had yet to be secured.

This call for authentication was embedded in a broader political and commemorative framework established a year earlier. On July 2, 1947, the Polish Sejm passed three linked resolutions: two authorizing the creation of state museums at Auschwitz and Majdanek,¹¹ and another founding the Council for the Protection of Martyrdom Sites.¹² These resolutions were

¹⁰ “Protokół z posiedzenia Rady Ochrony Pomników Walki i Męczeństwa w dniach 23 i 24 marca 1948” March 23–24, 1948, *Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki* (henceforth MKiS), *Centralny Zarząd Muzeów* (henceforth CZM), *Wydział Muzeów i Pomników Walki z Faszyzmem* (henceforth WMiPWzF), sygn. 1a, Archiwum Akt Nowych (henceforth AAN), Warsaw, 3.

¹¹ Polski Sejm, *Ustawa o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu* (1947); and *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów na Majdanku*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1947, no. 52, poz. 266, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19470520266>.

¹² Polski Sejm, *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o utworzeniu Rady Ochrony Pomników Męczeństwa*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1947, no. 52, poz. 264, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19470520264>.

grounded in the same ideological language, commemorating “the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other nations.” This framing gave the Council its mandate and shaped the museum’s function as a site of historical verification. During the communist period, PMO-B reported to a sub-division of the Ministry of Culture and Arts (Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki, or MKiS), with the Council—Rada Ochrony Pomników Walki i Męczeństwa (ROPWiM)—housed in the Central Museum Administration (Centralny Zarząd Muzeów).

While the Sejm resolutions cast Auschwitz as a site of international martyrdom, the museum’s early work was shaped primarily by the perspectives and involvement of former Polish political prisoners, whose efforts drove much of the site’s initial framing and interpretation. At the Council’s founding meeting in Warsaw, PMO-B’s first director and former political prisoner, Tadeusz Wąsowicz, presented a detailed report on the museum’s activities to date, and the participants discussed the statutes and regulations necessary to monitor the museum’s activity.¹³ But the work ahead, it was clear, would hinge on first grounding the museum’s claims to truth in authenticated space and material evidence.

The Camp as A Crime Scene

How did the museum understand the goal of authentication, i.e., establishing the technical truthfulness of the site—and how was it to be achieved? At PMO-B, this process first took shape during the preparations for the museum’s first permanent exhibition. Entrusted with the responsibility of narrating the crime in situ, early museum professionals needed to demonstrate that landscapes, buildings, objects, and documents were connected to the camp and played a role in its operation.

¹³ “Protokół z posiedzenia Rady Ochrony Pomników Walki i Męczeństwa w dniach 23 i 24 marca 1948”, *MKiS, CZM, WMiPWzF*, sygn. 1a, AAN, 3.

The first means of establishing such truth predated the museum's existence and was legal: the framing of these materials as evidence of crimes. After the camp's liberation and before it became a museum, Auschwitz-Birkenau was designated a crime scene by both the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission and the Polish Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (*Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce*, GKBZNP). These commissions, and their regional branches, relied on forensic protocols to collect, analyze, and verify materials.¹⁴ For example, in 1947, the prosecutor's office in Gliwice ordered the forensic examination of barrels of women's hair sent from Auschwitz to Germany to produce rugs. The Department of Forensic Medicine at the Jagiellonian University analyzed the samples, confirming the hair's human origin and detecting traces of Zyklon B. Witness testimonies corroborated the findings, describing how the barrels contained not only hair but also fragments of human skin and coins inscribed in Greek.¹⁵ This convergence of material and testimonial evidence helped establish the authenticity of artifacts and, by extension, the crimes they substantiated.

Although these procedures served legal ends, they also proved foundational to the museum's own operations. In its early phase, PMO-B leaned on the authority of postwar investigations and their forensic findings to construct its own credibility. The 1947 resolution by the Polish Sejm and the museum's 1950 statute—ratified by MKiS—named the museum the sole custodian of all camp-related evidence.¹⁶ Investigative bodies were ordered to transfer materials

¹⁴ Jacek Lachendro, "Introduction," in *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, online lesson, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, accessed April 1, 2025, http://lekcja.auschwitz.org/en_22_muzeum/.

¹⁵ Marta Zawodna, "Wokół tego, co pozostało: Biograficzne podejście do badań nad szczątkami ludzkimi na przykładzie włosów eksponowanych w Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau [About What Is Left: A Biographical Approach to Research on Human Remains, Using the Example of the Hair Exhibited in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum]," *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 61, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 76–77.

¹⁶ Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki, *Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Sztuki z dnia 17 stycznia 1950 r. w sprawie nadania statutu Państwowemu Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka*, *Monitor Polski* 1950, no. 13, item 132, accessed

to the museum. While it took many years for this transfer to be completed, the museum held access to them from its onset.¹⁷ It transformed their use from juridical to educational: evidence gathered to prosecute perpetrators was used in exhibitions to convey the reality of the camp to the wider public.¹⁸ For instance, the museum's first permanent exhibition in 1947 displayed piles of confiscated victim belongings in Block 5 under the telling title "Evidence of Mass Extermination."¹⁹ The heading demonstrates the museum's reliance on forensic epistemology to authenticate objects and assert its authority to relay a credible history of the crime.

With historical authority came a weighty responsibility: to preserve and present the truth with scientific rigor. The stakes were high. Any doubt cast on an object's authenticity risked undermining the historical record itself—an especially perilous prospect in the face of political manipulation and denial. Forensic authentication became a safeguard against disbelief, not only from deniers but also from a general public struggling to comprehend the unprecedented nature of the events. Tadeusz Hołuj, a former prisoner, early museum employee, and member of the museum's first Historical Commission, in charge on setting up the museum, recalled in an opinion piece he published in 1955 in *Życie Literackie* both visitor disbelief and the museum's process of verification:

The unbelievability of SS crimes, their monstrous nature and scale, strikes not only foreign visitors from the West, but also Poles. How often one hears words of disbelief or suggestions that the matters of suffering and crime here have been

November 14, 2022, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WMP19500130132/O/M19500132.pdf>; Polski Sejm, *Ustawa o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa* (1947); Kazimierz Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince," October 10, 1956, *Zbiór Referaty*, tom 4, *Archiwum Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau* (henceforth APMA-B), Oświęcim, 3–6.

¹⁷ Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 3–5.

¹⁸ An important function of all memorial sites in former camps. Thomas Lutz, "Materialisierte Authentifizierung: Die Bedeutung authentischer Gebäude und Objekte in Gedenkstätten und Dokumentationszentren der NS-Verbrechen," in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: Die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 75.

¹⁹ Zawodna, "Wokół tego, co pozostało," 77–78; Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 127–28.

artificially exaggerated or displayed “for propaganda.” Meanwhile, every exhibit, every caption “with a thesis,” everything shown in the Museum is based on scholarly evidence, on testimonies given before the Supreme National Tribunal, on investigative and trial materials from proceedings against Nazi criminals, on verified camp memoirs, and on SS records. I personally remember the astonished eyes of Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, her distrustful gaze; I remember the probing, persistent questions of Indian Prime Minister Nehru; I know of many attempts by Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian, and Italian visitors to reach the sources of information.²⁰

Hołuj highlights disbelief across geographical and political divides, pointing to its sources in ideological manipulation for propaganda purposes, not an uncommon state practice throughout the years of the communist regime. However, his response confronts this skepticism with the museum’s strict authentication process, stressing its reliance on scrutinized and verified evidence. Indeed, only after confirming the barrels of hair through scientific analysis did the museum incorporate them into its permanent exhibition.²¹

Beyond movable objects, the process of setting up the first exhibition in 1947 also required the authentication of camp structures. In many cases, former prisoners employed at the museum had to rely on their familiarity with the terrain. Fortunately, the SS failed in destroying the archives of the camp’s Central Construction Office (*Zentralbauleitung*), and most of the camp’s architectural plans survived. While these documents were confiscated by the Soviets,²² some copies remained in the museum’s possession.²³ In their absence, the theoretical reconstruction of the camp’s space and architecture was often fraught with difficulty. This was especially true in the case of Block 11, known as the Death Block—one of the most brutal sites

²⁰ Tadeusz Hołuj, “Sprawa wiecznej pamięci.” *Życie Literackie*, October 30, 1955.

²¹ Zawodna, “Wokół tego, co pozostało,” 78–81.

²² Paul B. Jaskot et al., “Visualizing the Archive: Building at Auschwitz as a Geographical Problem,” in *Geographies of the Holocaust*, ed. Anne Kelly Knowles et al., *The Spatial Humanities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 189.

²³ Hołuj, “Sprawa wiecznej pamięci.”

in the main camp, and central to the commemoration project.²⁴ Politically and historically significant, it was the site of summary trials, executions, and the imprisonment of notable individuals, including Father Maksymilian Kolbe.²⁵ It was opened to visitors even before the memorial was officially inaugurated.²⁶

Efforts to reconstruct Block 11 faithfully encountered multiple challenges. While SS blueprints existed, they omitted key elements—such as the 1x1-meter standing cells used to starve prisoners²⁷— and provided no information on the summary courts, executions, or other events that took place within its walls. Moreover, because so few prisoners survived incarceration in the block, only a handful of eyewitnesses could speak to what transpired there. Nevertheless, some former prisoners appear to have entered the building after liberation. Photographs from the Soviet Commission show survivors in striped uniforms touring the courtyard of Block 11 alongside Soviet soldiers.²⁸

Alfred Wóycicki, a former prisoner and one of the architects of the museum's 1947 permanent exhibition, authored the interpretive scenario for Block 11. He did not cite sources for his detailed reconstructions, but his work was likely based on testimonies from three or four survivors, including Maksymilian Chlebik. Chlebik had worked in the block's penal company until December 1944, when he became the barber responsible for cutting the hair of prisoners condemned to death. Having spent four years in the block, he offered a rare and detailed account

²⁴ “There is very little information on how this block looked like.” “Poprawiona hist. Bloku 11 z hist. stolarki” n.d., no archival number, *Archiwum Dokumentacji Konserwatorskiej Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau* (henceforth ADK PMA-B), Oświęcim, 3.

²⁵ Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945*, 1st American ed. (New York: H. Holt, 1990), 80.

²⁶ Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 69.

²⁷ “IKONOGRAFIA A-11,” photographs, 1945–1981, A011/02/01, *ADK PMA-B*, 66. It appears the memorial site gained access to the block 11 architectural plans, made by the Central Construction Office, before 1989. This was probably facilitated by connection between Soviet and Polish cultural institutions, thanks to which the museum was able to obtain copies of original SS documentation.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

of its internal layout and functions. His testimony remained indispensable in later years for guiding conservation decisions.²⁹

Despite the limited number of surviving witnesses, Wóycicki and the museum appear to have concluded that they had sufficient evidence to undertake an accurate reconstruction of the building's interior, more of which I will detail below. Through the process of collecting sources, interpreting testimony, and physically restoring the space to its wartime appearance, the museum effectively reconstituted the crime scene in situ. In doing so, it assumed the responsibility of collecting, verifying, and presenting the block's history—thus asserting its authority to authenticate the site.

While structures and objects were central to the museum's exhibitions, they were not its primary tools for reconstructing the broader history of the camp. Lacking access to chemical labs and formal forensic expertise, the museum turned increasingly to documents and testimonies, which were more readily available. Yet here, too, it faced serious challenges. SS records could not be trusted: they employed euphemistic language, fabricated causes of injury and death, and deliberately obscured the nature of the crimes. In the camp's final days, the SS destroyed the majority of camp documents.³⁰ What survived was scattered or removed from the site—some taken abroad. The Soviet Commission, for example, confiscated the few surviving SS documents

²⁹ The conservation history of the building, written after 2010, mentions three witnesses only: Jerzy Brandhuber, Maksymilian Chlebek, and Czesław Sułkowski. An earlier inventory of preservation work, providing key wartime dates, testimonial sources, as well as history of the block's renovations between 1960-2007, mentions five accounts. The "Chronicles of Terror" database also holds the testimony of Jan Pilecki, who worked as a clerk (*Blockschreiber*) in block 11. Najwyższy Trybunał Narodowy, "Protokoł Jan Pilecki," August 28, 1947, *Chronicles of Terror Database*, the Pilecki Institute, accessed December 4, 2022, <https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/3373/edition/3354>. It is unclear whether Wóycicki was aware of any of these when he wrote the description of the block, but it seems logical to assume he knew some of these people personally.

³⁰ Tadeusz Iwaszko, "Wspomnienia byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz jako źródło historyczne," paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of Martyrological Museums, April 7–9, 1976, *Zbiór: Referaty*, tom 24a, T. Iwaszko, 282 inw. 163082, *APMA-B*, Oświęcim, 179.

and many objects found on the terrain, to the frustration of Polish officials.³¹ Most of these items were never returned from Moscow. These gaps, combined with the ideological slant of surviving records, severely limited the museum's ability to construct a comprehensive and authoritative narrative.

In response, the museum began developing its own scientific and investigative capacities. In preparation for the establishment of the museum, the State Commission of Martyrology and Monuments asked former prisoners to come forth and help fill the documentary gaps. "Let each person describe, even with clumsy words, the most difficult and most interesting moments of their personal experiences," they pleaded in a letter they sent survivors, "providing, if possible, names, prisoner numbers, and dates of noteworthy events." However, aware of the subjective dimension of such accounts, they also asked that those who come forth "describe only what they personally lived through or witnessed themselves."³²

After opening its permanent exhibition, the museum identified the creation of its own archive as its most important task.³³ Already in 1947, a Documentation Unit operated in Kraków under the Kraków District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes. In 1949, it was transferred to the camp's neighboring town of Oświęcim.³⁴ Soon after, former prisoners and museum staff Tadeusz Szymański and Jerzy Brandhuber began expanding the collection.³⁵ Documentation efforts were halted during the site's intense politicization period, between 1950 and 1955. Other than the state overhauling of exhibitions, the Central Committee of the PZPR appointed a Verification Commission which led to dismissal of "un-Marxist" staff members and

³¹ For example, 7000 kg of human hair. Zawodna, "Wokół tego, co pozostało," 75–76.

³² Ludwik Rajewski and Stefan Haupe, "Apel do b. więźniów politycznych w sprawie Muzeum w Oświęcimiu," 1947, *Materiały*, tom 56, *APMA-B*, 17.

³³ Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ "Relacja Tadeusz Szymański," November 7, 1975, Ośw./SZYMAŃSKI/?, *APMA-B*, 64.

a substantial budget cut.³⁶ It was only in 1955, after Destalinization, that survivors were reinstated as museum employees and the PZPR allocated funding for establishing both an Archival Department and a Research-Scientific Department.³⁷ Chief Archivist Tasuedz Iwaszko led the renewed efforts to acquire official SS and prisoner documentation (including correspondence), legal records, and postwar investigative reports, while also actively collecting survivor accounts. Initially, prisoner accounts took the form of short affidavits (*oświadczenia*) intended to establish facts and compensate for lost or skewed documentation. Staff compared statements to the available historical document to check credibility, and if this was impossible, cross-checked multiple witness statements to verify consistency.³⁸ Over time, the museum also began collecting fuller recollections (*wspomnienia*) with a more personal tone. Standardized questionnaires were developed, and interviews were eventually recorded as well as transcribed. Some accounts were gathered from survivors visiting the site; others were solicited directly by researchers, often using snowball methods to identify additional witnesses connected to particular events or spaces.³⁹ Beginning in the 1960s, the museum announced annual literary competitions soliciting survivor memoirs, publicized both nationally and internationally by survivor organizations like the International Auschwitz Committee or the state-sanctioned survivor organization ZBoWiD.⁴⁰ By 1976, the museum archives possessed 2000 short factual

³⁶ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 99–100.

³⁷ Huener, 142–43; Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 10.

³⁸ Irena Strzelecka, "Relacje byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz oraz innych świadków wydarzeń jako źródło pomocnicze w pracy naukowo-badawczej," paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of Martyrological Museums, April 9, 1976, *Referaty*, tom 24a, Ref./Strzelecka, 290 inw. 163090, *APMA-B*, 217.

³⁹ Interview with Szymon Kowalski, Deputy Director of the Archives, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, October 15, 2021.

⁴⁰ Collection attempts had various degrees of success. The international efforts especially were deemed a failure, the reasons for which Iwaszko does not specify. Tadeusz Iwaszko, "Wspomnienia byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz jako źródło historyczne," paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of Martyrological Museums, April 9, 1976, *Referaty*, tom 24a, T. Iwaszko, 282 inw. 163082, *APMA-B*, 181.

statements (*oświadczenia*) and 702 longer, more personal accounts (*wspomnienia*).⁴¹ Reflecting on two decades of the Archival Department's activity, Iwaszko summarized the value of such accounts. Beyond serving as primary sources used by historians for reconstructing events, memoirs enjoyed an "enormous demand" among visitors. Guides reportedly drew on these accounts during tours, incorporating survivor testimony into the site's educational framework.⁴²

In 1957, the Research-Scientific Department began publishing a scientific journal. The early volumes of *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* (*Auschwitz Studies*, 1957–1965) reflected the museum's broader mission to establish and defend the historical record of Auschwitz through rigorous documentation, survivor testimony, and forensic evidence. Each issue combined reproductions of original SS documents and postwar legal records, in addition to the accounts of former prisoners collected by the archives, who contributed both personal recollections and institutional knowledge. Many articles focused on specific spaces within and outside the main camp—such as Block 11, the penal company, the hospital, or various subcamps⁴³—and examined the bureaucratic machinery of slave labor, punishment, medical experimentation, and extermination. The journal also serialized Danuta Czech's *Kalendarium*, a chronological reconstruction of camp events grounded in archival sources and eyewitness accounts. Framed by the legal expertise of figures like Jan Sehn—a Kraków-based investigating judge and leading prosecutor of Nazi crimes in Poland—and translated into German, Russian, and French, *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie* positioned the museum as an expert authority with an international scholarly reach. Its early issues functioned not only as historical publications but also as acts of memorial and juridical

⁴¹ Iwaszko, "Wspomnienia byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz jako źródło historyczne," 173; Strzelecka, "Relacje byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz oraz innych świadków wydarzeń jako źródło pomocnicze w pracy naukowo-badawczej," 218.

⁴² Iwaszko, "Wspomnienia byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz jako źródło historyczne," 180.

⁴³ Witness testimonies proved especially important for issues 9 through 17 of *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*, which detailed the histories of Auschwitz-Birkenau's subcamps. Strzelecka, "Relacje byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz oraz innych świadków wydarzeń jako źródło pomocnicze w pracy naukowo-badawczej," 219.

intervention, offering accounts of prisoners who escaped, resisted, or perished, reporting on compensation for victims, and publicizing legal efforts to prosecute Nazi crimes.⁴⁴

After completing this first phase of institution-building, PMO-B began shifting attention to the conservation of landscapes and structures not used for exhibitions. Yet it was only in the mid-1950s, after the control of the museum returned to survivors, that it began seriously addressing the complex conservation issues of the vast site. Funds were secured in 1959, and extensive conservation efforts followed between 1960 and 1964.⁴⁵

The development of on-site conservation required new forms of documentation. Unlike the archival department, which focused on testimonies and written records, conservation relied on the physical landscape, architectural remnants, and surviving construction plans. As museum director Kazimierz Smoleń later explained, “As far as methodological principles are concerned, strict conservation guidelines are followed, i.e., the planning of renovations and reconstructions of existing authentic buildings or the supplementation of untreated buildings is carried out according to authentic plans and surviving structural elements.”⁴⁶ Here, the language of authenticity was applied through a technical conservation lens, stressing the high standards of professional methodology. Although these methods posed technical challenges, they also introduced a new mode of authentication—one grounded in the epistemologies of monument preservation.

⁴⁴ "Zestawienie Zawartości „Zeszytów Oświęcimskich” Od Numer 1 Do Numeru 25," Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, accessed April 16, 2025, https://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/inne/zo_spis_tresci.pdf.

⁴⁵ Tadeusz Kinowski and Kazimierz Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny prac konserwatorskich Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka na lata 1958–59," study, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 1957, Kon III/01/02, *ADK PMA-B*; Tadeusz Kinowski, "Zadania Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu w zakresie konserwacji, remontów i inwestycji w odniesieniu do obiektów i terenu na lata 1963–1966," October 20, 1962, *Zbiór: Opracowania*, tom 23, Kinowski/93, *APMA-B*.

⁴⁶ Kazimierz Smoleń, "Biuletyn wewnątrz nr 3/61," February 27, 1961, *Zbiór Materiały/Biuletyn wewnątrz 1961/2*, *APMA-B*.

At the heart of the museum's institutional logic was the transformation of Auschwitz from a site of destruction into a document of destruction—a material and spatial record whose evidentiary status did not merely support historical interpretation but constituted the very basis of the museum's authority and function. Repeatedly described in official documents as a historical “document,” the site itself was understood to bear witness through its terrain, structures, and collected records.⁴⁷ The anxiety provoked by the loss, manipulation, or absence of official documentation—compounded by fear of denial and distortion—made the act of documentation especially urgent. Through this work, the museum gradually transformed the site itself into an authoritative historical document to be read, deciphered, and compiled into a narrative.

Despite the 1947 legal proclamation that the museum would serve as a monument not only to Polish but international martyrdom, early documentation was shaped by local networks and the predominance of Polish political prisoners, many of whom had personal or professional ties to the museum.⁴⁸ While Jewish institutions like the Jewish Historical Institute focused more directly on collecting Jewish survivor accounts, PMO-B collected far fewer. Compounding this was the fact that many Jewish victims of Auschwitz were never registered as prisoners, making their experiences far more difficult to trace through official records. The history of Roma and Sinti prisoners was even harder to reconstruct—no institution took up their documentation systematically until the 1960s, and the surviving community was small, scattered, and deeply stigmatized.⁴⁹ As a result, early documentation efforts, though grounded in a forensic ethic, overwhelmingly reflected the experiences and suffering of Polish political prisoners—leaving the

⁴⁷ Historical Commission, "Odpis," 1946–1947, *Materialy*, tom 56, *APMA-B*, 7–15; Rajewski and Haupe, "Apel do b. więźniów politycznych," *APMA-B*, 1; Szymański, "I Had to See Whether I Could Cope with Working at This Place...", *Pro Memoria* 7, July 1997, 43–45.

⁴⁸ Iwaszko, "Wspomnienia byłych więźniów KL Auschwitz jako źródło historyczne," 183.

⁴⁹ Ari Joskowicz, *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 17–19.

stories of Jews, Sinti & Roma, and political prisoners of non-Polish origins largely underrepresented in the museum's documentation efforts.

The museum's adoption of authenticating practices gradually conferred on it the authority to speak not only as a custodian of memory, but as an expert on the crimes committed at Auschwitz. While it had initially relied on state forensic investigations to validate its materials, by the mid-1960s, that relationship had reversed: criminal investigations now turned to the museum for expertise. During the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, which prosecuted former SS personnel from the camp, the museum maintained close ties with West German legal authorities. In December 1964, a delegation from the Frankfurt court—including Judge Walter Hotz, three public prosecutors, four private prosecutors, defense attorneys, and court officials—visited the museum to examine the site in person.⁵⁰ Museum director Kazimierz Smoleń and other staff members guided the inspection and offered explanations, while measurements and observations conducted during the visit confirmed the accuracy of prosecution witness testimonies and refuted defense claims. Prosecutor Grossmann told journalists that although the court had studied Auschwitz for years, the full scale of the crimes had not been understood until the site inspection revealed their extent.⁵¹

Museum staff members also served as expert witnesses in SS trials. Danuta Czech, a senior researcher and author of the museum's chronological *Kalendarium*, served as an expert witness at the Frankfurt trial in 1965, the Bielefeld trial in 1966–67, and the Białystok Gestapo

⁵⁰ Kazimierz Smoleń, "Biuletyn wewnętrzny nr 1/65," January 7, 1965, *Zbiór: Materiały, Biuletyn wewnętrzny 1963/64/65, APMA-B*, 88. Quoted: „przybyli sędzia Walter Hotz, trzech oskarżycieli publicznych, czterech oskarżycieli prywatnych, obrońcy i grupa urzędników sądowych, aby na miejscu skonfrontować z materialną rzeczywistością zeznania około 260 świadków i samych oskarżonych.”

⁵¹ Franciszek Piper, "Wykorzystanie działalności naukowo-publicystycznej w przygotowaniu i przebiegu procesów przeciwko SS-manom, członkom dawnej załogi KL Auschwitz," paper presented at the 2nd International Conference of Martyrological Museums, April 7–9, 1976, *Referaty*, tom 24a, Piper/286, inw. 163086, *APMA-B*, 198.

trial in 1967.⁵² The museum provided West German prosecutors with microfilm copies of thousands of key documents, detailed site maps, and extensive historical research to support the proceedings.⁵³ Despite this meticulous work, the court's verdict diverged markedly from the prosecution's demands: only six of the twenty two accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, and several others received light sentences of just a few years.⁵⁴ In this context, the museum's evidentiary contributions took on additional meaning. As Piper notes, in the face of a legal system that frequently failed to deliver proportional justice, the documentation and scholarly publication of Nazi crimes served as a form of moral restitution, preserving the memory of victims and offering a potential warning to future generations.⁵⁵ The museum's position as custodian of evidence and interpreter of the historical record had, by this point, become central to its institutional identity, and to the broader judicial and memorial work of postwar Europe.

These authenticating practices—rooted in forensic evidence, testimonial corroboration, and material conservation—formed one axis of the museum's commemorative authority. But they were not sufficient. As early exhibitions developed and visitors arrived in growing numbers, the museum increasingly engaged a second mode of authority: authenticating the past—shaping experiences, spaces, and symbols that could emotionally and morally convey the truth of Auschwitz. Together, these dual processes—authentication through evidentiary verification, and authentication through affective staging—produced the historical and experiential authenticity that came to define the site.

⁵² Kazimierz Smoleń, "Biuletyn wewnętrzny nr 10/66," November 11, 1966, *Biuletyn wewnętrzny 1966/67/68, APMA-B*, 39–42; Piper, "Wykorzystanie działalności naukowo-publicystycznej," 197.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

Authenticating Experience

Beyond the work of authentication, the museum also engaged in what I earlier defined as *authentication*: the interpretive and affective staging of historical materials to generate a sense of truth through experience. These practices, employed through spatial design, narrative form, and symbolic framing, did not verify the past so much as make it felt, morally resonant, and institutionally credible.

At the PMO-B, exhibition design worked to produce a sense of truth, generate affect, and stage historical presence.⁵⁶ Visitors were not only informed about the past but were made to feel its reality through immersive curatorial strategies embedded within original camp structures. These practices extended beyond the display of evidence: they sought to stage history as lived experience. In doing so, the museum's emerging evidentiary authority became inseparable from its spatial and affective logic, shaping what visitors learned and experienced, and in turn, the historical consciousness and political message of the represented events.⁵⁷

Preparations for the museum's permanent exhibition began in early 1946, when MKiS appointed an Historical Commission comprised mostly of former prisoners employed at the new museum.⁵⁸ That September, the Commission submitted an initial proposal for the exhibition's layout, followed in February 1947 by a more detailed scenario.⁵⁹ Their vision paired documentation with architectural space to generate what they called "a vivid visual

⁵⁶ Sabrow and Saupe, *Historische Authentizität*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁸ The members of the commission were: Jan Sehn (Judge and Chairman of the Kraków District Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland); Stanisław Kłodziński (physician, former prisoner, museum staff member), Tadeusz Wąsowicz (former prisoner, Museum Director), Wincenty Hein (lawyer, former prisoner, museum staff member); Agatsztajn (no first name mentioned in the documents; Chairman, Kraków Jewish Historical Commission); Alfred Wóycicki (playwriter, former prisoner, museum staff member), Kazimierz Smoleń (former prisoner, museum staff member, the museum's second director beginning in 1955), Tadeusz Hołuj (poet, politician, and social activist, former prisoner, museum staff member); Professor Piwarski (PZPR party member) "Informacja Dla Wydziału Propagandy o Państwowym Muzeum w Oświęcimiu i Brzezince," November 14, 1949, 1354/0/1.18.1/237/XVIII/81, *AAN*, 68.

⁵⁹ Lachendro, "Designing the Museum," In *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*.

representation set against a historical backdrop.”⁶⁰ Visually striking exhibitions were to be situated within original camp structures, lending credibility to the narrative. This “vividness,” however, was never to lapse into spectacle. The Commission insisted that the museum must “avoid sensationalism or macabre depictions, yet [...] still clearly present evidence of the truth.”⁶¹ Except for the five-year period of Stalinist intervention between 1950 and 1955, these principles endured throughout the exhibition’s evolution.

In its exhibition planning documents, the Commission drafted a foundational historical narrative that traced the camp’s origins to German imperialism and cultural domination, locating Auschwitz within a broader trajectory of militarism and colonial aspirations. This trajectory culminated in the Nazi rise to power, the occupation of Poland, and the establishment of Auschwitz as a site of persecution, extermination, and forced labor, ending with the Allies’ installment of (fraught) European peace arrangements. In early 1946, Commission member and former political prisoner Wincenty Hein succinctly encapsulated the desired historical takeaway. The museum was “to portray the constant and unchanging nature of German ideology,” illustrated through examples of “power and aggression,” but also highlighting “moments of endurance and victorious resistance.”⁶² In this narrative, Auschwitz was presented not as an isolated anomaly, but as the culmination of centuries of German ideological development.

The camp’s history was divided into two phases: first, from 1940 to the end of 1942, during which Polish political prisoners were “biologically exterminated” through starvation, forced labor, and brutal punishments; and second, from mid-1942 until late 1944, when the

⁶⁰ Wincenty Hein, "Projekt ramowy Muzeum Państwowe w Oświęcimiu," 1946–1947, *Materiały*, tom 56, *APMA-B*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

systematic extermination of Jews reached industrial scale.⁶³ While the Commission acknowledged the intensified lethality of the second phase, it insisted that the museum's message reflect international victimhood, giving equal weight to Jewish and Polish experiences. They proposed collaboration with the Central Jewish Commission in Łódź but also asserted that Jewish victims be solely represented within the designated national exhibitions of their countries of origin.⁶⁴ As Huener notes, this logic marked early postwar Polish commemoration, which allowed for Jewish perspectives only within a broader narrative of international antifascist struggle and Polish political martyrdom.⁶⁵

The exhibition's spatial layout flowed out of and reinforced this narrative arc. Visitors were to enter through the infamous "Arbeit macht Frei" camp gate and proceed to Block 15, "Germany and Poland," which offered a *longue durée* view of German militarism.⁶⁶ Blocks 16–18 portrayed the life of the registered prisoner: forced labor, punishment, and daily survival. As the Commission described it, these blocks would depict "the entire life of the prisoner" and demonstrate how Auschwitz functioned as a labor colony that masked the extermination activities at nearby Birkenau.⁶⁷ The route then turned to Blocks 4–6, which focused on those not registered—chiefly Jews—whose belongings and traces were used to convey the scale and industrial logic of extermination. Block 7 highlighted resistance efforts, and Blocks 8–11 preserved original spaces where punishment, execution, and medical experimentation occurred.⁶⁸

⁶³ Historical Commission, "Odpis," *APMA-B*, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9; The museum's original spatial plan included national pavilions, located in former prisoner blocks at Auschwitz I, for each country whose citizens were imprisoned in the camp. The choice reflected the site's early internationalization. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 93.

⁶⁵ Huener, 77–78.

⁶⁶ Historical Commission, "Odpis," *APMA-B*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

Crucially, the narrative was embedded within the architecture of the former camp itself. Former prisoner blocks did not simply contain the exhibitions—they shaped the visitor’s experience by embedding narrative within place. The same blocks that had confined prisoners during the war now functioned as exhibition “shells,” their preserved architecture enhancing the evidentiary power of the display. They thus became immersive and experiential environments. While the exhibition that opened in June 1947 was initially limited in scope (Blocks 4–6 and 8–11), it already reflected the museum’s emerging strategy of using spatial authenticity coupled with the evidentiary power of documents to produce historical truth.⁶⁹ Even in its initial limited spatial organization, the museum had begun to articulate a coherent commemorative vision shaped by the input of former prisoners: one that used original structures, documentary evidence, and material remnants to convey a feeling of the history of the camp.

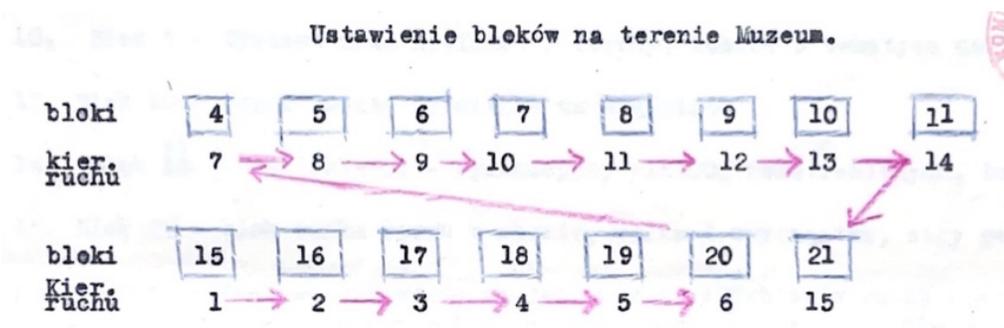


Figure 4. Draft of visitor circulation from the museum’s report to the PZPR Central Committee, dated November 21, 1949. In the earlier plan from 1946-1947, blocks 18-21 were not yet incorporated into the scheme. In this later plan, block 21 was dedicated to the topic of camp resistance, ending the exhibition on a somewhat more hopeful note. Source: 1354/1.18.1/237/XVIII/81, AAN, 68.

The exhibition’s further development was soon interrupted. Beginning in 1949, the PZPR and ZBoWiD imposed ideological control over the site.⁷⁰ Budgets were cut, Jewish victimhood was de-emphasized, the language of German responsibility replaced with references to

⁶⁹ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 73.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

international fascism, and the museum's original framework was all but erased.⁷¹ By 1953, the museum was both ideologically hollow and physically deteriorating.⁷² A turning point came after Stalin's death in 1952 and the subsequent Thaw, with the relaxation of cultural politics throughout Poland. In 1954, the MKiS and the PZPR initiated a full institutional overhaul of the museum. Directed by former prisoner and the museum's new director, Kazimierz Smoleń, the new exhibition resurrected the framework set out in 1947, with less stringent (though still pronounced) ideological oversight.⁷³

In returning to the vision outlined by former prisoners in 1946–47, the 1955 exhibition restored the museum's commitment to spatial and evidentiary authority.⁷⁴ Yet within this renewed framework, key differences emerged in the commemorative treatment of distinct victim groups. This contrast was clearest in Blocks 4–5 and Block 11—spaces dedicated respectively to Jewish and Polish political martyrdom. Both were essential to the narrative and moral architecture of Auschwitz I, yet their curatorial logic was divergent: one was built around displaced, overwhelming material presence, framed as “evidence” of crimes against humanity; the other around reverent spatial understatement, in which Polish political prisoners and the resistance movement were heroized and sanctified.

In both the original 1946–47 plan and the 1955 permanent exhibition, Blocks 4–6 were designated to confront visitors with the industrial scale of the Nazi killing enterprise, primarily targeting Jews. The logic and structure of these blocks remained broadly consistent across both versions. As Huener observes, these blocks effectively “transported an important aspect of the ‘Birkenau experience’ to an exhibition hall in Auschwitz I,” reinforcing the base camp's

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 99–101.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 103–4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 107–9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

centrality as the primary site of remembrance.⁷⁵ The Historical Commission's original design articulated the core aesthetic and didactic principles: the exhibitions should present evidence while avoiding sensationalism. At the same time, the Commission acknowledged the emotional weight of this section, noting that "Block 4 may be the most horrifying in its impact because of the task it receives—to depict the extermination of four million people"⁷⁶ That representational force was to serve a broader moral purpose: "to make the visiting public aware of the way in which an action by one nation against another can be carried out," a formulation described as a *crimen lese humanitatis*—a crime against humanity.⁷⁷

In the original plan and its eventual 1955 materialization, block 4, entitled "The Extermination of Millions," visualized the mechanics of mass killing through visual materials and artifacts, including architectural models, documents, Zyklon B canisters, and crematoria fragments.⁷⁸ In both early and later exhibitions, Blocks 5-6 were spaces of sensory shock and evidentiary accumulation, filled with confiscated belongings—shoes, razors, brushes, prosthetics, clothing, human hair—collected from the so-called "Kanada" warehouses. Here, little textual interpretation was provided. The curators relied instead on the mass of objects themselves to convey meaning, presented as irrefutable proof of the crime through their sheer number and familiarity.⁷⁹ The affective power of these artifacts created a strong sense of presence and loss.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁶ Historical Commission, "Odpis," *APMA-B*, 13. 4 million was the assumed number of victims during the communist era.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁸ Historical Commission, "Odpis," *APMA-B*, 13; Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 123–25.

⁷⁹ Historical Commission, "Odpis," *APMA-B*, 13–14; Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 127–28.



Figure 5. Block 4, “Extermination of Millions.” Piles of Zyklon B cannisters. Source: Jacek Lachendro, “The First Exhibition: 1947,” In: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, [Online lesson](#), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.



Figure 6. Block 4, “Extermination of Millions.” Hair of women murdered in the gas chambers.
Source: Jacek Lachendro, “The First Exhibition: 1947,” In: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, [Online lesson](#), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.



Figure 7. Block 5, "Evidence of Mass Extermination." Entrance. Source: Jacek Lachendro, "The First Exhibition: 1947," In: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, [Online lesson](#), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.



Figure 8. Block 5, "Evidence of Mass Extermination." Jewish prayer shawls. Source: Jacek Lachendro, "The First Exhibition: 1947," In: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, [Online lesson](#), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.



Figure 9. Entrance to block 11, “Death Block.” Source: Jacek Lachendro, “The First Exhibition: 1947,” In: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, [Online lesson](#), Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

In 1947, block 4 also held a small Jewish commemorative space, designed by the Central Committee of Jews In Poland,⁸⁰ which was removed during the communist overhaul and was not returned in the 1955 exhibition.⁸¹ Huener argues that the later exhibition failed to fully represent the systematic nature of the Shoah: it named Jews as victims, but did not trace their persecution as a targeted, racialized process culminating in genocide. Nor did it situate their destruction within a broader trajectory of dispossession and anti-Jewish policy.⁸² His argument, however, relies on textual analysis. While explanation of the particular historical circumstances of Jewish persecution is indispensable for knowledge acquisition about the Shoah, it did not necessarily facilitate empathy and understanding. The absence of explanatory framing did not mean absence

⁸⁰ Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 172.

⁸¹ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 100.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 125.

of Jewish presence. The overwhelming presence of the victims' possessions—many of them clearly Jewish in origin—was neither subtle nor deniable to contemporary visitors. As Huener himself concedes, these blocks communicated “the experience of the unregistered prisoner” and used everyday objects to create affective proximity with the victims.⁸³ Against the backdrop of political censorship of Jewish victimhood, the belongings themselves indivertibly bore witness to the ancestry of their owners. Moreover, while the original plan had placed the blocks dedicated to the registered prisoner (Blocks 16–18) before those addressing extermination, the 1955 layout reversed this order, guiding visitors from ideological framing in Block 15 directly into the visual testimony of mass murder—thus giving it primacy.⁸⁴

While Blocks 4–6 represented mass extermination through material excess and didactic display, Block 11 followed a wholly different curatorial grammar. It was the most fully preserved space in the museum and the clearest embodiment of reverent minimalism. In contrast to the displaced, overwhelming accumulation of Jewish belongings, Block 11 was to remain untouched—its spatial arrangement and original furnishings retained with minimal interpretive framing. As Alfred Wóycicki, the author of its first exhibition plan, explained, “Block 11 should be associated entirely with the facts which transpired there.”⁸⁵ This deviation from the museum's otherwise thematic organization was intentional: restoration itself was framed as a gesture of reverence and sanctity.

Wóycicki, a playwright by vocation, was deeply attuned to the evocative power of setting and scene. Yet he insisted that Block 11 should reject spectacle and favor suggestive realism. He cited Buchenwald's post-liberation “panopticon”—where corpses were arranged to shock foreign

⁸³ Ibid., 128–29.

⁸⁴ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 124; Historical Commission, “Odpis,” *APMA-B*, 10–14.

⁸⁵ Alfred Wóycicki, “Projekt bloku XI Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu,” n.d., A011/03/01, *ADK PMA-B*, 1–2.

visitors—as an example of what Auschwitz should *not* emulate.⁸⁶ Portraying the Americans as distasteful, his opposition to macabre staged scenes in the American occupation zone reads as a political wink to the Polish communist authorities, though he forgets to mention former Buchenwald inmates themselves staged these scenes for outside spectators. Against this Cold War backdrop, the Polish museum was to offer a space in which “the proof will be the lack of elements that tear the nerves, shake the terror, excite the imagination.”⁸⁷ The 1955 exhibition followed this logic, and situated a careful arrangement of artifacts to quietly assist memory: inside the reconstructed penal block, blankets were laid on the concrete floor to recall the site’s postwar use as a temporary morgue; above them hung a photograph of corpses wrapped in similar textiles.⁸⁸ In the SS guardroom at the entrance, visitors encountered the original prisoner allocation board, alongside a beating cane, a death book, a phone, and lists of names clipped to the desk.⁸⁹ These objects were not staged, but returned to the place where they had once functioned.

⁸⁶ Wóycicki, "Projekt bloku XI Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu," *ADK PMA-B*, 2; Volkhard Knigge, "Buchenwald," in *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge: KZ-Relikte und KZ-Denkmäler 1945–1995*, ed. Detlef Hoffmann, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus Verlag, 1998), 96–97.

⁸⁷ Wóycicki, "Projekt bloku XI," *ADK PMA-B*, 2.

⁸⁸ "IKONOGRAFIA A-11," *ADK PMA-B*, 36.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

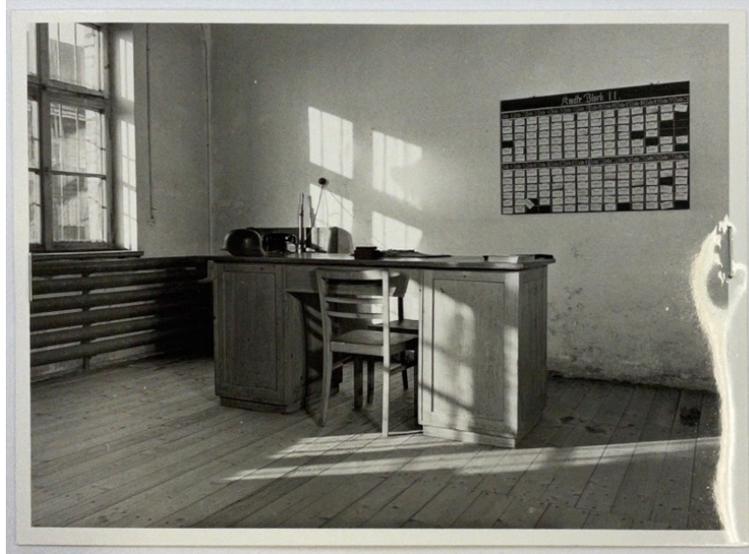


Figure 10. SS Guard Room, block 11. 1972. Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.
Source: "IKONOGRAFIA A-11," A011/02/01, ADK PMA-B.

The 1955 exhibition also retained Wóycicki's original commemorative logic. As Huener notes, Block 11 was a "votive sanctuary," a site of "reverence and devotion, but also a place of suffering, drama, sacrifice, and even sainthood."⁹⁰ Wóycicki's early vision had already framed the space as a secular shrine: a place where visitors, like "pilgrims," would bow their heads in solemn recognition of those who perished. He referred to the block as a sanctuary (*rezerwat*) and a mausoleum, a designation that in postwar Poland took on a specific commemorative function.⁹¹ Mausoleums were not only symbolic graves for the unburied but sites where the dead—especially resistance fighters and political martyrs—were reframed as national heroes and saints.⁹² Set against the victory over Nazism but the loss of the state to Soviet control, a culture of national martyrdom both alleviated the senseless death of millions of Polish citizens—and

⁹⁰ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 131.

⁹¹ Wóycicki, "Projekt bloku XI," *ADK PMA-B*, 2.

⁹² Joanna Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland*, trans. Simon Lewis, *Warsaw Studies in Contemporary History*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2015), 63, 162.

provided national solace for lost independence.⁹³ In this cultural context, Polish political prisoners were not just victims but saints of the nation. The commemorative function of Block 11 thus went beyond historical education: it offered a transcendent form of national meaning-making.

While the 1955 scenario emphasized acts of resistance and foregrounded Polish martyrs, it retained Wóycicki's language of solemn realism.⁹⁴ The significance of Block 11 was not expressed through imported materials or representational models, but through the gravity of the space itself. It was both a crime scene and a sacred national monument. However, as Huener points out, even though the exhibition emphasized resistance and heroism, the site itself acquired a broader, more popular symbolic power. The courtyard and the reconstructed Execution Wall became central locations for official wreath-laying and informal rituals alike, forming a commemorative space where a "diversity of victims" could be collectively mourned and symbolically unified in death.⁹⁵

Taken together, these early curatorial choices at Auschwitz I established the foundations of what would become one pillar of the museum's commemorative paradigm: the use of reconstructed spaces and material excess as instruments of knowledge production, affective encounter, and public mourning. Blocks 4–6 conveyed the horror of extermination through curated evidentiary abundance, while Block 11 relied on spatial reconstruction and solemnity to mark the gravity and sanctity of political martyrdom. This paradigm—rooted in presence, documentation, and deliberate design—stood in stark contrast to what would later emerge at Birkenau. There, the commemorative grammar of absence emerged, over time, as a byproduct of

⁹³ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 38–39.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

neglect, limited resources, and institutional marginalization. Birkenau's desolate expanses acquired an unplanned symbolic power, offering a counterpoint to Auschwitz I's didactic clarity with an aesthetics of emptiness, decay, and disappearance.

As the commemorative framework stabilized across the complex, museum staff began facing new challenges—how to conserve rapidly decaying structures, how to preserve the “real” without reconstructing it, and how to manage the tension between the material needs of the site and its symbolic meanings. The next section turns to these dilemmas, examining how the museum confronted the shifting demands of historical conservation.

Part II. Conservation as Commemoration: Material Challenges and Emerging Logics (1945-1957)

PMO-B was founded on an ambiguous legal premise. The 1947 Sejm resolution did not specify which structures, ruins, or landscapes should be conserved, or whether wartime destruction and postwar decay should be incorporated into the museum's design. In the absence of a coherent conservation framework, museum professionals were tasked with stabilizing a devastated site while also constructing the very categories by which preservation would be understood. What followed was not merely technical maintenance, but a series of interpretive and commemorative decisions that shaped how the site would be seen, felt, and understood by visitors.

Containing Memory: Tensions with the Surrounding Landscape

One of the earliest and most structurally ambiguous challenges the new museum faced was defining its physical scope. The 1947 Sejm resolution offered no precise delineation of what the preserved terrain should include.⁹⁶ Initially, the museum boundaries encompassed the entire

⁹⁶ Polski Sejm, *Ustawa o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa w Oświęcimiu* (1947).

SS so-called “zone of interest,” a vast area spanning approximately 1,700 hectares, which included Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and numerous auxiliary sites. When the memorial was officially inaugurated in 1947 this zone was reduced to 1343 hectares, by 1952 to 235 hectares, and by 1957 to 191 hectares, comprising only the terrain of Auschwitz I and Birkenau.⁹⁷ Notable and historically significant sites—such as the Rajsko experimental station⁹⁸ and the Monowitz labor camp complex, where tens of thousands of forced laborers perished⁹⁹—were excluded. The state’s spatial delimitation of the site marked the boundaries of the commemoration project, containing the physical bounds of commemoration within the most infamous sites—but these boundaries was shaped more by postwar practicalities than by coherent memorial logic.

These spatial reductions were deeply shaped by tensions between national remembrance and the imperatives of local reconstruction. Throughout the early postwar period, displaced residents, many of whom had been evacuated by the Germans during the war, sought to reclaim their homes, fields, and livelihoods.¹⁰⁰ The state’s failure to offer compensation or legal clarity turned the museum’s continued presence into a source of resentment. In 1950, a new statute regulating the museum’s structure acknowledged the need to resolve the issue through an official ordinance of the MKiS, to be enacted in coordination with the Council of Ministers. It also recognized the museum’s obligation to compensate property owners whose land had been subsumed into the protected terrain.¹⁰¹ But no such ordinance was issued for another seven

⁹⁷ Marek Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, trans. Anna Szadkowska (Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, 2014), 28.

⁹⁸ For more on this camp see Anna Zięba, “Podobóz Rajsko,” *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*, no. 9 (1965): 71–89.

⁹⁹ For more on this camp and the entire IG Farben complex see Piotr Setkiewicz, “Wybrane Problemy z Historii IG Werk Auschwitz,” *Zeszyty Oświęcimskie*, no. 22 (1998): 7–133.

¹⁰⁰ Marta Zawodna, “O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata: Sposoby postępowania ze szczątkami ludzkimi na terenach byłego KL Auschwitz-Birkenau od momentu ostatecznej ewakuacji obozu do powstania Muzeum,” *Zagłada Żydów; Studia i Materiały* 8 (2012): 167.

¹⁰¹ Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki, *Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Sztuki* (1950).

years.¹⁰² As of 1956, museum's director Kazimierz Smoleń lamented to state officials the consequences of this ongoing delay, noting that "prolonging the issue of establishing the boundaries of the museum for such a long time does not have a positive effect on the attitude of the population."¹⁰³

That "attitude" occasionally manifested in hostile actions. In the "Meksyko" sector of Birkenau, local villagers cut through fences to graze livestock on the grounds of the former camp.¹⁰⁴ The museum's Protection Unit toured the ground to prevent theft and looting. In one incident, a museum guard was shot at, his dog killed. While Smoleń condemned these violations, he also acknowledged their moral and material basis. "One has to understand the bitterly justified population," he wrote in a 1956 report, "to realize how difficult the role of the guard in this area is."¹⁰⁵ It was only in 1959 that the state initiated compensation for landowners in Brzezinka and Pławy, but the process was prolonged and created dissatisfaction.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, throughout the 1960s, though the museum had been granted custodianship over the terrain by the state, it had not yet secured the local consent that such authority required. The situation underscored the unresolved status of the terrain not only legally, but socially and symbolically.

This impasse prompted museum professionals to reimagine the museum's perimeter not only as a legal boundary but as a commemorative one. In the early 1960s, the museum initiated negotiations with the Department of Urban Construction and Architecture of the Voivodeship National Council to establish a "Protection Zone" around Auschwitz-Birkenau. The goal was to

¹⁰² Polski Sejm, *Rozporządzenie Ministra Kultury i Sztuki z dnia 9 grudnia 1957 r. w sprawie szczegółowego określenia granic terenów Pomnika Męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1958, no. 6, item 20, accessed July 28, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19580060020>.

¹⁰³ Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, 29.

prohibit new construction within the line of sight of the camp and to maintain the surrounding terrain as agricultural or meadowland, mirroring the vast open space experienced by prisoners during the war. The Protection Zone would preserve the sensory field of the site—its horizon lines, emptiness, and exposure—by regulating not just the memorial ground but its visual environment. The regulations on the Protection Zone affected neighboring villages such as Brzezinka and Pławy, whose ability to rebuild and modernize after years of wartime destruction was severely curtailed.¹⁰⁷

These boundary and buffer zone decisions were, in principle, extensions of the museum’s curatorial authority—a spatial expression of the moral obligation to preserve a landscape of atrocity. Yet they were also negotiated acts, shaped by local pressures, limited resources, and the politics of postwar reconstruction. While the museum sought to contain memory through landscape, its ability to do so was always partial, conditioned by shifting political pressures and the lived realities of local populations. In this way, the boundaries of commemoration—the line dividing memory from everyday life—were shaped as much by compromise as by design.

The Technical Terrain: Structures Not Meant to Last

The conservation challenge at Auschwitz-Birkenau was not only symbolic and political but deeply material. The camps were not built to last. Many of their structures were adapted, expanded, or hastily constructed under war conditions, and already suffered extensive wear and damage by the time museum professionals assumed responsibility for the terrain. In the years following liberation, rapid deterioration compounded the question of how, and whether, the original camp could be preserved “for all times.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 30–32.

Even Auschwitz I, with its seemingly solid brick architecture, proved vulnerable. Originally built as Polish army barracks in the early 20th century, it had been modified repeatedly by the SS to serve its new function as a concentration camp; floors were added and internal divisions altered during severe wartime scarcity of building materials.¹⁰⁸ Wartime overuse, overcrowding, and lack of proper maintenance had worn down infrastructure across the site.¹⁰⁹ Air raids in 1944 also damaged several buildings.¹¹⁰ When Soviet forces arrived in January 1945, they found a terrain marked by both violence and abandonment. Buildings were structurally fragile, and many roofs, windows, and internal fittings had already been destroyed or looted. These weaknesses only worsened after the war due to lack of basic maintenance. Damaged structures were left exposed to snow, rain, and drastic temperature shifts.¹¹¹ As early as 1956, Polish engineers inspecting Auschwitz I warned that some buildings posed a safety hazard for museum visitors, closing the kitchen building (whose state was marked “catastrophic”) for visitors.¹¹² The site’s apparent permanence was, in truth, brittle.

At Birkenau, the technical challenges were even greater. The camp had been established on marshy ground in 1941, and its barracks, both wooden and brick, were built in haste by malnourished Soviet POWs working without proper tools or training. Some of the prisoner housing consisted of wooden stables laid directly on soil, with no drainage or foundations.

¹⁰⁸ Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan van Pelt, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 174; Danuta Czech, “Origins of the Camp, Its Construction and Expansion,” in *Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka, 5th ed. (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012), 21–39.

¹⁰⁹ See description of poor living conditions, daily hygiene and sanitary conditions in Tadeusz Iwaszko, “The Daily Lives of Prisoners,” in *Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka, 5th ed. (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012), 71–76.

¹¹⁰ On the (probably accidental) bombing of Auschwitz I see Henryk Świebocki, “Disclosure and Denunciation of SS Crimes,” in *Auschwitz: Nazi Death Camp*, ed. Franciszek Piper and Teresa Świebocka, 5th ed. (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2012), 262–63.

¹¹¹ The extent of the destruction is textually described and documented in a series of illustrative photos in the museum’s first conservation plan. Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny,” 2, 21–42.

¹¹² Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny prac konserwatorskich Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka na lata 1958-59,” 18.

Flooding was common; sanitation was minimal; walls sagged under the weight of overcrowding; and floors eroded under the passage of tens of thousands of prisoners. The makeshift quality of construction was exacerbated by wartime overuse and the brutal conditions of these structures.¹¹³ By 1945, most wooden structures were already disintegrating. In the immediate postwar years, some were dismantled by the state for materials, while others simply collapsed. Even the brick buildings, such as those in the women's sector, suffered from foundational instability and persistent exposure to the elements.¹¹⁴

These realities posed immense difficulties for any long-term conservation strategy. Until 1950, the site had on its premises some workshops, active from the time of the camp. The men employed there developed some maintenance and conservation expertise through their work on the former camp terrain. The state even commissioned them for museum work at other sites in Poland.¹¹⁵ However, with the 1950 budget cuts, the museum was forced to close the workshops. In the absence of an on-site conservation team, the state of the grounds severely deteriorated.¹¹⁶ With no on-site maintenance team in place until 1962, much of the postwar effort focused on reactive interventions: patching roofs, reinforcing sagging walls, or barring access to unsafe interiors.¹¹⁷ Many original elements were already lost. The technical terrain of Auschwitz-Birkenau made the imperative to conserve especially fraught, calling into question what preservation could or should mean in such a context.

¹¹³ On the design, construction, and prisoners' experiences of Birkenau's barracks see Dwork and van Pelt, *Auschwitz*, 262–75.

¹¹⁴ Kinowski and Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny," 1–2, 35–41.

¹¹⁵ Adam Żłobincki, "I Have Photographs from That Time in an Album...," *Pro Memoria* 7 (1997): 69–70.

¹¹⁶ Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 11.

¹¹⁷ Kinowski, "Zadania Państwowego Muzeum," 31.



Figure 11. State of the camp kitchen at Auschwitz I, circa 1956. Note the tilted walls to the left, which needed to be reinforced with supporting beams from the outside. Even at Auschwitz I, where camp buildings were made of brick, wartime wear and tear left the structures in an advanced state of deterioration. Source: KonIII/01/02, ADK APMA-B



Figure 12. Floor in block 21, 1956. Mold and fungi ravaged the floor of Block 21 at Auschwitz I. Source: KonIII/01/02, ADK APMA-B.

Auschwitz I as a Site of Restorative Logic

At Auschwitz I, early decisions on spatial design and reconstruction were guided by a conservation logic grounded in restoring the camp's operational phase. Museum professionals oriented their work around two symbolic reference points: 1940, marking the camp's establishment, and summer 1944, when the SS began its liquidation. These dates shaped not only exhibition narratives but also small-scale restorative choices that defined the museum's commemorative priorities. Rather than reconstructing the camp wholesale, the early work reanimated key years through exhibition design, selective interventions, and ritual practice—articulating a restorative logic that served both evidentiary and ethical aims.

The earliest expression of this logic was the museum's decision to inaugurate the site on June 14, 1947—exactly seven years after the arrival of the first transport of Polish political prisoners. While those men are traditionally identified as the camp's first victims, the choice of this date also retroactively elevated their experience to foundational status, establishing a narrative ground zero. In practice, this anniversary helped foreground the centrality of Polish martyrdom in the museum's emerging commemorative paradigm.¹¹⁸ The choice of date thus encoded a specific temporal and national framework as foundational.

This logic was evident in the earliest exhibition plans drawn up by the Historical Commission in 1946–47. The blueprints envisioned a visitor path through the camp that would move chronologically and thematically, from the ideological roots of Nazism to the transformation of Auschwitz from a camp for Polish political prisoners into a center of mass extermination. To reinforce this progression, certain buildings were to be preserved as examples of particular years. For example, Block 8 was to retain its internal layout from 1940, and Block 9

¹¹⁸ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 47–48.

from 1944.¹¹⁹ Though the plan was ultimately abandoned due to space constraints and the eventual decision to house national exhibitions in these blocks, the proposal is telling. It was meant to show the worsening of camp conditions over time—from early political repression to overcrowded, lethal containment. Just as the ideological arc of the museum’s exhibition was structured around the evolution of Nazi brutality, so too was the physical space envisioned as a temporal palimpsest, with distinct years standing in for distinct phases of atrocity.

This emphasis on 1940–44 also carried deeper commemorative implications. In the museum’s 1957 conservation plan, chief conservator Tadeusz Kinowski and director Kazimierz Smoleń opened their report with a telling historical claim: that the Nazis had intended to implement “Plan Molla,” meant to destroy Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944, but were thwarted by the acts of the camp’s resistance movement and the Red Army.¹²⁰ “In this way,” they wrote, “the traces of the greatest crime in the world were preserved.”¹²¹ Communist tropes of resistance aside, this language articulated the site’s protection not only a technical task but a moral inversion of the Nazi project. To preserve the site as it existed at its peak functionality between 1940 and the fall of 1944 was to reverse the SS effort to erase evidence. In its essence, it was both a pedagogical and a moral act. This commemorative ethic also aligned with the postwar Polish state’s emphasis on antifascist resistance and the imperative to teach future generations about the dangers of Nazism. Moreover, the material condition of Auschwitz I, whose brick buildings and infrastructure remained largely intact after the war, lent itself to this logic of temporal restoration. Unlike the devastated terrain of Birkenau, Auschwitz I could be more

¹¹⁹ Rajewski and Haupe, “Apel do b. więźniów politycznych,” *APMA-B*, 1.

¹²⁰ After learning about the extent of Plan Molla, the Polish camp resistance movement smuggled its details to radio stations outside of Poland. Thanks to their efforts, the plan to liquidate all camp prisoners remaining at the camps was stopped. Franciszek Piper, “Akcja dyplomatyczna rządu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na uchodźstwie w celu ratowania przed zagładą więźniów KL Auschwitz w fazie likwidacji obozu w świetle akt brytyjskiego Ministerstwa Spraw Zagranicznych,” *Dzieje Najnowsze* 51, no. 3 (2019): 215-216.

¹²¹ Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny,” 4.

readily staged as a place of historical continuity and functional legibility—a site where the evidence of organized terror could be visibly reconstructed and didactically transmitted.

The same logic underpinned the decision to reconstruct key damaged buildings and sites. Such was the case with the reconstruction of the execution wall in Block 11 and the gallows at the roll call area. The most visible and controversial example of restoration, however, was the partial reconstruction of Crematorium I.¹²² Originally adapted from a prewar warehouse, the building had undergone several changes between 1940 and 1944. It was used for gassing and cremation until mid-1943, then repurposed for SS use and ultimately converted into an air raid shelter.¹²³ In 1947, museum staff reversed the changes made in mid-1943: they reconstructed two cremation furnaces and the original chimney, and reopened sealed entry points.¹²⁴ Though the building no longer functioned as a gas chamber by 1944, the museum opted to restore it to its most pedagogically powerful state: its 1942–43 function as a site of mass killing. The logic here was clear—1944 and earlier was the period worth restoring, while late war and post-liberation use was to be erased. The museum deliberately selected the period in which the structure had served its peak genocidal purpose—arguably its most historically consequential form—and elevated it as the object of restoration.

This curatorial practice of selecting and reconstructing specific historical moments served multiple purposes. It countered the Nazis' 1944 attempt to destroy evidence by visually asserting the machinery of murder. It also offered visitors a coherent, graspable narrative embedded in physical space. Auschwitz I thus became a site of deliberate presence, of recovered temporal

¹²² Julia Röttjer, "Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer Narrative in internationalen Kontexten: Das Staatliche Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau als UNESCO-Welterbe seit den 1970er Jahren," in *Re-konstruktionen: Stadt, Raum, Museum, Das Gemeinsame Kulturerbe – Wspólne Dziedzictwo* (Warszawa: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2019), 282.

¹²³ E. Dyjas, "Krematorium I," 2006, A049/01/04, *ADK PMA-B*, 1–4.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7. The reconstructions were initially done incorrectly. Röttjer, "Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer narrative," 282.

layers carefully chosen to tell a particular story. This approach was only possible due to the relative material stability of Auschwitz I's brick buildings, which could be more readily repaired than the deteriorated wooden structures of Birkenau or the detonated gas chambers. But it was also ideological. The selected temporal frames—1940 and 1944—aligned with the Polish martyrological narrative (1940, arrival of Polish political prisoners) and the camp's peak exterminatory function (1944). These became the moral and commemorative anchors of the museum. In doing so, the museum effectively established the restoration of wartime temporality through curatorial staging of exhibitions and partial structural reconstructions.

As the next section will show, at Birkenau, no such reference point was enacted—because it could not be. The camp's destruction, scale, and affective resonance rendered it a site where destruction itself became the primary historical testimony. Inaction, shaped by bureaucratic obstacles, unintentional neglect, and material limitations, gave rise instead to a logic of empty space and ruin left “as is.” At Birkenau, the absence of deliberate curatorial time-framing created a commemorative aesthetic rooted in ruination and loss.

Birkenau and the Emergence of Non-Intervention

If Auschwitz I came to symbolize the presence of evidence and the authority of historical reconstruction, Birkenau emerged as its inverse: a site marked by ruin, absence, and the impossibility of curatorial control. This contrast was not the result of a clearly formulated commemorative strategy, but rather the outgrowth of neglect, infrastructural collapse, and postwar indecision. In Birkenau, safeguarding the aesthetics of ruin was not initially a principle—it became one by default.

By the time the PMO-B was inaugurated in June 1947, much of Birkenau had already deteriorated beyond repair. In preparation for retreat from the camp, the SS had detonated the gas

chambers and crematoria, torched the Kanada warehouses where victims' possessions were stored, and dismantled Birkenau's new extension, the so-called "Meksyko" section. Between 1945 and 1947, additional degradation occurred. A state-commissioned construction company, with armed guards, dismantled nearly 200 wooden barracks for use in reconstruction projects; civilians removed timber for heating; and looters dug into the ground in search of gold and valuables, disturbing human remains in the process. With insufficient state intervention or enforcement capacity on the terrain, Birkenau slipped rapidly into a condition of abandonment.¹²⁵

The situation did not improve after the museum's inauguration. As Huener notes, during the early years of the museum, Birkenau was left largely untouched—without explanatory signage, marked paths, or curated interpretation. The site was marked above all by scenes of physical deterioration and a general lack of care. The entrance gate, railway tracks, some brick barracks, and the ruins of the crematoria remained, but most structures were gone. Few tourists made the trip from the main camp to Birkenau, located 3 kilometers away. The only monument was a sarcophagus containing ashes from all European concentration camps. For an uninformed visitor, the site revealed little of its history.¹²⁶

Despite this, Birkenau's physical decay began to solidify into a commemorative logic soon after the museum was inaugurated. In 1948, museum visitor Kazimierz Koźniewski published an opinion piece in *Przekrój* reflecting on his experience at the memorial. He argued that it was Birkenau—not the meticulously conserved Auschwitz I—that best communicated the horror of the Nazi camp system:

Museum requires conservation, and horror cannot be conserved. Let the other part of the Auschwitz camp serve as example: Most of the barracks in the infamous, horrifyingly

¹²⁵ Kinowski and Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny," 1–2.

¹²⁶ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 137–39.

extensive (175 ha) Birkenau ... were taken apart to be used for other purposes. The remaining handful stand today in the condition in which they were deserted in January 1945: they are dirty, traces of blood and squashed vermin can be seen on the walls. In three years, they have sunk more deeply into the ground, they are rotting and falling apart. Yet thanks to this they are still vested with THAT HORROR; you can imagine THAT TIME. Yet this will end soon. Either wind and rain will raze the barracks to the ground or special conservation will protect them against ruin, yet it will chase out the specter of the system.¹²⁷

For Koźniewski, the failure of the museum lay in its inability to preserve the *experience* of atrocity. In his view, it was precisely the aesthetics of decay—rotting walls, vermin traces, structures sinking into the ground—that preserved the “specter of the system.” Birkenau’s ruins embodied the ungraspable scale and violence of the site in ways that polished exhibitions could not. Any attempt to restore or conserve, he argued, would sanitize the terror and erase its haunting presence. While Koźniewski’s position faced strong opposition, especially from survivors committed to protecting the site’s physical integrity,¹²⁸ his reflections captured something essential: that absence, ruin, and neglect could themselves become affective forms of remembrance. Compared to Auschwitz I, whose rows of red-brick buildings and manicured paths lent it a sense of order and containment, Birkenau’s devastation evoked the enormity of violence in more visceral and disorienting ways. It was, for some, a space where the unconscionable could be felt rather than explained.

In the years that followed, Birkenau remained largely untouched—not by explicit design, but because of unresolved bureaucratic and material questions. In 1950, in response to the site’s visible decay, the Museum Statute proposed “the establishment and maintenance of a cemetery-park on the grounds designated for this purpose” but still left this designated area undefined.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Kazimierz Koźniewski, “Drażliwy Problem,” *Przekrój* no. 179 (September 19, 1948), 3. Translation cited in Jacek Lachendro, “Introduction,” in *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*.

¹²⁸ Lachendro, “Disputes in the press,” in: *Auschwitz Museum in the First Years of Its Operation*, online lesson, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, accessed April 1, 2025, http://lekcja.auschwitz.org/en_22_muzeum/.

¹²⁹ Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki, *Zarządzenie Ministra Kultury i Sztuki* (1950).

This linguistic ambiguity diverged from the 1946–47 museum vision, which called for preserving Birkenau in the state it was found after liberation, limiting cemetery functions to the crematoria and ash fields.¹³⁰ Similar proposals for cemetery-parks were considered and implemented at over camps transformed into memorial sites. In other postwar camp memorials such as Buchenwald or Flossenbürg, similar cemetery park plans emerged as pragmatic responses to crumbling landscapes and budget shortfalls. As Harold Marcuse has argued, these gestures substituted symbolic forms (heroic death, military aesthetics) for in-situ conservation.¹³¹ In this context, conserving ruins “as is” had not yet become the normative logic of genocide commemoration.

In the PRL, the politics of heroization aligned with the state’s interest in promoting resistance narratives and reducing the burden of material maintenance. To reconfigure Birkenau into a cemetery park while preserving Auschwitz I would have been a political act of erasure—reinforcing a commemorative hierarchy in which Polish martyrdom was central and Jewish genocide peripheral. Huener sees this hierarchy between victimhoods as a reflection of the museum’s orientation toward a Polish audience in the early years. Wóycicka, by contrast, attributes it more prosaic reasons, rejecting deliberate marginalization. As she demonstrates, the lack of development at Birkenau in the late 1940s was not for lack of proposals: between 1947 and 1952, a number of competing designs were submitted for the terrain—ranging from a park of reflection to a monumental “park of nations”—but they were consistently blocked or left unimplemented due to bureaucratic inertia, lack of funding, and political disputes between institutions, ultimately reinforcing the marginalization of the site despite the state’s declared

¹³⁰ Historical Commission, "Projekt ramowy Muzeum Państwowe w Oświęcimiu," 1946–1947, *Materiały*, tom 56, *APMA-B*, 9.

¹³¹ Harold Marcuse, “Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre,” *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 57–58.

commitment to preserving it.¹³² Both Huener and Wóycicka underplay the massive scale and fragile condition of Birkenau, which made any intervention technically and financially daunting. Attending to these material constraints is crucial: it reveals how the site's physical fragility shaped institutional choices as much as political frameworks or ideological narratives, underscoring the value of a materially-focused approach to understanding commemoration at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Even after the survivors regained control over the site in the mid-1950s, the state posed challenges. In 1956, Smoleń sent officials in Warsaw a detailed report on the entire scope of the museum's activities, in which he reiterated the urgent need for conservation funds. "This affair [conservation] is worse than catastrophic... Two years ago, the sauna building collapsed in front of visitors' eyes upon exiting the building... Fortunately, there was no accident. How could this state be allowed to happen? Who is responsible for these matters?"¹³³ The pleading director warned the authorities that in the absence of urgent care, the museum's board would be forced to pass a resolution to close the museum to visitors.¹³⁴

Eventually, the authorities agreed to allocate a substantial budget for conservation—though the available archival materials provide no clear explanation for this decision. In the museum's first conservation plan, dated to 1957, Smoleń continuously reiterated the legally binding nature of the 1947 resolution, which prohibited any changes to the original character of the site, and which he argued the state was compelled to honor. Citing the law, he unequivocally rejected the idea of converting Birkenau into a cemetery park.¹³⁵

¹³² Zofia Wóycicka, *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944-1950*, vol. 2, Warsaw Studies in Contemporary History (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Edition, 2013), 176–81.

¹³³ Smoleń, "Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum," 14.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³⁵ Kinowski and Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny," 4.

The 1957 conservation plan framed Birkenau's maintenance 'as is' in terms that echoed some of Koźniewski's reflections nearly a decade earlier. While the authors strongly opposed the idea of letting the terrain simply decay, they marked the aesthetics of ruin as evocative and consequential to the character of the site. Smoleń and Kinowski expressed to state officials in Warsaw that "The opinion of all visitors is almost unanimous. They think that Birkenau, with its sheer size and primitive living conditions, and above all, the ruins of the instruments of destruction, conveys the most shocking impression and gives a truthful image of that place."¹³⁶ The terrain's horror could not be taught through objects or exhibitions—it could only be felt. The proposal called for the site to remain barren, its vastness uninterrupted by construction or landscaping. No grass, no flowers, no beautification. The power of Birkenau lay in its sensory impact: the immensity of the terrain, the coldness of its ruins, the exposure to wind and sky. This choice suited the state, as it entailed—at least for now—lower maintenance costs.

Non-intervention, in this way, became a new curatorial mode—one that relied not on narrative reconstruction but on spatial affect. It arose not from a clearly articulated plan, but from the convergence of material conditions, budgetary constraints, and unresolved political disagreements. Over time, however, this lack of intervention acquired moral resonance. The ruined crematoria and collapsed barracks became the evidence. The void itself became legible as testimony. While Auschwitz I was built into a site of knowledge and vigilance, Birkenau became a landscape of mourning and ruin.

This divergence—between presence and absence, reconstruction and decay, curated temporality and unrepaired time—was foundational. It produced two commemorative paradigms within a single memorial institution. And while each was shaped by accident as much as

¹³⁶ Ibid., 4.

intention, together they came to structure how the Shoah would be visualized, taught, and remembered across much of the postwar world. The shift toward non-intervention at Birkenau was neither planned nor predetermined; it arose out of neglect and necessity, only later acquiring the ethical power which came to be associated with the aesthetics of ruin.

By the early 1960s, the museum's commemorative and conservation practices had become increasingly codified. At Auschwitz I, restorative logic continued to shape interventions, anchoring the site's evidentiary authority in reconstructed spaces and preserved artifacts. At Birkenau, by contrast, the aesthetic of non-intervention—initially born of abandonment and practical constraint—had evolved into an ethical imperative. This dual logic, formalized in internal conservation plans and reinforced by ongoing visitor response, positioned the museum at the forefront of a broader shift in historical preservation. As international principles of conservation began to coalesce—most notably in the 1964 Venice Charter—the museum's approach found resonance in emerging ideals of authenticity, which emphasized minimal intervention, respect for original materials, and the preservation of sites as historical documents in themselves. These convergences between national practice and international doctrine culminated in 1979, when Auschwitz-Birkenau was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The designation recognized the site not only for its historical significance, but as a symbol of universal human values and world peace in the age of the Cold War. The next, final section of this chapter examines how the museum's evolving conservation logic aligned with and helped shape these global frameworks for memory, authenticity, and moral responsibility.

Part III: The Emergence of Historical Authenticity: From Site Logic to Global Recognition Framing the Conservation Turn (1957–1959)

The 1957 conservation plan marked the PMO-B's first comprehensive attempt to articulate a long-term strategy for the preservation of the former camp.¹³⁷ Importantly, its impetus was the announcement made that year on the competition for the design of the International Monument for the Victims of Fascism, organized by the International Auschwitz Committee, and which was meant to be erected on the terrain of Birkenau.¹³⁸ Though systematic in scope and organization, the plan remained reactive in tone—born of mounting crisis rather than visionary clarity. It responded to the ongoing degradation of post-camp structures and the museum's limited ability to carry out its preservation responsibilities. Yet even within its reactive register, the plan introduced a more deliberate and structured approach to site maintenance, proposing guidelines that would become the foundation for future conservation policy.

Throughout the document, the museum presented itself as both a guardian of memory and a beleaguered institution, increasingly unable to fulfill its legal duties due to lack of support. The 1947 act was quoted directly to remind state authorities of their statutory obligations: “Although the total cost estimate for the conservation work is very significant—especially given the country's current economic situation—the Museum believes that the existing law cannot be disregarded.”¹³⁹ The plan's most urgent warnings appear in its final pages, where the authors insisted that “Extending the conservation work over a longer period or postponing it will increase the risk of collapse and force the closure of additional sectors to visitors, which may, in turn,

¹³⁷ Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny.”

¹³⁸ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 152.

¹³⁹ Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny,” 6.

result in the closure of the Museum altogether—something that must not be allowed to happen.”¹⁴⁰

Importantly, the plan did not treat the terrain as a uniform entity, but as a landscape of varying material conditions that required differentiated treatment. At Auschwitz I, creating legibility shaped selective rebuilding efforts. For example, although Block 26 had been burned by the SS during their retreat, the museum opted to reconstruct it to match the neighboring blocks—probably because its ruined state deemed too visually disruptive to the orderly layout of the main camp, especially given its visibility from Blocks 10 and 11.¹⁴¹ That said, it was marked as visually distinctive by bricking up the windows. While the destruction of the building might have served as a powerful index of Nazi evidence-erasure, its pedagogical potential was overridden by practical concerns: museum real estate was limited, and a restored structure could serve both symbolic and logistical functions.

The plan’s authors acknowledged that many structures, particularly in Birkenau, had already been dismantled, degraded, or left in advanced states of decay. For these areas, the museum sought to define new modes of conservation suited to a site already in ruins. It outlined strategies for stabilizing partially collapsed barracks, reinforcing crematoria ruins, and reconstructing symbolic elements such as guard towers “as models.”¹⁴² These reconstructions, the plan argued, were necessary in order for “repair of an integral feature characteristic of the camp’s surroundings.”¹⁴³ At the same time, full interiors were omitted to save on cost and “stop the dangerous process of wood theft” by the local population, a threat explicitly acknowledged

¹⁴⁰ Kinowski and Smoleń, “Plan perspektywiczny prac konserwatorskich na lata 1958-59,” 14.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 13.

by the authors in reference to the frequent looting of building materials.¹⁴⁴ In this light, the reconstructed guard towers at Birkenau—one of the few rebuilt elements at that site—reflected not only the motivation to restore a prominent feature of the site’s original landscape, but a desire to mask the troubling visibility of local destruction and reassert visual control over a terrain marked by postwar damage.

The proposed interventions reveal an emerging logic of pragmatic reconstruction that cut across both Auschwitz I and Birkenau. While later decades would draw clearer distinctions between presence and absence at the two sites, the 1957 plan responded to more immediate concerns: visual legibility, structural risk, reputational damage, and the pressures of material loss. Conservation was not yet a fully articulated ideology, but a tactic deployed unevenly, often defensively, to stabilize a site still vulnerable to both physical decay and political scrutiny. Even so, these proposals signaled a broader shift in conservation logic: from emergency improvisation to planning grounded in spatial diagnosis, functional differentiation, and a pragmatic assessment of what the site could still communicate. By distinguishing between what should be rebuilt, repaired, stabilized, or left untouched, the plan began to define a preservation ethic—one increasingly oriented toward material evidence and the visual legibility of destruction.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 12.

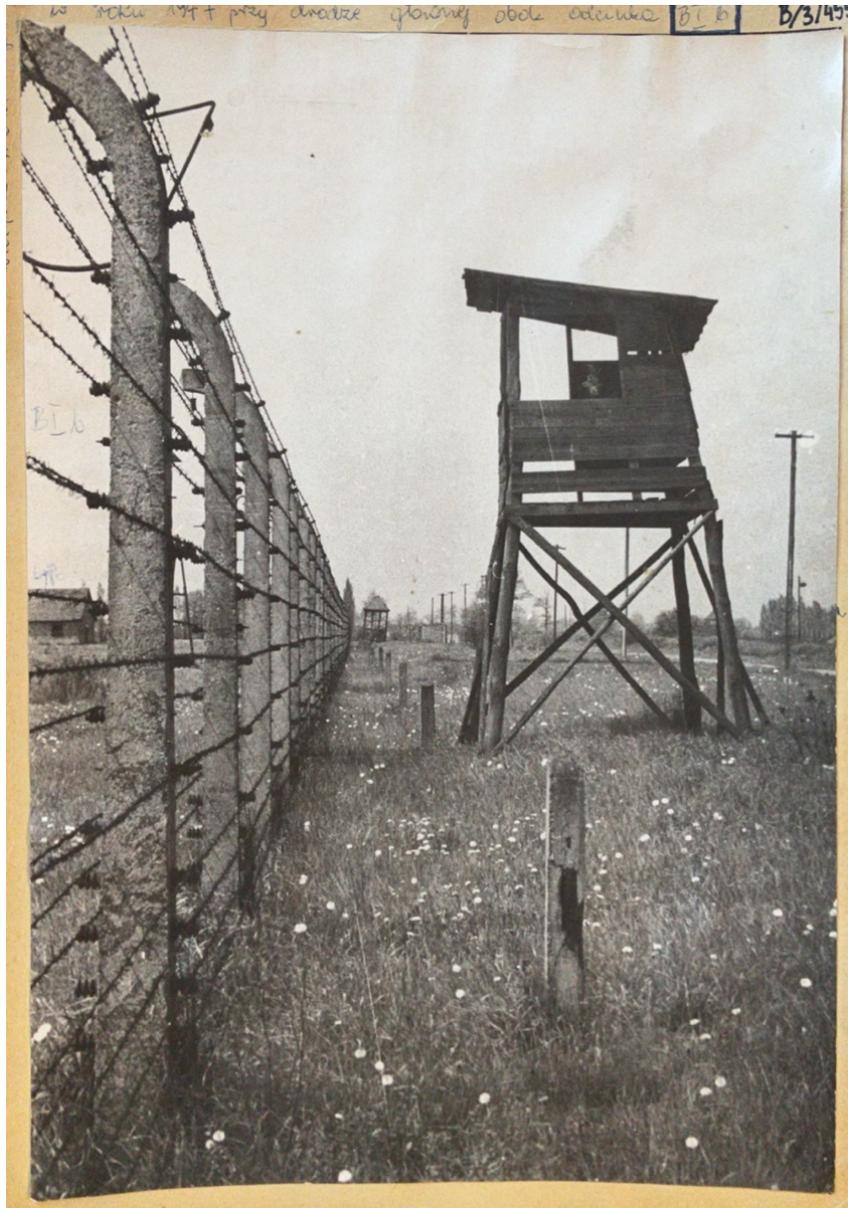


Figure 13. Watchtower in section B1b, Birkenau, 1947. Source: “Ikonografia B-3,” 7, B003/01/21, ADK PMA-B



Figure 14. The terrain of the collapsed gas chambers and crematorium V, 1960, before capital renovations. Conservation entailed clearing out the weeds and shrubberies to improve visual legibility. Source: "Ikonografia B-42," B040/01/07, 17, ADK PMA-P.

The 1963-1966 Plan: Scaling Up and Professionalizing Conservation

By 1962, the PMO-B had reached an inflection point. The October 1962 general conservation plan for the following three years marked another significant shift—not in theoretical sophistication or technical mastery, but in scope and coordination.¹⁴⁵ Compared to earlier documents, it offered a more detailed and systematic accounting of damage across the memorial complex, articulating with new precision the conservation needs of each sector and object type. For the first time, preservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau was framed as a total environmental task. The plan extended its focus beyond buildings and exhibitions to include fences, gates, drainage systems, roadways, chemical treatments, signage, and landscape features such as lawns and forested areas.

Like the 1957 plan, the 1962 program emphasized the replacement of deteriorated structural elements, particularly in the barracks, where wartime materials had been reused multiple times and were often unsalvageable. Conservation entailed the selective substitution of rotten wood, especially in roof constructions, foundations, and entrances, with more stable materials. In sector BIIa, roof plates and foundational beams were partially replaced, while Barrack 30 in BIIb, the last remaining wooden structure in that zone, received new foundations and supplemental anti-rot treatments. Wherever possible, replacements were made using wood salvaged from collapsed sections.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, the crematoria ruins were treated according to a different logic. Reinforcement focused on securing existing fragments from within. The plan proposed installing concealed concrete supports inside the collapsed ruins of crematoria II and III, stabilizing the gas

¹⁴⁵ Kinowski, “Zadania Państwowego Muzeum.”

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

chamber and undressing room walls without reconstructing their exterior appearance.¹⁴⁷ In the following decade, canalization systems were added to crematorium II and III to prevent flooding and water damage to crematoria foundations.¹⁴⁸

The plan also employed strategies of terrain accentuation to help visitors imagine the former camp layout. In 1958-1959, chimneys in the men's section in Birkenau were stabilized to maintain vertical marks of camp barracks.¹⁴⁹ In 1962, 276 concrete frames were projected to be installed along the ground to trace the footprints of destroyed barracks, anchoring the memory of destruction in material outlines.¹⁵⁰ These interventions, and others like them, aimed to reinforce visual legibility. And, as in earlier plans, visual coherence was maintained through symbolic reconstructions such as the guard towers and stabilization of prisoner barracks' chimneys.

Circulation and infrastructure improvements were another key focus. Drainage upgrades and fungicide treatments were introduced not only to protect structures but to support anticipated visitor traffic.¹⁵¹ The museum also undertook a significant overhaul of Birkenau's deteriorating road network. Nine kilometers of roads, damaged by vehicle traffic and long-term neglect, were evaluated and reconstructed using a new layering technique that combined cement and crushed stone to replicate the texture of wartime gravel roads.¹⁵² These repairs were coordinated with plans to reroute the visitor path in anticipation of the unveiling of the International Monument, scheduled for January 1965.¹⁵³ At the same time, Kinowski urged the museum board to weigh the risks of these improvements, cautioning that "the proposed route through Birkenau will allow

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴⁸ E. Papiurek, "Inwentaryzacja murów rozbieralni krematorium II B-38," 1991, A038/03/01, *ADK PMA-B*, 5; E. Dyjas, "Zestawienie prac remontowo-konserwatorskich w obiekcie B-39 od 1967 roku," n.d., A039/01/13, *ADK PMA-B*, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Kinowski and Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny," 12.

¹⁵⁰ Kinowski, "Zadania Państwowego Muzeum," 24.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 13. The monument was inaugurated in 1967.

the sightseeing of the most important fragments of the camp and the designed expositions,” but will also “in several cases violate the authenticity of the former camp by introducing a few new sections to the road.”¹⁵⁴ Eventually, the site was reserved for pedestrian traffic only.

In sum, the 1963-1966 plan represented a critical expansion in the scope and ambition of conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It introduced techniques of visual reinforcement, restructured circulation routes, and systematized ongoing maintenance. However, no exhibitions were introduced and the site still suffered from minimal signage. While still dependent on emergency repairs and an unevenly professionalized workforce, the plan articulated a conservation logic grounded in interpretive legibility and structural endurance. Yet the burst of capital investment that accompanied this plan—most notably between 1960 and 1964—did not give rise to a sustained program. In the years that followed, conservation efforts stagnated, reduced to provisional maintenance and lacking institutional continuity. Nonetheless, its approach to ruins, reconstructions, and terrain prefigured the international standards of authenticity that would soon be codified in the 1964 Venice Charter—standards to which the museum would ultimately be held.

Authenticity as a Conservation Value Emerges

By the early 1960s, the PMO-B had begun to articulate and implement a set of conservation principles that, while still provisional and inconsistent, bore the marks of a shifting international and national discourse around authenticity. This shift did not begin with a clearly defined doctrine or terminology. Rather, authenticity emerged unevenly: first as a practice of restraint, then as a principle of interpretation, and only later as a fully codified heritage value. Within the museum’s planning and conservation records, the term itself rarely appeared in the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 37.

1960s. Yet the logic of authenticity—understood as the conservation of original material, the refusal of speculative reconstruction, and the effort to retain visual legibility—was increasingly embedded in institutional decision-making.

In what follows I trace how authenticity entered the conservation logic of the PMO-B between the late 1950s and the end of the 1970s. It situates the museum’s evolving practices within broader developments in postwar Polish conservation thought and international heritage discourse, particularly the 1964 Venice Charter. Rather than treating the Charter as the origin point for conservation reform, this section emphasizes its convergence with existing intellectual and professional currents in Poland. By examining the writings of prominent Polish conservators Jan Zachwatowicz and Józef Dutkiewicz alongside internal museum planning and the 1979 UNESCO inscription, the following pages show how authenticity became a usable, and ultimately institutionalized, framework for guiding conservation at the site.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, Polish conservation thinking was shaped not by adherence to abstract principles, but by the urgency of national survival. Nowhere was this more visible than in the decision to reconstruct Warsaw’s Old Town, an effort widely acknowledged even at the time as a radical departure from emerging conservation norms. As later scholars have emphasized, postwar reconstruction in Poland, especially in Warsaw, entailed a conscious suspension of non-interventionist conservation ethics, the widely accepted standard of practice at the time, on social and national grounds.¹⁵⁵ The destruction wrought by the war was not merely physical but cultural; rebuilding monuments and cityscapes was seen as a necessary act of historical and political recovery. Within this context, Jan Zachwatowicz’s 1946

¹⁵⁵ Kacper Kuźnicki, “The Authenticity of the Reconstructed Old Town of Warsaw: A Reflection,” *eConservation Journal*, no. 1 (autumn 2013): 27–29; Artur Kwaśniewski, “Polskie podejście do waloru autentyzmu zabytków architektury,” in *Dziedzictwo architektoniczne: rekonstrukcje i badania obiektów zabytkowych*, ed. E. Łużyńska (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza Politechniki Wrocławskiej, 2017), 6.

essay *Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków* (“Program and Principles of Monument Conservation”) outlined the philosophical and practical foundations of a distinctly postwar logic of reconstruction.¹⁵⁶

Writing as Poland’s Chief Monument Conservator during a period of profound dislocation, Zachwatowicz framed conservation not as a neutral science, but as a civic and national duty. Monuments, he argued, were “not only documents,” but emotionally and socially charged structures with the power to educate and unify the nation. Their destruction under German occupation was part of a deliberate attempt to erase Polish cultural identity. In the face of such trauma, conservation principles needed to adapt. “We will reconstruct these monuments,” he wrote, “so that we may pass on to future generations, if not their authentic form, then at least an accurate one—alive in our memory and preserved in materials.”¹⁵⁷ The reconstruction of form was, in his view, a patriotic obligation. He acknowledged this position as a form of betrayal to conservation orthodoxy, one in which “we are fully aware of the tragic nature of the conservation falsehood being committed.”¹⁵⁸ Yet desperate times necessitated radical interventions which would salvage Poland’s cultural property.

Zachwatowicz’s emphasis was not on fidelity to original materials, but on restoring the legibility and symbolic force of monuments so they could continue to function as sites of memory, education, and civic life. He insisted that the monument can only retain its use by adaptive use that balances the historical value with a new, social function—whether as a public building, museum, or civic landmark.¹⁵⁹ For Zachwatowicz, ruins held value only when they

¹⁵⁶ Jan Zachwatowicz, “Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków,” *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury* 1–2 (June 1946): 48–52.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

were fully absorbed into the landscape as genuine relics of decay; otherwise, reconstruction was not just permitted but required. This position, shaped by the political and psychological demands of postwar Poland, stood in contrast to the emerging conservation ethos in Western Europe, which increasingly valorized minimal intervention.¹⁶⁰

Zachwatowicz's general approach to reconstruction as a national obligation helps explain some of the early reconstructions at PMO-B. Early interventions at Auschwitz I, such as the reconstruction of Block 26 in 1957, reflected a continuation of Zachwatowicz's postwar logic. By the 1960s, however, this approach would gradually give way to a more restrained conservation approach, particularly at Birkenau. As I have shown above, faced with Birkenau's fragile material state, the museum began to prioritize stabilization, visual legibility, and non-intervention—a shift that paralleled broader changes in both Polish and international conservation thinking.

By the early 1960s, Polish conservation thought was beginning to articulate new philosophical frameworks for dealing with sites of wartime destruction, including cities, buildings, and landscapes. One of the most influential and enduring statements from this period came from art historian and conservation theorist Józef Dutkiewicz. In a short but influential 1961 article titled “*Sentymentalizm, autentyzm, automatyzm*,”¹⁶¹ (“Sentimentalism, Authenticism, and Automatism”) Dutkiewicz proposed a threefold framework for evaluating conservation attitudes. He rejected what he called *sentymentalizm*—a nostalgic or romanticized attitude toward ruins that elevated emotionalism over critical judgment—as well as *automatyzm*—a technical, procedural approach to conservation that lacked historical

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶¹ Józef E. Dutkiewicz, “Sentymentalizm, Autentyzm, Automatyzm,” *Ochrona Zabytków*, nos. 1–2 (1961): 3–16.

sensitivity.¹⁶² In contrast, he championed *autentyzm*: an approach grounded in emotional recognition of historical damage, an appreciation of the ruin as a truthful witness to destruction, and restraint in the face of irreversible loss.¹⁶³

The core of his argument was the idea of *autentyzm przeżycia*: the authenticity of experience.¹⁶⁴ Rather than rebuilding or smoothing over destruction, conservators should preserve the ruin as it is, precisely because its brokenness bears historical and moral witness. “This postulate,” he wrote, “includes both the authenticity of experiencing the drama of the object—the drama of a monument succumbing to destruction—and the recognition of the latent beauty of such decay, as well as restraint from attempts at makeup or reconstruction.”¹⁶⁵ For Dutkiewicz, *autentyzm* was not about aestheticizing decay, but about preserving its evidentiary and affective charge. In an era of political reconstruction and narrative control, the ruin became a multilayered space which subtly made legible the truth of both past and present.

These ideas were articulated just three years before the adoption of the Venice Charter in 1964, a foundational international document produced by the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments. The Charter codified a set of conservation principles that would guide heritage preservation globally for decades to come. It emphasized the importance of maintaining historical monuments “in the full richness of their authenticity,” discouraged speculative reconstruction, and insisted that all historical layers were deemed crucial for understanding the full meaning of a monument. It thus demanded the old and new historical layers be clearly distinguishable from each other.¹⁶⁶ While the Charter never defined authenticity

¹⁶² Ibid., 6, 8, 16.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 13–15.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 13. The word also translates as ‘survival.’

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.,

¹⁶⁶ *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964)*, ICOMOS, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

explicitly, it nonetheless affirmed it as the core value of preservation. In this respect, its ethical thrust resonates strikingly with Dutkiewicz’s formulation.

Indeed, the Polish translation of the Venice Charter offers a revealing linguistic parallel: the Charter’s call to safeguard heritage “in the full richness of their authenticity” is rendered not with *autentyczność*, a term signifying more scientific and technical applicability in conservation, but with *autentyzm*—*w całym bogactwie ich autentyzmu*.¹⁶⁷ The choice of this term suggests that in early 1960s Polish conservation discourse, *autentyzm* already contained its philosophical weight as an experiential, ethical stance toward the past. It also hints at the alignment, even if uncoordinated, between Polish intellectual trajectories and the emerging international consensus.

Although Dutkiewicz did not write about Auschwitz-Birkenau directly, his ideas resonate with the conservation choices emerging at the site in the same period. The museum’s approach to the crematoria ruins and terrain at Birkenau, in particular, embraced non-reconstruction, visual legibility, and the conservation of destruction as a form of testimony. In Dutkiewicz’s programmatic thesis, this type of preservation was especially apt for an age of death, destruction, and catastrophe—and allowed those negative values, and their consequences, to retain their legibility.¹⁶⁸ These practices reflect the very ethics Dutkiewicz articulated: protecting damage as historical content, resisting reconstruction, and preserving architectural absence as witness. His intervention thus marks one of the earliest Polish articulations of authenticity as a conservation value—a value that would soon be inscribed in international doctrine and gradually institutionalized at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

¹⁶⁷ “Karta Wenecka. Postanowienia i uchwały II Międzynarodowego Kongresu Architektów i Techników Zabytków w Wenecji w 1964 r.,” n.d., accessed July 9, 2025, <https://icomos-poland.org/en/dokumenty-doktrynalne-2.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Dutkiewicz, “Sentymentalizm, Autentyzm, Automatyzm,” 8.

From National Custodianship to Global Recognition: The 1979 UNESCO Inscription

The 1979 inscription of Auschwitz-Birkenau on the UNESCO World Heritage List marked a turning point in the global recognition of Holocaust memory and the reframing of the former camp complex as a universal site of warning. The nomination drew together multiple strands of postwar developments: the rise of international heritage initiatives, the growing authority of UNESCO and ICOMOS in shaping global conservation norms, and Poland's strategic positioning within these forums. It also reflected shifting epistemologies of authenticity, the emergence of intangible value as a heritage criterion, and the blending of national narratives with universal ideals. While the material remains of the camp had long been under Polish custodianship, the nomination reframed them as evidence of crimes against humanity and moral obligations to future generations in a distinctively universal language.

In the decades following World War II, cultural heritage became an increasingly international concern. The establishment of UNESCO in 1946—its inaugural mission “to build peace in the minds of men”—was rooted in a universalist vision that sought to transcend nationalist violence and rebuild global civilization on the basis of education, science, and culture.¹⁶⁹ Though originally dominated by Western European members, UNESCO gradually incorporated postcolonial and Eastern European voices, positioning itself as a global forum for cultural diplomacy. As Paul Betts has argued, UNESCO's goal was not only the protection of monuments but the reimagining of civilization itself, detaching it from its imperial and Eurocentric origins and reframing it as a universal inheritance.¹⁷⁰ Among its landmark achievements was the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and

¹⁶⁹ Paul Betts, “World Civilization,” in *Ruin and Renewal: Civilizing Europe after World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 313.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 344.

Natural Heritage, which established the World Heritage List and introduced the principle of “Outstanding Universal Value” (OUV) as the central criterion for inscription, which established how to assess a site’s authenticity during its evaluation for inscription in the World Heritage List.¹⁷¹

Parallel developments in the conservation field reinforced this shift. The 1964 Venice Charter codified a set of principles for monument conservation, emphasizing material integrity and the scientific study of historical layers. It was followed by the founding of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) in 1965 as a non-governmental expert body attached to UNESCO. ICOMOS served both as a policy-making institution and as an advisory body for World Heritage nominations, tasked with evaluating sites’ historical, aesthetic, and scientific significance. The Polish conservation field actively participated in these developments. The founding congress of ICOMOS was held in Warsaw and Kraków in 1965, and Polish conservators contributed to international debates on authenticity, reconstruction, and the integration of intangible values. By the 1970s, Poland had positioned itself as a key player in international heritage policy, serving on the inaugural World Heritage Committee and submitting several of the first successful nominations.¹⁷²

Poland was among the first twenty states to ratify the 1972 Convention, and it moved quickly to secure early inscriptions. At the time of the first nominations, Krzysztof Pawłowski,

¹⁷¹ The General Conference of UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, November 16, 1972; Roha W. Khalaf, “Authenticity or Continuity in the Implementation of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention? Scrutinizing Statements of Outstanding Universal Value, 1978–2019,” *Heritage* 3, no. 2 (2020): 243–74; Jukka Jokilehto, “What Is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties,” *Monuments and Sites* 16 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.11588/monstites.2008.0.21802>.

¹⁷² Andrzej Tomaszewski, “Dziedzictwo kultury w perspektywie międzynarodowej,” in *Polski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS: 1965–2015: 50 lat w służbie ochrony zabytków*, ed. Polski Komitet Narodowy (ICOMOS) et al. (Warszawa: ICOMOS; Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, 2015), 84–85; Krzysztof Pawłowski, “Pierwsze dylematy Komitetu Dziedzictwa Światowego UNESCO,” in *Polski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS: 1965–2015: 50 lat w służbie ochrony zabytków*, ed. Katarzyna Pałubska, Katarzyna Sroka, and Łukasz Urbański (Warszawa: Polski Komitet Narodowy ICOMOS; Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, 2015), 71–72.

Deputy General Conservator of Poland and Vice-President of ICOMOS, was elected to represent Poland on the World Heritage Committee. In 1978, he formulated five nominations on Poland's behalf: the historic centers of Warsaw and Kraków, the Wieliczka Salt Mine, Białowieża Forest, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. His proposal to include Auschwitz marked a conceptual intervention: while the existing criteria focused on sites of artistic and architectural achievement, he argued that places of profound historical trauma—particularly those documenting “highly negative events”—must also be preserved as part of humanity's collective memory.¹⁷³ This proposal foreshadowed the tension that would come to define Auschwitz's nomination: the need to fit a site of atrocity into a heritage framework originally built to celebrate cultural and aesthetic patrimony.

The Polish strategy was to nominate Auschwitz-Birkenau not simply as a historical site, but as a functioning museum. The nomination referred to the State Museum in Oświęcim, rather than the camp alone, and thus presented the institution's educational and commemorative mission as inseparable from the ruins it preserved. This included “extensive archival resources, collections of historic objects, artistic works and documents, a library, a collection of stamps, information on traveling exhibitions, lectures and films shown, as well as numerous publications.”¹⁷⁴ In doing so, the nomination emphasized the camp as both a physical crime scene and an institutionalized repository of evidence, framing its significance in forensic and pedagogical terms.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Pawłowski, "Pierwsze dylematy Komitetu Dziedzictwa Światowego UNESCO," 74.

¹⁷⁴ International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), *Advisory Board Evaluation (ICOMOS) / Évaluation de l'organisation consultative (ICOMOS)* (Paris: ICOMOS, June 7, 1978), accessed July 9, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31/documents/>.

¹⁷⁵ Röttger, “Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer narrative,” 273–75.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was nominated under Criterion VI of the 1972 Convention, the only category that allows for the inscription of sites based on intangible value—namely, their association with immaterial values, such as memory.¹⁷⁶ This was exceptional. Most World Heritage sites were nominated for their architectural, artistic, or scientific value, and Auschwitz’s “nearly insignificant material form” challenged the prevailing norms.¹⁷⁷ ICOMOS accepted the nomination, recognizing the site’s symbolic resonance and its function as a moral witness. Yet the use of Criterion VI alone was, and remains, controversial. As Szmygin and Kowalski have shown, the emphasis on intangible value raised concerns about politicization and interpretive ambiguity.¹⁷⁸ The inscription of Auschwitz effectively precluded the nomination of similar sites, inaugurating the “symbolic representation” principle—whereby one exceptional site could stand in for all others.¹⁷⁹

The narrative presented in the nomination document adhered to long-standing Polish commemorative patterns. The text emphasized Polish resistance and international antifascist struggle, while downplaying the specificity of Jewish genocide. Jews were named, but primarily under the banner of a broader multinational victimhood. As Röttjer notes, the site was presented as “a monument to the martyrdom and struggle of the Polish people and other nations,” and the overwhelming number of Jewish victims was not thematized as a distinct historical category.¹⁸⁰ Even the mention of gas chambers and crematoria was folded into a general account of resistance and political martyrdom. Meanwhile, Monowitz and the network of satellite camps were

¹⁷⁶ UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (1972).

¹⁷⁷ Bogusław Szmygin, “Miejsce Pamięci – definiowanie pojęcia dla ochrony zabytków [Sites of Memory – defining the concept for heritage protection],” in *Miejsca pamięci - definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona = Places of memory - defining, interpretation, protection* (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 167–68.

¹⁷⁸ Szmygin, *Miejsca pamięci*, 8.

¹⁷⁹ Wojciech Kowalski, “Zagadnienie ochrony miejsc pamięci w teorii i praktyce,” in *Miejsca pamięci – definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona [Places of memory – defining, interpretation, protection]*, ed. Bogusław Szmygin (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 88.

¹⁸⁰ Röttjer, “Re-Konstruktion nationaler historischer narrative,” 278.

excluded from the designated site, and Birkenau itself remained underrepresented relative to Auschwitz I—reinforcing the museum’s longstanding emphasis on the main camp.¹⁸¹

The nomination also deployed a powerful visual and spatial logic. Auschwitz-Birkenau was framed, as Röttjer articulates, as a “forensic evidence and archaeological time capsule,” a site where the physical remains could testify to the crimes committed. This logic underpinned efforts to stabilize and preserve the camp as it appeared in 1945. The nomination even proposed expanding the protective zone introduced at the site in 1962 from 300 to 1000 meters to recreate the wartime “zone of silence” and prevent encroaching development.¹⁸² At stake was not only the authenticity of the structures, but the authenticity of the atmosphere.

In repones to the nomination document, the ICOMOS’s evaluation challenged Polish national framing by stressing the site’s universal message, as well as its Jewish specificity. The museum, it declared, was “a monument to the martyrdom and resistance of millions of men, women, and children,” among them “so many Jews.” It also stood as a custodian of irrefutable evidence of “one of the greatest crimes committed against humanity,” and as an institution that “will contribute to world peace.”¹⁸³ While the ICOMOS statement foregrounded a universalist narrative it omitted specific nationalities and muted any mention of Polish martyrdom (instead only citing its abstract trope of resistance)—thus subtly shifting the interpretive frame away from national memory toward global moral discourse.¹⁸⁴

The 1979 inscription of Auschwitz-Birkenau thus consecrated a new paradigm within international heritage policy. It marked a shift from classical monument preservation to the

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 275–76.

¹⁸² Ibid., 274–75. The introduction of this expansion was the source of many controversies with the locality in the 1990s.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Ibid., 279.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 279.

recognition of symbolic, forensic, and testimonial value. It stretched the concept of authenticity beyond material substance to include absence, silence, and institutional authority. And it transformed a national museum, forged in the politics of communist Poland, into a global site of conscience. While Auschwitz's exceptional status would later become a source of tension within UNESCO and ICOMOS, the inscription established the precedent for integrating sites of atrocity into the global heritage canon—not only as ruins, but as archives, pedagogical spaces, and moral witnesses.

Conclusion

By the end of the 1970s, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum had stabilized a set of commemorative and conservation practices that were not only institutionally durable but increasingly legible within transnational heritage frameworks. What began in 1947 as an improvised attempt to preserve a devastated site under conditions of political constraint and material scarcity evolved, over three decades, into a bifurcated commemorative grammar: Auschwitz I as a site of curated presence and evidentiary display; Birkenau as a landscape of material absence and ethical restraint.

This dual paradigm did not emerge from a single decision but took shape through shifting conservation plans, curatorial strategies, and legal and bureaucratic frameworks—punctuated by moments of rupture and resumption. The museum's work of preservation was never only technical; it was interpretive and institutional, informed by both internal epistemologies and external pressures. Through successive acts of documentation, stabilization, and spatial framing, the museum constructed its authority to speak for the past, even as it absorbed the material and moral burdens of representing atrocity.

The 1979 inscription of Auschwitz-Birkenau on the UNESCO World Heritage List marked a key moment in this process. It affirmed the museum's authority on a global stage, translating its practices into the language of universal human values, phrased in Cold War terms. At the same time, the nomination retroactively stabilized curatorial and conservation choices made under national conditions—elevating postwar layers, visual restraint, and survivor-built exhibitions into globally hailed forms. UNESCO, with its Cold War rhetoric of world peace and East-West alliance building, shaped both the recognition and the terms of that recognition: Auschwitz became a world site through a framework that valued moral witness and material authenticity, but left its national particularities partially submerged.

The inscription also drew a boundary around a contained, commemorative core—a boundary that would come to obscure as much as it revealed. Even as the museum formalized its authority over Auschwitz I and Birkenau, the broader terrain that had once supported the camp system remained unsettled: legally, spatially, and commemoratively. Former SS zones, administrative buildings, infrastructure, and postwar housing developments lay just outside the frame, excluded from the protected area and the moral language of preservation. These spaces, marginal to the museum but central to the site's wartime history and postwar afterlife, posed unresolved questions about how—and whether—to contain the memory of atrocity within fixed spatial limits.

The 1979 designation marked the culmination of three decades of institutional labor. It also set the stage for the challenges to come. In the next chapter, I turn to the peripheries of the memorial site: zones of ambiguity where habitation, reconstruction, and return unfolded alongside the remnants of violence. These spaces complicate the museum's commemorative

logic—not by negating it, but by revealing the limits of what could be preserved, narrated, or sanctified within the postwar frameworks of preservation.

Vignette 1: Ecologies of Burial

The ground at Auschwitz-Birkenau can be thought through ecologies of burial and commemoration—the complex interplay of earth and ashes, and the changing attempts to cover and uncover human and non-human remains. This framework connects sites as different as Treblinka and Bergen-Belsen with Buchenwald and Auschwitz. The first two have no crematoria, but they do have histories of changing meanings as burial grounds. Thinking about what the earth reveals and conceals engages the question of what to do with human remains and how to treat them in space.

Since arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, I kept hearing about things found, revealed, preserved, or forever lost in and on the ground: ruins of structures, archaeological findings, foundations, documents found in basements or rescued from pyres of fire. Perhaps the most jarring examples are the reports Sonderkommando members wrote and buried in the grounds next to the crematoria, which were retrieved after the war (the last manuscript was found in the 1970s). These accounts proved invaluable for reconstructing one of the most criminal aspects of the camp.

Ground seems like a stable element, a certain resource to stand on. But at the memorial site, it is a material in flux. How to discern and separate ashes from earth? Anywhere could be a place where human remains are found. The ground still produces traces to this day: metal spoons (Primo Levi would have surely appreciated one of these during his imprisonment), cups, bowls, buttons, sewing materials, prayer books, unidentifiable textiles. This is a feature common to all in-situ memorial sites I've visited.

First and foremost, the earth of former camps holds the ashes of the victims. Yet no one knows precisely where. This uncertainty gives a sacred quality to everything found in the

commemorative space. Still, some parts of the site are more laden than others. The area around Crematorium IV and V at Birkenau, the most desolate and remote part of the camp, has a small pond where some of the ashes of the victims were scattered. A few weeks ago, I tried to gauge how many people were dumped into it when I passed by. It is too small, certainly, to contain much of their ashes. Even though decades have passed, I felt like I was walking on human remains.

The Vistula River is another location where ashes were scattered. It represents the problem and tragedy of graves for anonymous victims in unmarked areas. The river is a moving grave; there's no way to still the ashes in the water. Its ecology is one of the ebb and flow of life, in which traces are carried away with sticks and branches.

In the Polish newspapers from the communist era that I read at the library, Auschwitz is repeatedly referred to as the “biggest cemetery in the world.” They report on mass rallies held on the grounds of the memorial site in defense of “world peace.” In Israel, I've often heard the phrase “earth soaked with blood” during annual Holocaust commemoration services. “Their death commands us to live!” Such words have political undertones, point to the anxiety around closure and mourning, and the futile attempt to situate and bestow meaning to the astronomical number of dead bodies and lost names. These political statements denote the incompleteness of the mourning process and politicize it towards imagining some kind of future in which the ground is not drenched in blood anymore.

In the absence of bodies that may be buried, the crematoria becomes a substitute for a burial site, especially sacred as it represents a concentration of so many graves, located exactly at the site of the victims' murder. There no one lies in peace, but it is a place of extreme silence and serenity. Its representative quality is an artificial creation resting on the material evidence of

murder. The crematoria, then, are not only burial sites but crime scenes, the most critical evidence for proving the perpetration of a crime. There is tension between these two functions—a place of burial and rest, and an “evidence room” (a phrase coined by Robert Jan Van Pelt)—from which one retrieves the most painful moment in the victim's life, their death.

These reflections have convinced me that elements of the camp which appear the most stable and untouched have in fact shifted quite significantly over time. This is a central feature of memorial sites' authenticity. As I prepare to examine how the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum emerged from the ruins of the camp, I find myself paying close attention to how the earth itself—with all it contains and conceals—has been preserved, interpreted, and authenticated. The institutions that arose to protect the site would need to contend not only with buildings and artifacts, but with the very earth on which history had unfolded.

2. On the Edges of Memory: Peripheral Spaces and the Politics of Preservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau

Introduction

The 1964 short documentary film *Archeologia*, directed by Andrzej Brzozowski, opens in quiet tension. A man walks slowly through tall grass at the edge of a wooded area. The soundscape—birds, distant trains, a dog barking—is understated but immersive. No one speaks. There is no narration, no archival footage. What we hear instead is the rustle of leaves, the scrape of tools, the breath of wind. In time, these ambient sounds are joined by the rhythmic noise of digging: a shovel striking earth, a brush sweeping across a buried spoon, a gloved hand crumbling dirt between its fingers. The camera lingers on close-ups—faces, tools, hands, and objects. The film documents an archaeological excavation on the grounds of Crematorium III at Auschwitz-Birkenau. But it delays that revelation, allowing the viewer to first encounter the site not as an icon of atrocity, but as a place of careful labor, scientific method, and intimate gestures of recovery.

The landscape itself resists recognition. The ruins of the crematorium appear only at the end of the film. What comes before are fragments: spoons, dentures, coins, a doll's eye, a child's brooch, a harmonica, a lipstick fused shut by soil and time. The men conducting the dig handle these items with care, but eventually with routine; objects are sorted into piles, labeled, recorded, brushed, bagged, drawn. The work becomes procedural. In the final sequence, the camera pulls away—first from the hands, then from the excavation pits, and finally from the barbed-wire fences themselves—tracing a path through Birkenau's terrain to the distant outline of the crematorium ruins and the Gate of Death. The landscape is bare, yet saturated: with overgrown

grass dotted with flowers, rows of poles missing barbed wires, train tracks and remaining standing barracks. Its power lies not in spectacle but mute remnants.

Archeologia captures with stark elegance the themes at the heart of this chapter: the tension between absence and presence, visibility and disappearance, material recovery and symbolic marginalization. What lurks beneath and on the edges of landscapes of atrocity? What happens when these spaces are left unmarked, untouched, uncommemorated? This chapter investigates these questions by turning to two spatial peripheries of Auschwitz-Birkenau: zones that were once integral to the camp's operation but were subsequently excluded from institutionalized memory work. Both sites require considering the layered interplay of wartime violence and the scars it left, commemorative regimes, and institutional decision-making.

The first case study focuses on the incineration pits and temporary gas chamber sites behind Birkenau ("The Little White House," known as Bunker 1, and "The Little Red House", known as Bunker 2)—spaces of early mass killing whose material instability and remote location long rendered them peripheral, both literally and symbolically. Only in the 1990s did they become the object of sustained conservation and commemorative recognition. The second case study turns to the Höss villa and the SS Kommandantur, domestic and administrative spaces of the perpetrators at Auschwitz Main Camp. Though structurally intact and located near the core of the memorial site, these buildings were repurposed for residential use, later fenced off, and never formally integrated into the museum's narrative. They remain materially preserved but narratively absent.

Read together, these case studies expose the uneven terrain of postwar commemoration at Auschwitz-Birkenau. By exploring the wartime and postwar histories of these sites, they reveal how different forms of disappearance—material degradation, curatorial omission, symbolic

neglect—have structured the memorial landscape. They also raise broader questions about what is preserved, why it is preserved, and at what cost. Like the camera in *Archeologia*, this chapter attends not to the central monuments, but to the edges of memory: to the spaces where history surfaces and recedes, where objects accumulate and transform silently, and where meaning is never fully excavated. This chapter argues it is precisely these peripheral zones that most vividly expose the entanglement between the physical and social scars of atrocity and the equally persistent tendency of landscapes and communities to move towards renewal.

Defining the Margins: Historical and Spatial Context

The peripheries of Auschwitz-Birkenau were not natural byproducts of neglect, but the outcome of decades of spatial contestation. Before turning to the theoretical frameworks that guide this chapter's analysis, it is essential to understand the concrete historical processes—bureaucratic, political, social—that shaped the terrain's unstable boundaries. This history reveals how marginalization functioned early on, long before commemorative logics took hold.

The spatial margins of Auschwitz-Birkenau were shaped not only by the physical remnants of the camp but by decades of unresolved tensions between the museum's mandate to protect the terrain and local claim for rehabilitation and normalization. Throughout the years of the museum's existence, this tension was most profoundly expressed in struggles around the museum boundaries. In turn, these tensions shaped the treatment of post-camp areas; places formerly associated with the camp that were subject to inaction, neglect, and repurposing, often placing them in a liminal state.

Although the 1947 Act on the Commemoration of Martyrdom formally established the museum, its actual territorial scope remained unsettled throughout the 1950s. Initial plans envisioned a museum complex encompassing over 1,343 hectares across Oświęcim, Brzezinka,

Pławy, Harmęże, and Rajsko, integrating the core camp grounds with auxiliary zones intended for technical and economic support. Yet these plans proved unrealistic, with conditions on the ground changing rapidly. Residents, businesses, and industry and agricultural enterprises quickly returned to the area and claimed the areas in which they have previously dwelled, and which was significantly developed by the SS during the war. For instance, in 1947 the Peasants' Self-Help Cooperative in Harmęże and Pławy invested millions of PLN in the development of these former camp worksites. In turn, the state could not afford to expropriate and compensate the Cooperative, even though the site had employed thousands of slave laborers in dire conditions, claiming the lives of many. By late 1947, the expansive vision for the museum terrain had already been reduced to under 450 hectares. Struggles over expropriation continued well into the 1950s, causing tensions and conflicts between the museum and the local population.¹

This uncertain situation culminated in the 1957 resolution of the Council of Ministers, which formally defined the boundaries of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for the first time. The resolution followed years of contested developments and mounting pressure from museum authorities to protect not just isolated structures but the broader spatial context of the former camp. The 1957 demarcation included 191 hectares: 20 hectares in Oświęcim, 171 in Brzezinka, and excluded areas such as Rajsko and Babice. While this was a major milestone, it did not fully resolve the conflict. The resolution's implementation was inconsistent, leaving parts of the historically significant terrain—such as the Judenrampe and the so-called Mekysko section behind Birkenau—outside the museum's jurisdiction. Moreover, it failed to prevent further encroachment, as economic development and a lack of enforcement continued to threaten preservation goals. The 1957 resolution marked a turning point in articulating the museum's

¹ Marek Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, trans. Anna Szadkowska (Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, 2014), 24.

spatial needs, but it also exposed the enduring tension between commemoration and reconstruction in postwar Poland.²

Efforts to establish a meaningful “protection zone”—an area limiting urban development around the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum—began in the 1960s but faced legal, bureaucratic, and political obstacles for decades. In 1962, authorities established a protection zone around Birkenau only, citing the risk of housing construction abutting the camp’s perimeter and threatening its historical context. Museum officials insisted that the surrounding landscape must retain its wartime topography. Yet this declaration proved difficult to enforce, and development continued.³ A protection zone around Auschwitz I of at least 500 meters was only declared at the end of the 1970s, in response to plans for building a large housing estate near the Main Camp. The museum petitioned the voivodship’s planning authorities in 1977 for a “zone of silence” around both camps, one that would prevent desecration and protect the solemnity of the sites. For some areas of Birkenau they requested up to a kilometer from the barbed wire, and in Oświęcim 350 meters.

While the legal state of this petition remained undetermined, the Polish ICOMOS committee used it to nominate Auschwitz-Birkenau to UNESCO’s World Heritage Site initiative in 1978, submitting with the nomination a map that included the museum boundaries with the undeclared protection zone, noting that “The Museum (...) is now extending the protection zone from 300 meters to 1000 meters to preserve or restore the character of the site close to what it used to be at the time of the war or to establish a silence belt and prevent the urbanisation of the grounds surrounding this huge cemetery.”⁴ Yet even this “silence zone” proved difficult to

² Ibid., 24–27.

³ Ibid., 29–30.

⁴ Ibid., 32.

enforce: urban plans repeatedly failed to address the preservation of key sites such as the cremation pits and the “Little White House,” and development pressures persisted despite the 1979 UNESCO inscription.⁵

By the 1980s and especially into the 1990s, the limits of the existing protection frameworks became increasingly apparent, prompting renewed efforts to rationalize and reimagine the terrain surrounding the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial. In 1993, architects Marek and Jadwiga Rawecki completed an exhaustive inventory of the broader camp zone, documenting over 900 structures and determining that the widely accepted 500-meter protective buffer was inadequate—failing to cover key camp sites, while including areas with no historical connection to the camp.⁶ In short, the attempt to enforce an overarching protection zone failed to attend to the particularities of postcamp landscapes. Their findings also underscored the chaotic and piecemeal development that had occurred postwar, with state enterprises allowed to build freely while local residents faced restrictions.⁷

Amid mounting local resentment, the Raweckis initiated community consultations to advocate for a nuanced, historically grounded spatial plan that would address both commemoration and local needs. Yet their proposals, including a more functional landscape zoning strategy and the relocation of visitor infrastructure to the site’s periphery, met with mixed political support and strong resistance from locals, especially in Brzezinka.⁸ Decades of bureaucratic failures and the locals sense of diminishing power vis-a-vis national and global

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Ibid., 144–48.

⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁸ Ibid., 61–64.

frameworks perceived as attempting to claim their homes—led locals to feel, in the words of Andrew Charlesworth, “out of place”—and thus resentful.⁹

Rawecki’s account demonstrates that the peripheries of Auschwitz-Birkenau were never fully stabilized; rather, they were the product of negotiations, exclusions, and ongoing spatial struggles. Far from being ancillary, these contested boundaries help reveal how memory is mapped—and how it is challenged—on the ground. Their shifting and unstable status underscores the need to understand peripherality not as the outcome of neglect, but as a product of historical processes that actively shaped the memorial landscape. This history provides essential context for the chapter that follows, which focuses on zones within Auschwitz I and Birkenau that remained physically intact yet symbolically marginalized in both institutional and commemorative terms. It demonstrates the intricate yet concrete dynamics that shaped the area as a whole—between commemoration and reconstruction, institutional ambition and local resistance, the politics of mourning and the pressures of normalization. These tensions not only defined what could be preserved, but also structured how absence and marginality became inscribed into the physical and symbolic landscape of Auschwitz.

The peripheries of Auschwitz-Birkenau were not natural byproducts of neglect, but the outcome of decades of active spatial contestation. Before turning to the theoretical frameworks that guide this chapter’s analysis, it is essential to understand the concrete historical processes—bureaucratic, political, social—that shaped the terrain’s unstable boundaries. This history reveals how marginalization was embedded early on, long before commemorative and preservation logics took hold.

⁹ Andrew Charlesworth et al., “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz? Contested Development in Post-War and Post-Socialist Oświęcim,” *Ethics, Place & Environment* 9, no. 2 (2006): 168.

The stages of determining the Oświęcim-Brzezinka State Museum lines

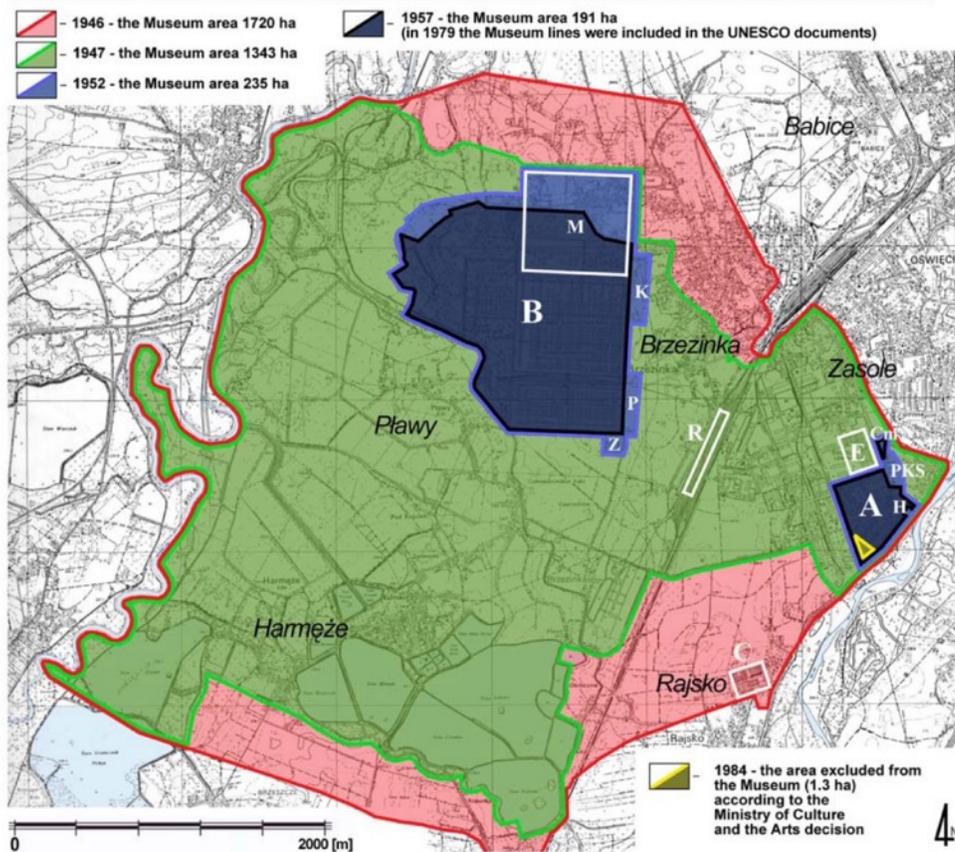


Fig.11. Map showing the stages of the demarcation of the territorial range of the Museum. White letters denote: A - the former mother camp (KL Auschwitz I - Stammlager); B - the former KL Birkenau; C - the greenhouses in Rajsko (the former KL Auschwitz sub-camp); Cm - the mass grave of the inmates; E - "Schutzhaftlagererweiterung"; H - the so-called "Villa Hoess"; K - the former KL Birkenau New Headquarters; M - the so-called "Mexico"; P - the foreground of the Gate of Death; PKS - the PKS depot; R - Judenrampe; Z - the camp potato store; (worked out by MR)

Map 2. The changing boundaries of the museum, 1946-1957. Source: Marek Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, trans. Anna Szadkowska (Gliwice: Wydawnictwo Politechniki Śląskiej, 2014), 28.

Theorizing Internal Peripheries

These institutional and material struggles over boundaries, access, and preservation help explain why key zones of atrocity at Auschwitz-Birkenau remained spatially unprotected and narratively marginal for decades. Their ambiguous status was not simply a result of oversight or bureaucratic failure, but a consequence of deeper tensions over how memory should be spatially organized and politically managed. The fact that these zones remained physically intact but interpretively unsettled suggests that their marginalization cannot be fully understood through

historical context alone. Rather, their status demands a conceptual framework capable of analyzing how memorial hierarchies emerge, how terrain is symbolically sorted, and how peripherality is produced not only by distance but by discomfort. The following theoretical framing draws on scholarship in Holocaust geography and memory studies to make sense of these internal peripheries—not as forgotten spaces, but as sites structurally suspended between visibility and erasure.

The spatial turn in Holocaust studies has called attention not only to where violence took place, but to how the distribution of memory reflects or distorts that geography. As I have shown in the previous chapter, at Auschwitz-Birkenau memory has long clustered around Auschwitz-Birkenau's symbolic core: at Auschwitz I in Block 11 and the infamous Arbeit macht Frei sign, and in Birkenau at the Gate of Death and crematoria. Marginal terrains have remained contested for many years. Andrew Charlesworth and Alison Stenning have argued that the landscapes of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the neighboring town of Oświęcim are deeply shaped by competing yet equally valid “moral geographies”—contested arrangements of space where particular uses, meanings, and groups are deemed “appropriate” or “out of place.”¹⁰ In this view, the spatial organization of memory reflects normative assumptions about who may inhabit which spaces, and to what end. The writers show that postwar and post-socialist development disputes in Oświęcim were animated by such conflicts: between local needs and global symbolic capital, between development and sacralization, and between Polish and Jewish memory frameworks.¹¹

These insights are echoed in the broader literature on Holocaust geographies. Tim Cole, Anne Knowles, and Alberto Giordano have emphasized that the Holocaust must be understood as a spatially complex phenomenon, enacted across a wide range of sites—railways, ghettos,

¹⁰ Ibid., 149.

¹¹ Ibid.

forests, and villages—through multiscaled systems of planning, movement, and violence.¹² Thought of this way, the spatial expression of the events and their aftermath can be discerned not only in centralized camps but in many types of and dispersed locations. Karen Till and Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen advance this further with their call for “responsible geographies of memory”—a framework that foregrounds the ethical weight of violence-marked landscapes and critiques how dominant Holocaust narratives, in concert with landscape materiality, have legitimized singular claims while silencing other important stories.¹³ Taken together, these insights point to both the material and symbolic margins of Holocaust sites—areas outside what has become central locations of commemoration and external to hegemonic narratives of memory. This important trend has produced some crucial work in Holocaust Studies in recent years, for example the publication *Shelter from the Holocaust*, co-edited by Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, and which reexamines the experiences of Polish Jewish refugees who survived the Holocaust through displacement into the Soviet Union. The volume highlights how both physical displacement and symbolic marginalization shaped the survival, remembrance, and historiographical neglect of these refugees, challenging established narratives of Holocaust memory.¹⁴

While the spatial turn in Holocaust geography helps reorient attention toward geographical and symbolical marginal terrain, Roma Sendyka’s theoretical exploration of “non-sites of memory” (*nie-miejsca pamięci*) provides a conceptual language for understanding how certain zones become symbolically excluded even when materially present. Developed in

¹² Anne Kelly Knowles, ed., *Geographies of the Holocaust*, The Spatial Humanities (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 4.

¹³ Karen E. Till and Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto-Arponen, “Towards Responsible Geographies of Memory: Complexities of Place and the Ethics of Remembering,” *Erdkunde* 69, no. 4 (2015): 302.

¹⁴ Mark Edele, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Atina Grossmann, eds., *Shelter from the Holocaust: Rethinking Jewish Survival in the Soviet Union* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017).

response to post-genocidal sites in Poland that contain human remains but lack formal commemoration, Sendyka redefines forgetting not as absence but as a condition of active silencing. These are not erased places, but ones where the past persists through soil, vegetation, rumors, and material residue—without the stabilizing frame of symbolic closure. In contrast to Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*, which presuppose mnemonic consolidation, Sendyka identifies spaces that are saturated with violence but “have been commemorated ‘not enough’—incorrectly, imprecisely.” These areas do not manifest in the field of cultural memory, but they are nonetheless active—taboo places marked in the landscape or architectural residue and which locals actively react to through rumors, avoidance, and vernacular practices.¹⁵ Beyond the fear of sites being haunted by violence, active silences also reveal unprocessed social emotions such as “guilt and fear of recorking, or shame in the face of neglect.”¹⁶

Terrain, for Sendyka, is not backdrop but archive and actor. At non-sites of memory, the terrain has ‘witnessed’ past violence and can ‘remember’ the events—not according to anthropocentric norms—for instance in plaques or curatorial framing, but in landscape that reveals or withholds remnants in depressions, soil discoloration, or mounds. Trees, for example, can be the sole witnesses to whole communities erased, and then drink the water mixed with ashes, becoming “the form of the victim’s endurance.”¹⁷ These insights resonate with the sites analyzed in this chapter: the cremation pits at Birkenau were long fenced off and protected, but not narratively interpreted; the SS Kommandantur and Höss villa were preserved but excluded from commemorative framing. By shifting the focus from whether a site is remembered to how memory takes form beyond symbolic representation, Sendyka invites attention to the terrain

¹⁵ Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem: nie-miejsca pamięci - próba rozpoznania*, Nowa Humanistyka, t. 63 (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2021), 47–48. All quotes translated by author.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 54–57.

itself, opening up a way to read these internal peripheries of Auschwitz not as overlooked, but as structurally unsettled zones marked by pronounced moral and social ambiguity, within a landscape otherwise saturated by commemorative coherence.

The concept of the periphery—both as a spatial descriptor and an interpretive category—runs through many of the case studies explored in an edited volume by Sendyka.¹⁸ The participating authors mark periphery not merely a geographic margin but a condition of symbolic displacement: a zone where violence occurred but where memory has failed to consolidate. These sites are not invisible; rather, they are made peripheral through institutional neglect, narrative omission, or commemorative asymmetry. The peripheral, in this framework, names a dynamic process of exclusion from the dominant spatial grammar of memory.

Aleksandra Janus, in her study of the peripheries of Sobibór, explicitly names the extermination site as operating on the peripheries of memory not only because of its rural location but because of the absence of material remains. She emphasizes that Sobibór was constructed to leave no architectural trace, and that its postwar landscape offers few legible cues.¹⁹ Its peripherality, however, also lies in its partial commemoration, the dispersed nature of human remains, worksites, and subcamps scattered around the area and which pose a challenge for their demarcation, visualization, and commemoration.²⁰ Mikołaj Smykowski's analysis of Chełmno similarly focuses on peripheral killing zones—forest areas where bodies were burned and scattered, but which remain fragmented in both commemoration and public awareness. His central insight is that peripheries are not created by distance alone, but by nationally inclined

¹⁸ Roma Sendyka et al., eds., *Nie-miejsca pamięci. Cz. 1: Nekrotopografie*, Nowa Humanistyka, t. 61 (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2020).

¹⁹ Aleksandra Janus, "Sobibór. Peryferie obozu zagłady," in *Nie-miejsca pamięci. Cz. 1: Nekrotopografie*, ed. Roma Sendyka et al., Nowa Humanistyka, t. 61 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2020), 441–42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 262–72

selective memorial attention and the privileging of certain narratives over others. In the case of Chełmno, a site associated primarily with Jewish victimhood, the communist state commemorative framing of the site erased its Jewish significance.²¹ His insights point to how commemorative asymmetry is produced by powerful agents such as the state. Finally, Katarzyna Grzybowska, writing on Krępiec Forest, emphasizes how peripherality emerges through a vernacular ethics of avoidance: residents remember the dead and warn each other to avoid burial sites, marking their graves both by desecration and sacralization. Nevertheless, these practices remain local, availing official frameworks, marked instead by gesture, warning, and silence.²²

These scholars treat peripherality as a site of tension between material presence and symbolic absence—a dynamic that resonates with the terrains explored in this chapter. Sobibór and Chełmno were officially recognized as sites of atrocity: the Polish state, Holocaust researchers, and commemorative practices have acknowledged their historical significance. Yet as Janus and Smykowski show, their material integration into public memory remains peripheral—managed, marked, but still narratively marginalized within the broader commemorative landscape. Their broader historical significance has thus been diminished not through erasure, but through selective incorporation and spatial marginalization.

A similar, though distinct, dynamic the peripheries I trace below. Unlike Sobibór and Chełmno, which lie geographically distant from major memorial circuits, these sites are situated within the very core of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. Yet despite their physical centrality, they too remain interpretively peripheral: contained, bounded, and unsettling within an otherwise

²¹ Mikołaj Smykowski, “Peryferie Chełmna nad Nerem. Materializacje (nie)pamięci,” in *Nie-miejsca pamięci. Cz. 1: Nekrotopografie*, ed. Roma Sendyka et al., Nowa Humanistyka, t. 61 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2020), 379–406.

²² Katarzyna Grzybowska, “Krępiec. Resztki ludzkie w peryferyjnym lesie,” in *Nie-miejsca pamięci. Cz. 1: Nekrotopografie*, ed. Roma Sendyka et al., Nowa Humanistyka, t. 61 (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, 2020), 407–40.

highly curated terrain of memory. They are neither erased nor fully integrated: materially present but symbolically unsettled. Their ambiguous status—recognized yet marginalized—makes them critical test cases for analyzing how violence is differentially remembered even at the heart of commemoration.

The case studies that follow extend the conceptual framework introduced by Sendyka, Janus, Smykowski, and Grzybowska by examining two internal peripheries within Auschwitz-Birkenau: the improvisational gas chambers and dispersed cremation fields behind Birkenau and the structurally intact yet narratively absent SS Kommandantur near Auschwitz I. Neither zone was forgotten, nor were they ever physically outside the museum's domain. Yet both have remained structurally marginal within the spatial and narrative organization of the memorial. Their peripherality has emerged not through outright neglect, but through active processes of physical containment, symbolic distancing, and ethical deferral.

Case Study I: The First Improvisational Gas Chambers and the Incineration Pits in Birkenau

From Farmhouses to Gas Chambers: The Origin of a Future Periphery

The incineration pits and the first two makeshift gas chambers at Birkenau, known as the “Little White House” (Bunker 1) and the “Little Red House” (Bunker 2), are closely linked sites in the history of extermination at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was here that the first Zyklon B gassings at Birkenau took place, claiming, according to estimates, the lives of approximately 100,000 people.²³

²³ “Aktualności. 2001. O 'Odnalezieniu' Pierwszej Komory Gazowej,” *Official archived site of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Miejsca Pamięci i Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau*, November 11, 2001, accessed April 20, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20060930084436/http://www.auschwitz-muzeum.oswiecim.pl/new/index.php?tryb=news_big&language=PL&id=616.

Before the war, this area consisted of agricultural land dotted with a few farmhouses belonging to the village of Brzezinka. As part of the broader effort to evacuate the area to make way for the camp, the SS seized these lands and structures in April 1941. Beginning in October 1941, thousands of Soviet POWs were deployed in the construction commando tasked with building Birkenau—a vast complex designed to house 100,000 prisoners.²⁴ Most of the existing farmhouses were demolished, with the exception of two small structures located on the northern outskirts of the camp. One had red exterior walls; the other, white. Both were surrounded by fruit trees, creating an idyllic landscape.²⁵

In the summer of 1941, Adolf Eichmann visited Birkenau and, in agreement with camp commandant Rudolf Höss, decided to convert the two farmhouses into gas chambers, taking advantage of their unassuming appearance to deceive the victims.²⁶ The internal layouts of both houses were modified: windows were sealed, and wooden planks were used to create doors, above which signs reading “Zur Desinfektion” (“For Disinfection”) were affixed. The doors could be locked with two external bolts tightened with screws. Inside, the rooms were painted white and the floors covered with sawdust. Near the Little White House, two wooden undressing barracks were constructed. Upon arrival, victims were ordered to undress under the pretense of taking a disinfecting shower. Then, accompanied by beatings and barking dogs, they were forced into the chambers, the doors were bolted shut, and canisters of Zyklon B were thrown inside.²⁷

The pits served as sites where the corpses of gassed victims were subsequently burned. After suffocation and death inside the gas chambers, bodies were transferred to nearby pits

²⁴ Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945*, 1st Owl Book ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, 93; Szlama Dragon, "Testimony," May 11, 1945, Supreme National Tribunal, Institute of National Remembrance GK 196/93, *Chronicles of Terror Database*, Pilecki Institute, accessed April 20, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/eSM4O>.

camouflaged with twig fences. Later, prisoners constructed a field railway to facilitate the transport of corpses to the incineration pits. Once the cremation process was complete, ashes were loaded onto trucks and, under orders, Sonderkommando prisoners scattered them into the Soła and Vistula rivers.²⁸ According to camp commandant Rudolf Höss, Bunker 2 could kill up to 800 people at a time, while the Bunker 1 up to 1200.²⁹ In contrast, Szlama Dragon, a Polish-Jewish Sonderkommando survivor, testified in May 1945 that Bunker 2 could fit up to 2000 people, while Bunker 1 close to 2500.³⁰ The smaller house (Bunker 2) was demolished in 1943 after the larger, purpose-built gas chambers at Birkenau began operation. The SS ceased exterminations at the larger farmhouse (Bunker 1) around the same time but resumed its use during the mass extermination of Hungarian Jews in mid-1944. Both houses were ultimately dismantled in late 1944, during the destruction of the remaining large-scale extermination facilities at Birkenau.³¹ Even so, the area was reused in the final days of the camp's operation as a site for corpse disposal.³²

The ruins of the first gas chambers and their adjacent incineration pits at Birkenau are significant for three interrelated reasons. First, they mark a terrain of human remains: sites that function both as mass graves and as evidence of the violence committed. The use of burning pits—an early and relatively primitive method of corpse disposal—left profound forensic and material traces, even though the SS later attempted to obliterate them. Second, the preserved ruins of the huts illuminate the early phase of the extermination process and its technological

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, 93.

³⁰ Dragon and Supreme National Tribunal, "Testimony."

³¹ Krystyna Marszałek, "'The Little Red House': Commemorating the Site of a Tragedy," *Pro Memoria* 16 (January 2002): 13; Igor Bartosik and Łukasz Martyniak, "*Biały Domek*": *Historia Zagłady w Bunkrze II* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2017).

³² Marta Zawodna, "O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata: Sposoby postępowania ze szczątkami ludzkimi na terenach byłego KL Auschwitz-Birkenau od momentu ostatecznej ewakuacji obozu do powstania Muzeum," *Zagłada Żydów: Studia i Materiały*, no. 8 (2012): 149.

optimization. Based on the initial operations at Bunkers 1 and 2, where bodies were first buried and later burned in open-air pits, the SS Central Construction Office planned the development of more permanent and industrialized killing facilities: four crematoria equipped with gas chambers and furnaces, completed between March and June 1943. However, as Jean-Claude Pressac emphasized, when the crematoria's capacity was overwhelmed—particularly during the mass arrival of Hungarian Jews in 1944—the SS reverted to the use of open-air burning in large pits, dug again near Bunker 2. The pits thus served as both an early and late-stage solution: a fallback when cremation technologies proved insufficient for the volume of corpses. Lastly, these sites became the locus of a major effort to destroy evidence. As part of Sonderaktion 1005 and parallel initiatives, the SS demolished the structures of Bunkers 1 and 2, filled in or camouflaged the pits, and sought to erase visible traces. When Soviet forces arrived in January 1945, the area appeared as an empty, barren terrain, devoid of standing structures, though human ashes and skeletal remains remained embedded in the soil.³³ In the decades that followed, this terrain would transform into a form of non-site memory: materially potent yet narratively unsettled, marked not by monumentalization but by an uneasy silence.

The Early Life of a Marginal Cemetery

The earth was not left alone for long. Human remains lay near the ground's surface, attracting both animals and humans. After the liberation, rats and rodents infested the terrain, tossing and turning the soil, scattering partially decomposed body parts across the landscape.³⁴ Soon, scavengers from across Poland arrived, sieving through the nearby Sola and Vistula rivers

³³ Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989), 161-182.

³⁴ Zawodna, "O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata," 149.

and digging up the mass graves and incineration pits in search of valuables.³⁵ These acts of grave desecration soon drew international embarrassment. In response, beginning in April 1946, the Ministry of Culture deployed a permanent protection unit to the site. This unit, composed largely of former prisoners, was tasked with safeguarding the terrain from so-called “hyenas.”³⁶

A photo taken in May 1946 by Mieczysław Kieta, a member of the unit and a former inmate, shows a pile of confiscated shovels surrounded by churned earth. The places where scavengers had turned the soil provides stark visual evidence of desecration and lingering human remains. The terrain was to become part of the museum. Although the sources do not confirm whether museum staff actively reburied exposed material, it seems reasonable to assume that some form of stabilization followed the protection unit’s arrival and preparations for the museum’s inauguration.



Figure 15. Turned soil in Birkenau. Photograph by member of the protection unit and former camp prisoner Mieczysław Kieta, 1946. Source: Jacek Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zaorać...?: idea założenia Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w świetle prasy polskiej w latach 1945-1948* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu, 2007), 178.

³⁵ “Kopalna złota w Oświęcimiu,” *Echo Krakowa*, no. 47, June 27, 1946, 1.

³⁶ Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, 21.

The actions of scavengers significantly disturbed the soil, accelerating decomposition processes and altering how organic matter interacted with the landscape. Press coverage from around the time of the museum's inauguration suggests that the initial tidying of the terrain may have been haphazard—or that natural processes quickly resurfaced decomposing material. When the museum opened, the official visitor route excluded the incineration pits. Nevertheless, some visitors sought them out. On June 16, 1947, the day of the museum's inauguration, Wanda Kragen, a reporter for *Robotnik* (the Polish Socialist Party's newspaper), described her impressions of the pits:

We are here now, walking around places where they buried and burnt corpses that the crematoria could not handle. [...] On the side, you can see the ruins of a hut. It is a primitive gas chamber, blown up by the Germans probably during the evacuation [...] Gas bubbles rise on the puddles, burst upon contact with air. Down here, the remains of unburnt human tissue are still fermenting. It is clear that this is one of the largest, massive cemeteries of nameless bones and ashes. It is soil, every inch saturated with human remains in the form of smaller and larger bone fragments, compact, dark lumps coming from the congealed goo of burnt bodies.³⁷

Kragen's gruesome account is saturated with body parts, decomposed tissue, and bone. To her, every inch of the earth was hiding human remains. Her depiction evokes a landscape replete with activated organic matter, where human and non-human elements intermingle and congeal. While her language is clearly meant to shock, it also conveys a visceral sense of dismay. She gives us a glimpse of how quickly decomposed matter reentered the landscape—complicating any attempt to locate, identify, or contain the remains. As Małczyński and Domańska argue, Holocaust sites are not just scenes of historical violence but stratified ecosystems that retain material traces of atrocity. The incineration pits, sodden and chemically saturated, became what they and Sendyka

³⁷ Wanda Kragen, "Obóz koncentracyjny przeobraża się w muzeum," *Robotnik: centralny organ PPS*, no. 160, June 16, 1947, 4; reprinted in Jacek Lachendro, *Zburzyć i zorać...? Idea założenia Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w świetle prasy polskiej w latach 1945–1948* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2007), 213.

call “archives” of the dead—landscapes that, through ecological processes, preserved and reactivated evidence that the perpetrators had sought to obliterate.³⁸

In her detailed research of the fate of human remains in the immediate aftermath of the camp’s liberation, Marta Zawodna argues that initial acts of collecting and burial of human remains around Auschwitz-Birkenau were part of a broader symbolic shift. In the weeks following liberation, the border between the living and the dead had not yet been reestablished. Corpses lay across the grounds, uncollected. But with the burial of the last known bodies in a symbolic grave in February 1945, a new logic emerged. The Christian ceremony, which took place next to Auschwitz I, a site associated with Polish political prisoners, marked the dead’s identities as Polish-Catholic.³⁹ As Zawodna puts it, once the victims’ remains were absorbed into a sacred national and religious framework, further digging began to be designated as sacrilege.⁴⁰ The majority of the former terrain transformed from an open site of physical evidence into what Colls calls a space with a “cemetery-like feel,” where digging and exhumation would constitute a disturbance of the dead.⁴¹ However, the site of the unmarked cremation pits located at Birkenau, a site of Jewish victimhood, were left outside of the sacralizing framework, and thus continued to hold an unstable, ambiguous status. Indeed, they remained a site of grave desecration throughout the following decade.⁴²

³⁸ Jacek Małczyński et al., “The Environmental History of the Holocaust,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 185–86, 192, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1715533>.

³⁹ Zawodna, “O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata,” 161–62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴¹ Caroline Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies: Approaches and Future Directions* (New York: Springer, 2015), 65, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-10641-0>.

⁴² The phenomenon was reported as late as 1956. Kazimierz Smoleń, “Sprawozdanie z X-letniej działalności Muzeum w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince,” October 10, 1956, *Zbiór Referaty*, tom 4, *APMA-B*, 15.

Mapping an Ambiguous Terrain: Institutional Gaps and Forensic Absences

Early forensic investigations of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex lasted a short time and did not entail building a substantial body of forensic evidence. As Colls notes, at various Holocaust sites the Soviet Special Commission inspected crime scenes only to ascertain their location, and “not to establish the precise nature and sequence of events,” for which they lacked technical expertise, appropriate technology, and procedural protocols.⁴³ Consequently, the terrain of the incineration pits was under inspected. Colls further observes that when memorialization occurs at a site, it often creates the false impression that all evidence has been found and fully understood.⁴⁴ In this case, however, memorialization lagged behind. The absence of visible markers and the decision not to conduct a full forensic survey preserved an open-endedness—one that left the pits physically vulnerable thus prone to disappearance.

Despite their ambiguous status and marginal location, the museum made early efforts to identify and include the pits in its commemorative blueprint. As early as 1947, the Historical Commission designated the terrain of the incineration pits for inclusion in a future “cemetery park,” along with the ruins of the crematoria. The intent was to distinguish the extermination zones of Birkenau from the rest of the camp, which was to be preserved in its evacuated state.⁴⁵ But the designation remained general; no specific measurements or fencing followed.

In the years that followed, the pits’ boundaries proved elusive. The museum’s 1950 topographical map of Birkenau marked six known incineration pits—two clusters, one near the “Little White House,” the other near the “Little Red House” and adjacent to the mass graves of Soviet POWs (see figures 2-6 in the appendixes).⁴⁶ The map did not indicate how these areas

⁴³ Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁵ Historical Commission, “Odpis,” 1946–1947, *Materiały*, tom 56, *APMA-B*, 9.

⁴⁶ Inż. Stefan Rapf, “Szkice Polowe: Oświęcim-Brzezinka-Rajsko-Pławy,” 1949–1950, 257/12/6/60, *ADK PMA-B*.

were determined. Likely, resurfacing remains provided evidence of their location. The testimony of survivors,⁴⁷ as well as the preliminary inspections by Soviet and Polish investigative commissions, may have further guided these identifications. According to museum Senior Researcher Franciszek Piper, the Research department collected information on the sites, yet it is unclear when this was done.⁴⁸ Still, the museum lacked certainty. Its plans to survey the terrain were repeatedly delayed, and archival folders meant to contain the results of a geological study from 1966 remain empty to this day,⁴⁹ the empty folder itself becomes an archival echo of institutional ambivalence.

In 1958, the museum submitted a general investment plan to the Ministry of Culture in preparation for its first large-scale conservation initiative. The plan included a request to measure the pits' boundaries so that they could be properly fenced, estimating the need for 3,000 square meters of fencing to prevent further profanation.⁵⁰ Attached to the application were photographs showing open pits with visible bones. One caption noted: "Birkenau – burning pits dug up in 1953. Throughout the entire area of the incineration pits, there are human bones in a depth of approximately 2 meters."⁵¹ It is unclear how this marked depth was ascertained. Furthermore, even more than a decade after the war, desecration appears to have continued. As Dziuban points out, desecration in postwar Poland cannot be reduced solely to lawlessness or poverty: it also

⁴⁷ E.g.: Dragon and Supreme National Tribunal, "Testimony"; Henryk Tauber, "Testimony," May 24, 1945, *Chronicles of Terror*, Pilecki Institute, original: Institute of National Remembrance, file GK 196/93, accessed [date], <https://zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/3783/edition/3764/content>.

⁴⁸ "Aktualności. 2001. O 'Odnalezieniu' Pierwszej Komory Gazowej."

⁴⁹ "Notatka dot. badań geologicznych w wposzukiwaniu szczątków ludzkich w Birkenau w 1966 roku: B-38, B-39, B-40, B-422, B-455," 1966, B038/01/10, *ADK PMA-B*.

⁵⁰ "Założenia do planu inwestycyjnego," November 27, 1958, 366/WMiPWzF/24, *AAN*, 27–28.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

reflected preexisting social divisions and the failure to integrate Jewish victimhood into the dominant commemorative script.⁵²

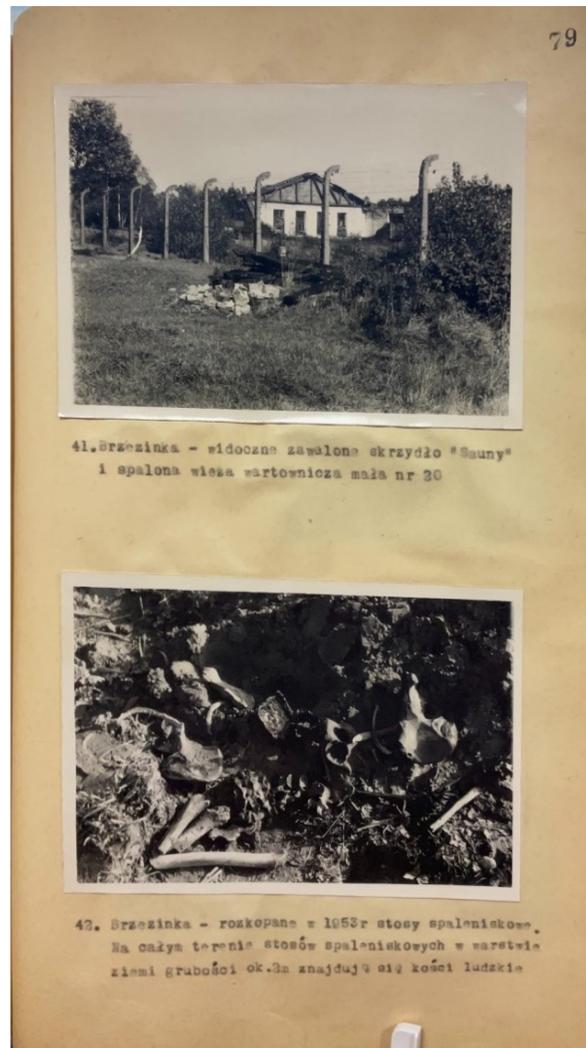


Figure 16. The pictures attached to the description of the state of the terrain from the first draft of the memorial site's conservation plan, 1958. Notice the open vista to the landscape in the first picture, contrasting with the close-up of turned earth, replete with human remains, in the second picture. The scattered location of the bones indicates a haphazard way of burial, as well as signs of grave desecration.

Source: "Założenia Do Planu Inwentycznego" (November 27, 1958),
366/WMiPWzF/24, AAN, 79.

⁵² Zuzanna Dziuban, "(Re)Politicising the Dead in Post-Holocaust Poland: The Afterlives of Human Remains at the Belzec Extermination Camp," in *Human Remains in Society: Curation and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass-Violence*, ed. Jean-Marc Dreyfus and Élisabeth Gessat-Anstett, *Human Remains and Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 45–48.

The available archival sources do not reveal whether the museum's requests to measure and fence the pits were ever implemented. What eventually seems to have prompted action was not commemorative urgency but the deteriorating physical condition of the terrain itself. By the mid-1960s, Birkenau was at risk of flooding, and the marshy soil threatened to destabilize the remaining structures and ruins within the barbed-wire perimeter. In 1966, a large-scale dehydration project was undertaken—one of the few infrastructural interventions that tangibly addressed the terrain of the pits.⁵³ Yet even this effort was driven more by necessity than symbolic intent.

From Dispersed Ashes to Contained Memory

Throughout the postwar decades, the bunkers and pits' marginality were both literal and symbolic. Only the terrain of Bunker 1 and its adjacent undressing barracks was included in the museum's official boundaries, declared in 1957. For reasons that remain unclear, Bunker 2 was excluded. In 1955, the Polish family who had owned the land before the war returned and rebuilt their home on the site. When the state legislated the museum's boundaries two years later, the house appears to have been treated as a fixed postwar fact—part of a landscape of reconstruction rather than preservation.⁵⁴ As a result, this key site of extermination was effectively erased from the institutional terrain.

Bunker 1 and its area, which remained within the museum boundaries, suffered from a sustained lack of commemoration. The exclusion was partly the result of the sites' geography and appearance. The SS chose the location to execute their murderous plans well—on the edge of the forest, remote and hard to reach. From the Gate of Death at Birkenau's entrance, it took

⁵³ W. Jirak, "Projekt koncepcyjny odwodnienia terenu. Stosy spaleniskowe B-455," 1965, B445/01/05, *ADK PMA-B*.

⁵⁴ Miejsce Pamięci Muz. Auschwitz-Birkenau, "Aktualności. 2001. O 'Odnalezieniu' Pierwszej Komory Gazowej."

nearly two kilometers to reach Bunker 1. Furthermore, the pits and adjacent Bunker offered no architectural referents—no ruins, no mass, no scale. The destruction of the evidence left these sites empty, amorphous, and undefined. Compounding this issue was the thin curatorial framing and lack of planned visitor circulation. Until the early 2000s, the museum offered no clear interpretive trail to the pits, and most visitors never reached Birkenau at all.⁵⁵

Several commemorative designs for the area were offered over the years. In 1954, during the early wave of de-Stalinization, the Ministry of Culture commissioned an inspection report of the museum, including aspects of the Birkenau terrain which have yet to be properly organized. The report called for the expropriation of all land containing human remains, the decoration of Soviet POW graves (located near Bunker 2, but inside the museum boundaries), and the creation of a three-dimensional model of the camp to be displayed at the entrance. The model would feature a glass panel showing a cross-section of the incineration pits and the ashes they contained—a literal visual cut through layers of soil and death.⁵⁶ Though never realized, the plan is revealing. It attempted to render the landscape legible through dislocated display, translating dispersed ashes into a contained visual anchor. But this logic also reflected state priorities: The emphasis on Soviet POW graves would have centered ‘brotherly’ Soviet martyrdom and elevated politically legible suffering, while continuing to marginalize the ungrievable Jewish dead. It also proved that even if a site was geographically peripheral, it could, in theory, be considered as a site of crucial import. As Colls argues, decisions about which remains to visualize often serve contemporary political needs, enhancing dominant narratives while sidelining others.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ See the growth in visitor numbers to Birkenau from 1990–2005. As late as 1990, only 39% of museum visitors made the trip to Birkenau. See Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: historia, polityka i pamięć: wokół Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980–2010* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2016), 264.

⁵⁶ “Notatkę w sprawie reorganizacji Muzeum w Oświęcimiu,” September 1954, 366/5/5/45, *AAN*, 1–2.

⁵⁷ Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, 300.

1955 marked a broader turning point. As discussed in the previous chapter, this was the year of survivor curatorship returned to the helm of the museum, coinciding with preparations for the tenth anniversary of the camp's liberation. The museum began reorienting its commemorative approach to Birkenau, bringing greater attention to its significance within the camp complex. These efforts included placing a large sarcophagus of victims' ashes at the end of the unloading and selection ramp, between Crematoria II and III.⁵⁸ This clumsy commemorative stone was to serve as a temporary solution until the construction of the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, whose competition was declared in 1956. The sarcophagus solved the problem the pits' physical marginality and empty space by symbolically relocating them to the heart of Birkenau. Simultaneously, however, it stripped these ashes from their spatial specificity. Whose ashes were buried and from whence they came—remains unknown. Still, the sarcophagus provided some representation of the unmarked buried ashes at the edges of the camp. By representing ashes in the camp's interior, the museum attempted to fix and stabilize them. Yet this act of symbolic relocation further illustrates how liminal sites of memory are not integrated but displaced—rendered legible only by removing them from their original terrain. Nevertheless, the practice of placing ashes in commemorative designs proved salient, and ashes were also incorporated into the foundations of the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, eventually inaugurated in 1967. This centralizing tendency marked the beginning of the museum's long struggle to integrate Birkenau's peripheries into its primary terrain.

⁵⁸ "Dokumentacji budowy pomnika w Brzezince," segr. PB/2, ZPMO.

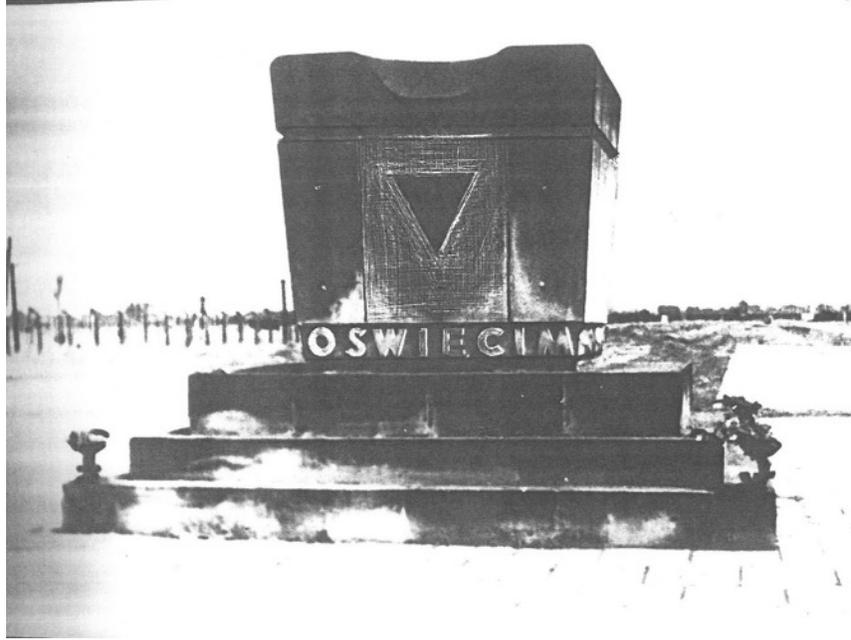


Figure 17. Sarcophagus with the ashes of victims placed between crematorium II and III in Birkenau, 1955-1967. Source: Dokumentacji Budowy pomnika w Brzezince, segr. PB/2, ZPMO.

The sarcophagus provided some displaced commemoration, while the terrain of the incineration pits itself still required urgent maintenance. Despite Bunker 1's early marginalization, the museum recognized the need to organize access to this important site. In 1959, the museum submitted its first master conservation plan, which proposed removing overgrowth at the incineration pits and organizing visitor access. Acknowledging the remoteness of the site, museum leadership began to consider infrastructural solutions.⁵⁹ The 1962 conservation plan proposed a formal visitor route ending at the pits, and Chief Conservator Tadeusz Kinowski even envisioned a road system allowing buses to reach the site directly, bypassing the long walk through the camp.⁶⁰ But the plan was ultimately rejected—likely due to

⁵⁹ Tadeusz Kinowski and Kazimierz Smoleń, "Plan perspektywiczny prac konserwatorskich Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka na lata 1958–59" (study, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 1957), Kon III/01/02, *ADK PMA-B*, 13.

⁶⁰ Tadeusz Kinowski, "Zadania Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu w zakresie konserwacji, remontów i inwestycji w odniesieniu do obiektów i terenu na lata 1963–1966" (October 20, 1962), *Zbiór: Opracowania*, tom 23, Kinowski/93, *APMA-B*, 8–9.

concerns about preserving the solemn atmosphere of the site by preventing motor vehicle access, as well as logistical limitations. Yet, as Colls reminds, such decisions are never purely technical: they shape symbolic inclusion.⁶¹ At Birkenau, the absence of a road signaled that the pits still lay outside the museum's core narrative.

These infrastructural considerations unfolded alongside broader conservation efforts that shaped not only the material stability of the site but its symbolic visibility. As Francesco Mazzucchelli observes, preservation not only stabilizes ruins but also constructs symbolic meaning: it draws attention to what stands above ground, while what lies beneath—or leaves no visible trace—fades from narrative visibility.⁶² At Birkenau, a site already marked by absence, this dynamic produced a stark spatial hierarchy. Conservation efforts between 1960 and 1964 focused on material remains that could anchor meaning—the gas chambers, crematoria, fences, and chimneys—creating a “forest” of stabilized forms that dominated visual and spatial memory. By contrast, the pits and Bunker 1, unbuilt and visually diffuse, could not compete with that symbolic density. They remained outside the curated field of visibility, excluded because they resisted the commemorative logics that prioritized architectural presence, even in the form of ruin. Their long-standing marginality, rooted in material absence, was rendered even more illegible by the very strategies designed to fix memory.

Still, museum professionals were aware of the sites' invisibility and continued to propose solutions. Over the following years, the museum continued to explore—but not implement—commemorative plans. In the museum's internal bulletin from March 1961, Director Kazimierz

⁶¹ Sturdy Colls, *Holocaust Archaeologies*, 297.

⁶² Francesco Mazzucchelli, “From the ‘Era of the Witness’ to an Era of Traces,” in *Mapping the “Forensic Turn”*: *Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, ed. Zuzanna Dziuban, *Beiträge des VWI zur Holocaustforschung*, Band 5 (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017), 170.

Smoleń declared once again that the incineration pits should be “set up as cemeteries.”⁶³ The conservation plan for 1963–1966 (drafted in 1962) proposed revealing the foundations of the “Little White House” and its undressing barracks, trimming vegetation, and creating a “plastic solution” for their presentation.⁶⁴ Another proposal from 1963 imagined an underground crypt with transparent walls through which visitors could view ashes.⁶⁵ Smoleń seemed unaware that such practices would contradict Jewish burial customs. In all proposed designs, the pits and bunker were to transform from invisible terrain into objects of visual encounter—contained, legible, and mournable. Yet these plans never materialized, and the sites remained unmarked and untreated.

The terrain was also politically volatile. The remains at the pits were simultaneously evidence of extermination, remnants of erasure, and the object of postwar desecration. Their commemorative framing required decisions not only about what kind of dead were buried there, but about what kind of mourning could be publicly endorsed. In the context of the communist state’s anti-Zionist campaigns, the reluctance to address this terrain was also ideological. This was a site of Jewish victimhood at the edge of a site of Jewish victimhood, whose commemoration was taken up at the height of communist dogma. As Jonathan Huener argues, the 1960s witnessed a systematic marginalization of Birkenau within the museum’s commemorative framework, precisely because its geography bore witness to the scale and specificity of Jewish extermination. The museum’s focus shifted instead toward Auschwitz I, where national exhibitions and narratives of political resistance could be more easily aligned with state ideology. The 1967 International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, while located

⁶³ Kazimierz Smoleń, “Biuletyn wewnętrzny nr 3/61,” February 27, 1961, Zbiór: Materiały, *Biuletyn wewnętrzny* 1961/62, *APMA-B*, 15.

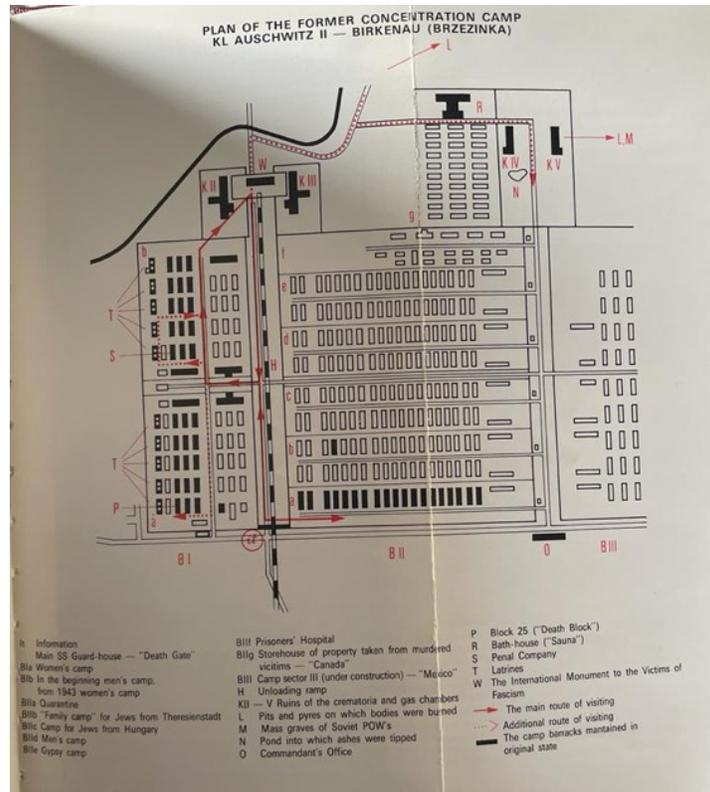
⁶⁴ Kinowski, “Zadania Państwowego Muzeum,” 14.

⁶⁵ Smoleń, “Biuletyn wewnętrzny nr 3/61,” *APMA-B*, 21.

in Birkenau, reinforced this universalizing narrative. Its abstract forms and ambiguous language elevated political martyrdom over racial persecution, allowing Jewish suffering to be acknowledged only indirectly—if at all.⁶⁶ Similarly to the Chełmno site, in which the communist state created commemorative hierarchies, the invisibility of the pits was not merely a logistical or curatorial oversight, but part of a broader inclination to obscure the distinctly Jewish dimension of mass death at Birkenau. Indeed, the museum's guidebooks from 1974 to 1990 did not mention the pits at all. In 1991, they appeared for the first time—but only as a label pointing to an area beyond the edge of the printed map.⁶⁷ This long standing silence demonstrates the dynamic of commemorative asymmetry: a selective commemoration that recognizes certain deaths while allowing others to fade into institutional periphery. The pits and bunker thus transformed into a site beyond the site—one that neither invited nor explained itself. This trend retained its force throughout the 1970s, and will only begin to transform in the 1980s, with larger transformations in Poland's memory politics.

⁶⁶ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, especially 153, 163, 172-173, 196.

⁶⁷ Kazimierz Smoleń, *State Museum in Oświęcim: Guide-Book*, trans. Stephen Lee (Oświęcim: Publishing House of the State Museum in Oświęcim, 1997), 25.



Map 3. Museum map, 1991. The arrow with L points towards the general direction of the Bunkers and incineration pits.

Shifting Symbolic Frameworks: Reinscribing Jewish Presence in Peripheral Ground

In the 1980s, a subtle yet significant reorientation began. In 1983, Polish scouts placed Stars of David and Christian crosses behind the "Little White House," where it was believed that Edith Stein, a Carmelite nun and Jewish-born German philosopher, had perished. The juxtaposition of Jewish and Catholic religious symbols hinted at the changing nature of victimhood, mourning, and belonging in Poland. Though not sanctioned by the museum, these grassroots interventions marked a new era of public activity in Auschwitz's commemorative landscape, coinciding with broader shifts in Polish memory culture. For the Scouts group, placing both symbols meant, at long last, the equal partnership of Jews and Catholic-Poles in

their common site of martyrdom. In contrast, Jewish leaders found the equal placement of crosses and stars of David at this site identified with Jewish victimhood was a cause for outcry.

As I discuss in the next chapter, after 1989 the politics of commemoration in Poland underwent a radical reordering, rooted in shifts that had begun in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Jewish memory came to the fore, and this development also reshaped the commemorative logic surrounding the pits. Once peripheral in every sense, they emerged as a site of heightened concern and Polish-Jewish contestation. The evolving politics of memory, together with increasing international—especially Jewish—advocacy, eventually led to the removal of the crosses in December 1997.⁶⁸ This successful campaign signified not only a symbolic repositioning of Jewish victimhood, but also a physical reintegration of the terrain of Jewish Birkenau into the broader story of Auschwitz and Polish national memory.



Figure 18. The Field of Ashes dotted with religious symbols, behind Bunker 1. 1997.
Source: ADK PMA-B/B445/01/04

⁶⁸ Miles Lerman, “Letter from Miles Lerman to Ambassador of the Republic of Poland, Jerzy Koźmiński,” December 5, 1997, 7, 2016.021 Subject File: Birkenau. Removal of Religious Symbols, Institutional Archives, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (henceforth IA-USHMM).

This renewed attention led, incrementally, to the site's commemoration. The controversy around the religious symbols around Bunker 1 probably provoked its reorganizing. The museum finally paved a road that provided visitor access and commemorative plaques were set up on the site. Bunker 2 was also finally incorporated into the museum terrain. In 2001, the "Little Red House" and its surrounding pits were added to the national registry of protected landmarks. In 2004, following a protracted dispute, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp Victims Memorial Foundation purchased the land and donated it to the museum. The following year, a gravel path was laid to connect the pits to the central terrain of Birkenau. The site was also properly fenced.⁶⁹ On the demarked terrain the museum placed in the front of the fence a short explanation plaque, and inside, on the terrain itself, three black plaques, one in Polish, one in English, and one in Hebrew, which read: "In memory of the men, women, and children, victims of Nazi genocide, who were murdered here." Together, these modest interventions marked the Bunkers and incineration pits official incorporation into the museum's spatial and narrative map—but in a subdued key. Unlike the grand international monument, the pits were not monumentalized but simply marked and contained. With this imperfect solution finally in place, it seemed at long last the dead could rest.

⁶⁹ Krystyna Marszałek, "'The Little Red House': Commemorating The Site of a Tragedy," *Pro Memoria: Information Bulletin of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp Victims Memorial Foundation*, no. 16 (January 2002): 13–16; Rawecki, *Auschwitz-Birkenau Zone*, 151.



Figure 19. The Little Red House. Source: www.auschwitz.org



Figure 20. The Little White House. Source: www.auschwitz.org

The Open-Ended Politics of Dead Bodies

Marta Zawodna notes that while burial is often regarded as an act of care, protection, and finality, it can also serve as a means of appropriation and the assertion of power. “The polysemy of dead bodies,” she writes, “can be utilized by whoever holds sufficient political power or another form of authority at the time.”⁷⁰ Zuzanna Dziuban sharpens this dynamic in her analysis of Bełżec, where a new memorial was constructed between the late 1990s and early 2000s. Archaeological excavations conducted at the site between 1997 and 2002, initially unsupervised by rabbinical authorities, handled human remains in ways that violated Jewish religious law, provoking intense objections from religious leaders and victims’ families. Further controversy arose over a proposed memorial design that would have included an architectural cut through the burial grounds, visually exposing the mass grave. In response to these concerns, the final phase of the project was placed under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis and the Jewish Cemeteries Rabbinical Commission in Poland, illustrating how burial practices at sites of atrocity remain ethically, religiously, and politically contested.⁷¹

The redesigned memorial, completed in 2004, introduced commemorative names, religious symbols, and burial-sensitive engineering, such as geotextile membranes and drainage systems, to protect the site and prevent further resurfacing of remains. As Dziuban observes, the dead finally received proper burial but this framing also recast them as members of a clearly defined religious community and rearticulated the site as a Jewish cemetery.⁷² The resolution it offered came at the cost of silencing the site’s long and painful postwar history of neglect,

⁷⁰ Zawodna, “O porządkowaniu poobozowego świata,” 165.

⁷¹ Dziuban, “(Re)Politicising the Dead in Post-Holocaust Poland,” 52.

⁷² Dziuban argues that the Bełżec memorial reduced the plurality of Jewish victimhood by framing the dead through Orthodox burial protocols, subsuming diverse identities under the symbolic figure of the Jewish religious martyr. Ibid., 53.

deseccration, and institutional inaction. Unlike Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the commemorative terrain remains empty and to some extent open-ended, Bełżec was sealed through sacralization—protected, but also closed to further questioning.⁷³

Similarly, the field of ashes and the Bunkers, once desecrated, overlooked, and materially unstable, were ultimately reinscribed as an open air yet enclosed commemorative space. But this re-inscription came with its own exclusions. The symbolic clarity it offered, enacted through visual containment, rested on the erasure of a longer, more chaotic history: the scavengers' transgressions, the museum's inaction, the unrealized crypt and model, and the contentious negotiations over land and memory. As Zawodna and Dziuban both suggest, burial does not only protect the dead; it also fixes their meaning. It determines who they were, and who may speak on their behalf. In this sense, burial is not only a spiritual or commemorative act—it is a political one.

A striking illustration of this dynamic emerged in 2001, when French newspaper *Le Monde* declared that “The Little Red House” had finally been “discovered.” The article credited Italian historian Marcello Pezzetti and French-Jewish leader Richard Prasquier with locating the site, negotiating the purchase of the house that had stood atop it since 1955, and reclaiming the land for proper commemoration.⁷⁴ For Jewish leaders and memory activists, the act of “discovery” was symbolically essential. It corrected decades of marginalization and spatial exclusion. It enacted a form of moral justice, restoring visibility and dignity to the unnamed dead. From this perspective, the discovery was not a fabrication but a reassertion of presence after a long silence. It was, in effect, a symbolic burial enacted through making the site visible.

⁷³ *Ibid.*.

⁷⁴ *Miejsce Pamięci Muz. Auschwitz-Birkenau, “Aktualności. 2001. O ‘Odnalezieniu’ Pierwszej Komory Gazowej.”*

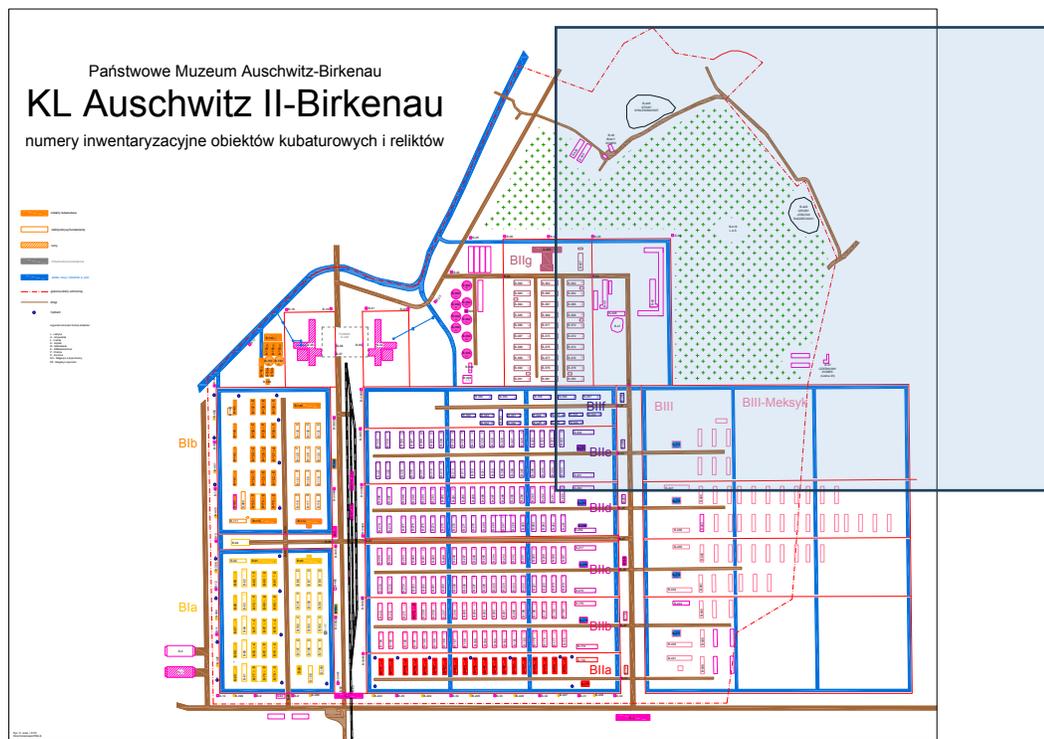
Yet the Polish museum's response told a different story. In Rzeczpospolita, senior staff rejected the notion that the site had ever been forgotten. They pointed to decades of documentation, maps, and survivor testimony that had clearly identified Bunker 2's location. As Franciszek Piper insisted, "one cannot live in something that no longer exists"—the original structure had been demolished in 1943, and the family had lived in a postwar house. What prevented earlier commemoration, they argued, was not denial but jurisdictional constraints and postwar reconstruction.⁷⁵ For the museum, the narrative of discovery implied institutional failure and historical amnesia. For Jewish actors, denying the reality of rediscovery meant downplaying the moral urgency of long-delayed burial.

This clash revealed more than just differing memories, it exposed a deeper contest over authority: who has the right to identify the dead, to declare them forgotten, and to return them to the commemorative map. It was not only a question of historical fact, but of symbolic and political control over the remains. In this sense, both narratives contain truth. The site had been known—and yet it had also been unmarked, unclaimed, and structurally excluded. From this perspective, the symbolic power of "discovery" lies in what it interrupts: the inertia of inaction, the long period in which the site remained unmarked and unclaimed. Even if the location was never truly forgotten, one can understand how it felt lost—at risk of being buried not by soil, but by silence. In this light, the act of naming and reclaiming the site takes on the character of a necessary correction, even if it overlays a more complicated past.

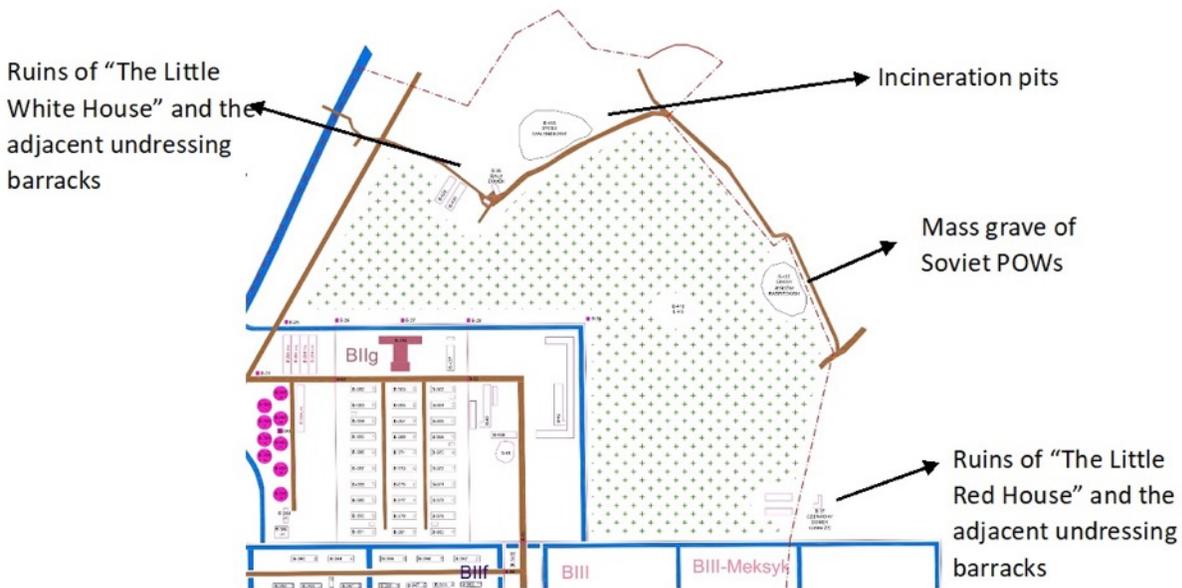
As with the pits, the story of Bunker 2 is not only about space but about power: about who gets to reanimate the dead, and who has the right to bury them again. What is visible today is not the full story, but a selectively stabilized one, shaped by competing imperatives to

⁷⁵ Ibid.

preserve, to mourn, to protect, and to narrate. A similar set of tensions shaped the fate of another marginal zone: the SS Kommandantur and the Höss villa. Yet here, the challenge lay not in preserving victim spaces, but in confronting the lingering material presence of perpetrator spaces—structures that were never fully destroyed yet remained difficult to narrate within the memorial site’s symbolic order. These internal peripheries, materially intact but interpretively fraught, complicate the memorial landscape in ways distinct from the abandoned pits of Birkenau.



Map 4. Contemporary map of Birkenau. Courtesy of Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Archives. The terrain of the incineration pits and bunkers is marked in light blue. Visitor entrance is marked at the bottom, in pink, from the Gate of Death. The walk from the entrance to Bunker 1 is about 2 kilometers. To reach Bunker 2, a visitor must walk an additional 1.5 kilometer.



Map 5. Zoom in on the analyzed area, with additional markings in arrows of the sites discussed in the chapter. Compare with maps in the appendix, in which four more pits are marked.

Case Study II: The Höss Villa and the SS Kommandantur

Spaces of Complicity: The Höss Villa and the SS Administrative Core

The Höss villa and garden's conservation records reveal their transformation from prewar times to the present.⁷⁶ Initially constructed from 1935 to 1937, the villa was a single-story building with a flat roof, serving as the residence for Sergeant Józef Soja, the retired commander of the Polish army's 33rd Infantry. The house was situated next to the military camp of this army unit, which prisoners would later expand into the notorious Auschwitz Stammlager (Auschwitz Main Camp). When the German occupied Oświęcim in September 1939, Soja's family temporarily shared their home with Polish POWs until the SS evicted them in May, 1940.⁷⁷

The villa's wartime expansion is detailed in the Höss trial protocols, cited in the conservation files. On March 1, 1941, Heinrich Himmler visited the camp and requested that

⁷⁶ Barbara Zając, "Dom i ogród Rudolfa Hössa," September 2007, A078/01/05, *ADK PMA-B*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

Höss make the house more presentable. In response, the camp's Central Construction Office drafted plans for renovations. In the ensuing months, inmates from the construction kommando substantially transformed the original one-story structure. They constructed a spacious cellar, added an additional floor, and installed a thatched roof. After completion, the house featured five rooms for the Höss family, three rooms for servants, and a kitchen. This expanded space was primarily intended for camp commandant Höss, his wife Hedwig, and their five children. The separate servant section accommodated several Polish women recruited from the area and Jehovah's Witness prisoners.

In April 1941, the bricklayer kommando built a brick wall around the villa and its projected gardens. Following the directives of the Central Construction Office, political prisoner and landscape architect Ludwik Lawin planned the two gardens: the first was a summer garden, with an attached summer house, a pool, pergolas, and a lush rose garden. The second was an agricultural garden, with a glasshouse, greenhouse, and hotbeds. Younger prisoners, assembled for a special kommando, gathered small white gravel stones for the summer garden, and an iron gate, designed by prisoner Jan Liwacz, connected the two spaces. The agricultural garden was isolated from the camp by a closed wooden door. In total, the summer garden covered an area of half an acre, and the agricultural garden another 0.7 acres.

The gardens, which Hedwig Höss closely oversaw, were lush and beautiful. She directed the work of Bronisław Jaroń, a notable Polish biologist, and Roman Kwiatowski, both camp prisoners. Despite frequently entertaining dignitaries in their home, Rudolf Höss kept the garden a private sanctuary strictly for the family, seldomly inviting guests to sit in it. The house and gardens were a central component of the lavish lifestyle of the family, maintained only a stone throw away from the camps' first gas chamber. According to testimonies, the cellar was always

well stocked with provisions taken from the victims of transports. It was furnished exquisitely from the transports and the labor of expert craftsmen imprisoned in the camp. Nevertheless, the camp's brutal reality occasionally penetrated the idyll; on days when the crematoriums of Birkenau worked at full capacity, a ball of smoke and fire was clearly visible from the villa's windows. The odor of burning flesh penetrated the villa, and forced the servants to shut the windows tight.⁷⁸

Recent scholarship on perpetrator spaces has drawn renewed attention to precisely such juxtapositions between homely order and horrifying violence. Rather than focusing solely on killing sites or administrative offices, this literature explores how homes and everyday spaces of Nazi functionaries were sites of entanglement—what Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt calls “spaces of complicity,” where domesticity, violence, and postwar memory converge.⁷⁹ Mario Panico describes this through the lens of the “material infra-ordinary,” arguing that banal material traces such as garden beds, furnishings, and cellar stores do not mute atrocity, but instead expose its unsettling coexistence with everyday life.⁸⁰ These insights clarify how atrocity and ordinariness were not spatially distinct but mutually constitutive. The villa was not simply adjacent to mass murder—it was made possible by it, permeated by it, and in moments (like the smoke-filled evenings) directly penetrated by it. Perhaps it is precisely this infra-ordinary quality, the quiet persistence of daily life, that rendered these spaces resistance institutional commemoration at Auschwitz-Birkenau, with its sacralizing tendencies.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 2–7.

⁷⁹ Ingvild Hagen Kjørholt, “The Nazi Camp Commandant’s House as a Space of Complicity: Understanding Art at Atrocity Sites; the Case of Falstad, Norway,” *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 7, no. 1 (2024): 52–53, <https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.7.1.160>.

⁸⁰ Mario Panico, “Representing the Material Infra-Ordinary of the Perpetrator,” *Journal of Perpetrator Research* 7, no. 1 (2024): 72–74, <https://doi.org/10.21039/jpr.7.1.165>.



Figure 21. Kommandant Höss's wartime villa, view from the roof of the SS-Verwaltung building. Picture before autumn 1940. APMO, syg. neg. 24590/52

Reclaiming the Camp: Clashing Moral Geographies

The Höss residence and its surrounding landscape occupied a unique position within the spatial logic of Auschwitz. Its proximity to the camp, its elaborate design, and its central role in the daily life of the commandant and his family make it a crucial site for understanding not only the functioning of the camp, but also the everyday world of its perpetrators. And yet, in the postwar years, the villa and its adjacent gardens were treated as peripheral—physically, administratively, and symbolically. Despite their proximity to the heart of the camp, these were internal peripheries—materially present but symbolically marginalized.

After the war, the Polish state returned the villa to Sergeant Józef Soja and his family, along with a small portion of the adjoining summer garden. This decision effectively severed the villa from the institutional jurisdiction of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. Though the museum repeatedly petitioned the state to incorporate the villa into its grounds, these efforts were denied. Conservator Barbara Zając, who began working with the museum's greenery division in 1992, later reflected that the garden had long stood "at a distant point on the list of important museum objects," because it was not directly associated with "evidence of Nazi crimes."⁸¹ Whether this was the museum's official position, or her personal assessment remains unclear. Still, the remark speaks volumes about postwar spatial hierarchies: the villa's domestic setting, despite its proximity to atrocity, was not deemed worthy of immediate preservation or interpretation.

While the villa was left outside the museum's boundaries, parts of the garden and other SS areas fell under its jurisdiction and were repurposed for utilitarian needs. In the 1950s, the museum canteen used the agricultural garden to grow produce, expanding the existing greenhouse to twice its original size. After the canteen closed, the area was subdivided into employee allotments. These plots—still within eyesight of the crematoria ruins—were used probably until the 1970s for personal cultivation and recreation.⁸² Later, the museum leased these out to local residents.⁸³ These acts of reoccupation blurred the line between reverence and routine, revealing the competing "moral geographies" between commemoration and a return to normal life. As Sharon Macdonald has observed, German postwar institutions often struggled with how to handle what she terms "difficult heritage"—sites morally fraught or physically

⁸¹ Zając, "Dom i ogród Rudolfa Hössa," 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁸³ Hartmut Ziesing, "A Flowery Paradise in Auschwitz: The Garden of the Kommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß," *Centropa* 4, no. 2 (May 2004): 147.

ambiguous that they eluded immediate codification within heritage frameworks.⁸⁴ In Germany, this difficulty often took the form of reckoning with perpetrator spaces within a perpetrator national context. In Poland, however, the landscape of Auschwitz was cast primarily as a site of victimhood and national martyrdom. Perpetrator spaces such as the Höss villa and SS Kommandantur sat uneasily within that commemorative paradigm, neither destroyed nor formally interpreted, but repurposed for mundane uses. Their ambiguous status reflected a broader hesitation to incorporate the material legacy of perpetrators into a memorial project centered on the suffering of their victims.⁸⁵

Meanwhile, the former SS Kommandantur building, situated across from the garden, was also reinhabited. During the war, it had housed the offices of the camp's senior SS officials, including Höss himself. In the immediate postwar period, it was repurposed to accommodate returning refugees. Eventually, the building was converted into apartments for museum employees—many of them survivors of Auschwitz.⁸⁶ A fence and gate were erected to shield this area from the view of visitors, effectively separating it from the memorial landscape.

For those who lived at the SS Kommandantur, the site and its vicinity became places of intimate reconstruction. The children of survivors played together in the repurposed space. Anna Odi, daughter of Józef and Maria Odi—both Auschwitz and Ravensbrück survivors—was born and raised in one of the apartments. In a 2021 newspaper interview, she described her childhood fondly: “We were the kids from the former SS block and this is where I spent my most joyful,

⁸⁴ Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013), 1–2.

⁸⁵ Kjørholt notes that most in-situ memorial sites are victim-centered. Kjørholt, “The Nazi Camp Commandant's House as a Space of Complicity,” 45.

⁸⁶ Oliwia Juras, “Kwerenda historyczna: Blok A-46. Dawny budynek komendatury,” March 2015, A046/01/09.1, *ADK PMA-B*, 8; K. Jędrusik, R. Wiewiórski, and Z. Domański, “Orzeczenie o stanie technicznym budynku A-46,” 1963, A046/01/02, *ADK PMA-B*.

carefree years. The camp became my second home. The former prisoners, with whom mum was friends, became my aunties, and the garden behind the crematorium became a playground.”⁸⁷

Odi’s childhood recollections challenge normative expectations of memorial spaces. Her story is far from trivial, and speaks to the layered symbolism of the site. The architecture of the perpetrators did not remain dormant or untouched; it became the setting for new forms of life and intimacy. What does it mean for a place of death to become a home, a garden, a playground? As Andrew Charlesworth has argued, Auschwitz has long been shaped by the tension between its commemorative function and the spatial and social needs of the living town around it.

Charlesworth notes that geographies are always imbued with moral expectations about what kinds of actions or behaviors are appropriate in particular places, rooted in “equally valid moral geographies”⁸⁸ Seen this way, the postwar reuse of the Höss villa and SS Kommandantur—domestic spaces reclaimed by survivors and museum staff—can be understood as early expressions of the uneasy coexistence between memorial sanctity and everyday life, without assuming each use is morally superior to the other. In the context of Auschwitz, this question becomes especially charged: who is to say that the preservation of the site must take precedence over the healing, housing, and restoration of the very people who survived it?

Still, not all actors accepted this coexistence. In a letter dated April 1952, museum director Tadeusz Wąsowicz wrote to the Central Museum Administration at the Ministry of Culture and Arts to protest the reappropriation of several areas on the camp’s periphery. He objected to a proposal to install a hog farm and meat-processing facility in the former camp

⁸⁷ Stuart Dowell, “‘I Grew up in Death Camp House’: Extraordinary Story of Woman Born in Auschwitz and Who Has Lived There Ever Since,” *THEfirstNews*, January 27, 2021, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/i-grew-up-in-death-camp-house-extraordinary-story-of-women-born-in-auschwitz-and-who-has-lived-there-ever-since-19380>.

⁸⁸ Charlesworth et al., “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz?,” 149.

slaughterhouse and expressed concern about requests to open a preschool and establish further residencies. He underlined the symbolic weight of these proposals by locating them “in the back of the gallows where Höss was hanged.”⁸⁹ Wąsowicz’s protest rested on two core arguments: the practical challenge of guarding an expansive terrain from vandalism or decay, and the ethical imperative of preserving its integrity as a site of martyrdom. But his protest also reflected a broader anxiety about symbolic coherence: the fear that memorial meaning could be diluted by mundane repurposing. His concerns were echoed in a 1953 letter from Ludwik Rajewski, then director of the Central Museum Administration, who warned the Ministry of Culture that allowing non-museum use “at the place of national struggle and martyrdom of the Polish and other nations, would be a desecration of this esteemed place and would have a negative impact on visitors, among these many from abroad.”⁹⁰

These spatial negotiations reflect broader tensions identified in postwar conservation theory and practice. As Jukka Jokilehto has shown, the adaptation of historic structures to new uses has long been recognized as a legitimate conservation strategy—so long as the new function respects the integrity and character of the original form.⁹¹ In many postwar Eastern European contexts, where widescale destruction took place, this principle supported the transformation of former religious and civic buildings into museums, concert halls, or cultural centers.⁹² Yet at Auschwitz, the question of adaptation was not merely functional—it was symbolic. While some former camp structures were repurposed for commemorative or educational use, the transformation of the SS Kommandantur into residential housing raised a different kind of

⁸⁹ “List Wąsowicza do Ministra,” March 7, 1951, 2/366/0/20.1/xx 21, *AAN*, 18–20.

⁹⁰ “List Dyrektora Centralnego Zarządu Muzeum do Ministra,” March 22, 1953, 2/366/0/20.1/xx 21, *AAN*, 22–23.

⁹¹ Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford, England: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999), 2, 286.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 255–56.

dilemma: could a site of perpetration become a private home, even if it belonged to a survivor? The difference between adapting a building for public memory and repurposing it for domestic life sharpened the moral tension between preservation and return to normalcy.

Despite its initial resistance, the museum eventually acquiesced to residential use—though only by staff.⁹³ In the 1960s, additional renovations formalized the transformation of the SS Kommandantur into apartments.⁹⁴ Some former prisoners remained there for decades, marrying, raising children, and forming communities. But over time, the museum grew uneasy with this informal coexistence. When families moved out, their leases were not renewed. The survivor generation gave way to professionalized staff. The once-inhabited buildings slowly emptied. The Höss garden, overgrown and concealed behind brick walls, became known locally as the “enchanted garden”: a site shaped no less by the wartime than its aftermath.⁹⁵ This overgrown terrain demonstrates Sendyka’s insight of a non-site of memory as an archive which contains varied historical layers, attesting to its uninterrupted function as a cultivated site of beauty and sustenance.

As Jacek Małczyński and his colleagues argue, post-Holocaust sites function not only as symbolic landscapes but as living ecosystems, where humans and non-humans, built structures and overgrown vegetation, all participate in shaping memory and erasure.⁹⁶ These spaces often bear the marks of layered processes—atrociousness, reoccupation, neglect, and ecological transformation. Seen through this lens, the slow overgrowth of the garden and the eventual withdrawal of its residents are not just a return to “emptiness,” but part of what the authors call a

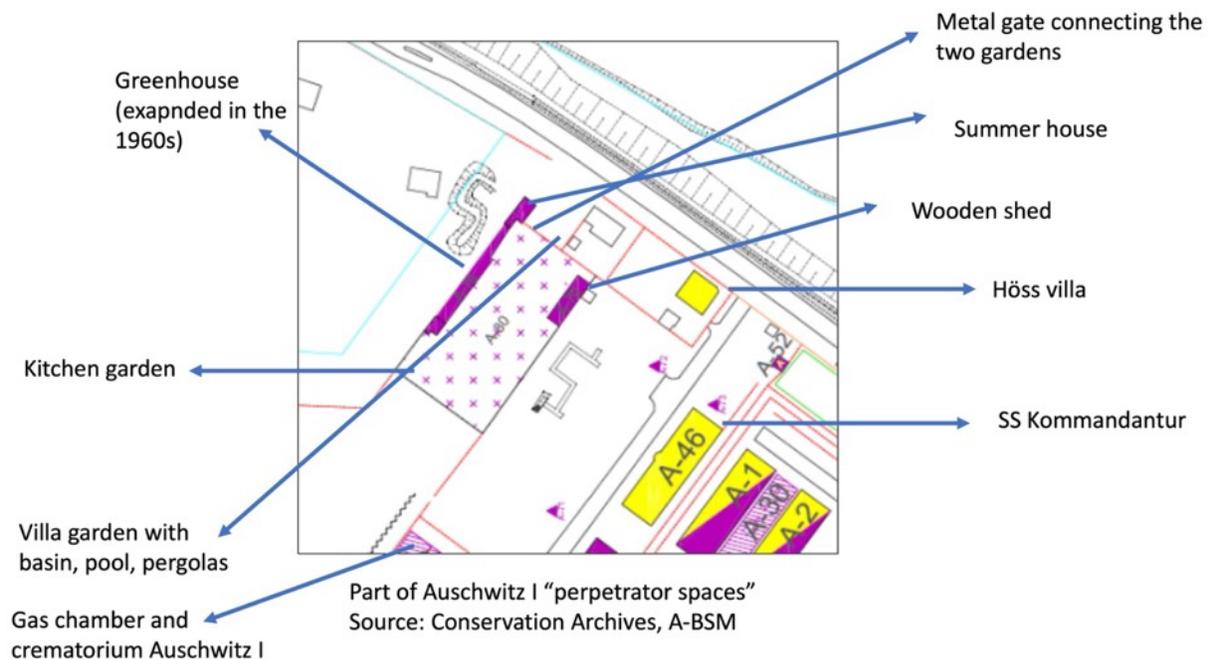
⁹³ Juras, “Kwerenda historyczna: Blok A-46. Dawny budynek komendatury,” 8.

⁹⁴ K. Jędrusik, R. Wiewiórski, and Z. Domański, “Orzeczenie ostatecznie technicznym budynku A-46,” 1963, A046/01/02, *ADK PMA-B*.

⁹⁵ Zajac, “Dom i ogród Rudolfa Hössa,” 7.

⁹⁶ Małczyński et al., “The Environmental History of the Holocaust,” 188.

stratigraphy of the Holocaust, where material, biological, and historical layers accumulate over time.⁹⁷ In this framing, the “enchanted garden” is part of a multispecies afterlife of the camp, a site where institutional memory meets the entropic forces of nature and informal acts of everyday life.



Map 6. Auschwitz I, contemporary map. Zoom in on the Höss villa and garden. Courtesy of the Conservation Archives, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

The Disappearing Perpetrator

Hartmut Ziesing notes that although the museum envisioned in the early 2000s returning the garden “to its historical condition, as far as reconstruction is feasible,” no such restoration has occurred. Conservation efforts remained limited to selective stabilization: the reinforcement of metalwork, removal of invasive growth, and preservation of deteriorating structures like the greenhouse and storage shed.⁹⁸ The site has never been integrated into the visitor route or

⁹⁷ Małczyński et al., “The Environmental History of the Holocaust,” 185.

⁹⁸ “Opis prac konserwatorskich w ogrodzie Hössa A-80 w czerwcu 1994 roku,” 1994, A080/01/06, *ADK PMA-B*; “Dokumenty dotyczące zlecenia rekultywacji trawnika w ogrodzie Hössa A-80,” 2009, A080/01/08, *ADK PMA-B*.

interpretive framework. Ziesing is empathetic: “From the point of view of the millions of victims, the survivors and their descendants,” it is “completely understandable that places such as the garden of Kommandant Rudolf Höss are assigned only marginal significance at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial.”⁹⁹

The unresolved status of the Höss villa and its garden reflects broader representational tensions around perpetrator spaces. As Caroline Pearce has shown, memorial institutions often struggle to portray Nazi perpetrators not as monstrous exceptions, but as figures embedded in bureaucratic systems and societal routines. The difficulty, she notes, lies in visualizing the Schreibtischtäter—the “desk-based perpetrator”—whose crimes were committed not on battlefields but in offices and conference rooms, under the guise of administrative normalcy.¹⁰⁰ The Höss villa complicates this further by extending the realm of perpetration into the domestic sphere—transforming the home, to recall Kjørholt’s concept, into a “site of complicity.”

Yet it is precisely such ‘normal’ sites as the desk and the home that facilitate complex ethical encounters with the realities of Nazi violence. Mario Panico argues that the study of everyday traces challenges the tendency to present perpetrators as entirely alien or inhuman. “Studying materiality,” he writes, “provides an opportunity to challenge the way perpetrators are commonly ‘othered’ in memorial museums and popular culture representations, that is, presented reductively as sub-human or entirely alien, unknowable.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the visitor’s ability to identify with the mundane aspects of a violent reality potentially allows unsettling insights about everyday complicity in injustice.

⁹⁹ Hartmut Ziesing, “A Flowery Paradise in Auschwitz: The Garden of the Kommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß,” *Centropa* 4, no. 2 (2004): 146–47.

¹⁰⁰ Caroline Pearce, “Visualising ‘Everyday’ Evil: The Representation of Nazi Perpetrators in German Memorial Sites,” *Holocaust Studies* 17, no. 2–3 (September 2011): 234.

¹⁰¹ Panico, “Representing the Material Infra-Ordinary of the Perpetrator,” 74.

At Auschwitz, the marginalization of the villa and Kommandantur does not preserve their neutrality—it contributes to the disappearance of the perpetrator from the memorial landscape. That disappearance is only reinforced by the single visible perpetrator object on the site: the gallows where Rudolf Höss was hanged, located next to the entrance to crematorium I at Auschwitz Main Camp. In the absence of contextualized perpetrator space, the execution site risks standing alone, offering a narrative of justice and symbolic closure in place of one of structural complicity and entangled intimacy.

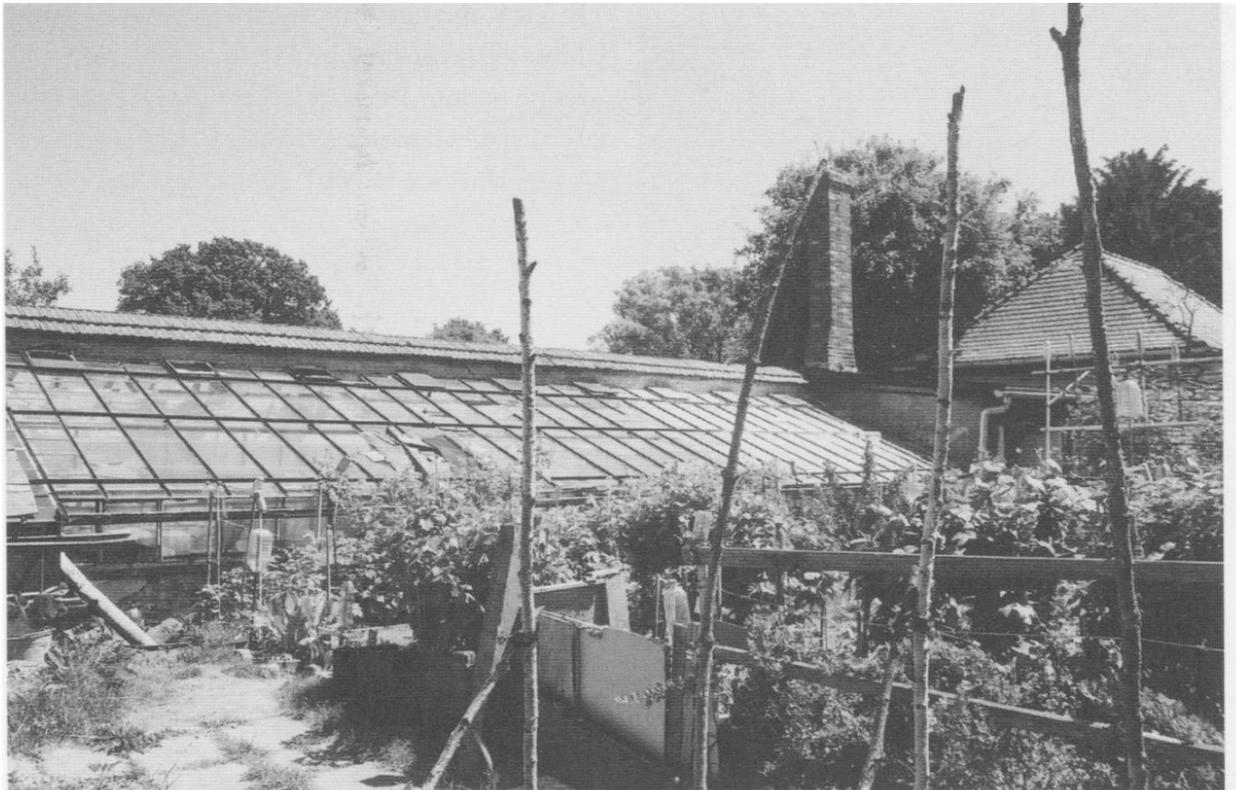


Figure 22. The kitchen garden, state in 2003. Source: Ziesing, Hartmut. “A Flowery Paradise in Auschwitz: The Garden of the Kommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß.” *Centropa* 4, no. 2 (May 2004): 141–48.

Conclusion: At the Threshold of Memory and Return

The two internal peripheries examined in this chapter—the incineration pits and Bunkers behind Birkenau, and the SS Kommandantur and Höss villa at Auschwitz I—reveal how memory does not simply cluster around atrocity’s epicenters but also lingers in zones marked by contradiction, reoccupation, and ambiguity. These sites remained narratively unsettled not because they were forgotten, but because they embodied tensions that were difficult to resolve: between conservation and reuse, reverence and routine, symbolic closure and the return to everyday life.

What makes these peripheries particularly revealing is not their exclusion, but the ways in which they were slowly, and often awkwardly, worked through. As I have shown, their marginality was shaped by overlapping forces—institutional logics, remote geographies, architectural constraints, social discomfort, and ethical ambiguity. In each case, spatial decisions encoded broader dilemmas: how to preserve the material afterlife of atrocity without interrupting the lives rebuilt around it; how to honor the dead without fixing the past into immutable forms; and how to re-integrate spaces of horror into a landscape of ordinary meaning.

Rather than offering a judgment, these peripheries present a provocation: what, in such landscapes, is deemed worthy of commemoration—and what is allowed to return to life? The answers were never fixed but emerged through contingencies, omissions, improvisations, and the difficult process of confronting histories that remain unresolved. These zones—neither wholly remembered nor wholly erased—are thresholds where the friction between memory and normalcy becomes most explicitly legible. Like the temporally layered images in *Archeologia*, they are places where excavation does not yield a clear narrative, but exposes overlapping traces: fragments of violence, gestures of caretaking, and the quiet persistence of the everyday.

The questions raised here—about material endurance, symbolic omission, and the ethics of spatial reintegration—become all the more urgent in the post-communist period, when the terrain of Auschwitz-Birkenau was defined through newly emerging transnational circuits of memory, capital, and diplomacy in the 1980s and 1990s. The next shifts focus from institutional avoidance to institutional attention, tracing how conservation itself became the primary project through which Auschwitz's meaning and future were contested and negotiated in a post-Socialist world.

Vignette 2: Echoes from the Past

I spent the first night of my internship at the museum's guesthouse, housed within the former SS Kommandantur building. The irony wasn't lost on me—a Jewish historian researching the site's conservation history, sleeping in rooms once used to administer genocide. The building retained its imposing character, with high ceilings and long corridors, despite having been repurposed for decades as apartments for museum staff and, more recently, visitor accommodations.

Just down the hall lived Anna Odi, who worked in the museum's documentation department. Both her parents were survivors of the camps, and she had grown up in this very building, in an apartment her family had been assigned decades ago when her parents began working at the museum. The building had a continuous history of housing those who documented the site's past—survivors and their children became the custodians of memory, living within walls that had once contained the architects of destruction.

After a day of navigating archives and acclimating to the weight of the place, I fell into an exhausted sleep—only to wake suddenly in the dead of night, my body frozen in that peculiar state between sleeping and waking known as sleep paralysis. I could neither move nor speak, but my senses remained unnervingly alert. Through the stillness came a distinct sound: the shuffling of papers, methodical and purposeful, as if someone were sorting through documents at a desk nearby. The sound continued for what felt like minutes before fading, and gradually my ability to move returned.

The next morning, over breakfast and coffee in the apartment's kitchen, I mentioned the experience to the other intern who had arrived a few days before me. “You were sleeping in Rudolf Höss's office,” she said matter-of-factly, pointing to the area adjacent to my room. “The

camp commandant worked there, signing orders and reviewing reports.” Her casual tone made the revelation even more chilling.

“You’re not the first to repost ghost stories,” she said, before launching into stories she had meticulously collected. “There were two camp guards from the protection unit in the late 1940s who reported hearing footsteps in wooden clogs every night, always at the same hour. They would search the building but never found anyone.” That was not all of it. She told me about a guard who claimed he heard a child screaming from somewhere in the building. Night after night, the same piercing cry. He finally quit his position altogether. I listened skeptically, attributing these tales to the psychological weight of working in such a place.

But then I encountered another ghost story, this time at the archives. To learn about the early research activities of the memorial site, I was reading the testimony of Danuta Czech, who worked in the research department since the early 1960s writing her monumental *Auschwitz Calendar*. In the 1970s, she was working late one night on a list of French children transported from Drancy. Exhausted, she fell asleep at her desk. She woke suddenly when the drawer containing the deportation lists simply opened by itself. She took it as a sign to continue her work, to keep documenting what happened to those children.

I thought about Czech—the model of a rational historian, basing her claims on empirical evidence—and wondered what she had really experienced that night. Had the drawer merely slipped open due to an uneven floor? Or had something else compelled her to continue her painstaking documentation?

That evening, returning to my room in the former Kommandantur, I found myself listening differently to the building’s ordinary creaks and sighs. The past seemed unusually

present within these walls, not just in the documented histories but in the spaces between official narratives—the realm of the unexplained, the unverifiable, and perhaps the unresolved.

As a historian trained to follow evidence and reject supernatural explanations, I still found myself wondering: What remains when meticulous conservation preserves a site's physical structure but can't contain all dimensions of its memory? What echoes persist that no conservation technique can capture or silence?

I slept with the light on that night.

3. The Return of Jewish Auschwitz and its Europeanization: Funding

Auschwitz-Birkenau's Conservation after 1989

Introduction

It was a hot summer day in June 1987 when Jewish billionaire and philanthropist Ronald S. Lauder set foot at Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, henceforth: PMO-B) for the first time. Heir to the Estée Lauder cosmetics empire, Lauder had spent much of his career in government service, first as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for European and NATO policy under the Reagan administration and later as U.S. ambassador to Austria. It was his encounter with the crumbling remnants of Auschwitz that would shape one of his most enduring philanthropic legacies. In a 1993 interview with *The New Yorker*, Lauder recalled his shock at the site's physical decay: "I went there and was shocked not only by the condition of the place but by the fact that there was no place to pray. You could see the entire place deteriorating before your eyes—the shoes, the suitcases, the wooden barracks. I realized that in another few years the place would be gone forever. Something had to be done."¹

Lauder's realization was neither new nor unique. By the late 1980s, the deteriorating state of Auschwitz-Birkenau was evident to all who visited.² Since the capital renovations completed in 1964, conservation efforts had been largely ad hoc, dependent on insufficient state funding and volunteer labor. It was Lauder's visit and subsequent intervention that would mark a turning point. His involvement catalyzed a broader international effort to preserve the site, drawing together Jewish organizations, Polish state officials, and foreign donors from Europe, the United

¹ Timothy W. Ryback, "Evidence of Evil," *New Yorker*, November 15, 1993, 68-81.

² The depleted state of the terrain was captured in a 1993 documentary meant to fundraise for conservation needs with the German public. See: *Schauplatz Auschwitz. Wie renoviert man ein KZ?* (Katowice: MAG Film, directed by Paweł Satala, 1993).

States and Israel in ways that fundamentally reshaped how Auschwitz was maintained and memorialized. His visit came at a moment of profound transformation for Poland, as the country was on the verge of political and economic upheaval. Within two years, communism would collapse, and with it, the rigid state-controlled memory politics that had long shaped Auschwitz's narrative. While Polish museum professionals had recognized these challenges, their efforts had been constrained by financial limitations and the priorities of the communist state. Within the new emerging political reality, transnational forces will join local ones in reshaping the place of Auschwitz and its physical presence in European and global consciousness.

This chapter examines why and how conservation became a central priority at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the wake of these transformations. Much of the scholarship on Polish memory politics in the 1990s examines “memory wars” surrounding Polish-Jewish relations before and during the war, as well as debates around Polish complicity during the Holocaust. Literature about Auschwitz reflects a similar tendency, analyzing ideological and interfaith controversies around the site—most notably over the Carmelite Convent. In opposition to that, this chapter highlights a different but equally consequential aspect of post-communist Auschwitz: the material and financial realities that shaped debates around the site, and which forced the Polish state to allow foreign stakeholders and funding, particularly Jewish, to influence its future. To achieve an improved state of PMO-B's physical appearance, Polish and Jewish stakeholders were forced to compromise and collaborate. The chapter thus provides a political and economic history of PMO-B amid shifting global politics.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that conservation was not merely a technical or ideological issue; it was deeply political, embedded in Poland's transition to democracy, rising Holocaust consciousness, the growing influence of Jewish organizations in shaping Holocaust memory, and

the internationalization of Auschwitz as a site of European and global responsibility. Beyond its logistical and financial demands, preservation at Auschwitz carried profound political stakes: recruiting financial support for conservation was inseparable from broader questions of historical responsibility and collective memory.

By the late 1990s, Auschwitz's conservation emerged as a transnational but primarily European project. While Jewish organizations played a key role in prompting support, it was European governments—led by Germany and supported by other EU nations—that ultimately assumed financial responsibility for its long-term preservation. As Poland integrated into European institutions, Auschwitz became a symbolic site of “peace-making” through which a unified European identity was negotiated and reinforced. Funding the conservation of Auschwitz was not just an act of remembrance but a declaration of shared values, situating the site at the heart of Europe's reckoning with its past. The following sections trace this process from the initial discussions between Lauder and Polish officials to the broader internationalization of conservation funding. By following these negotiations, the chapter reveals the often-overlooked intersections between financial pragmatism, political shifts, and the evolving landscape of Holocaust memory in post-communist Europe.

I begin with a substantial introduction to Polish economy, politics and memory in the 1980s and early 1990s, as well as changes in Holocaust consciousness during that time in the Jewish American, Israeli, and global spheres. This extensive introduction serves to foreground this and the next chapter, both dealing with the 1990s. While this chapter discusses the financial, social, and political conditions which allowed conservation to become the most important priority for PMO-B, the next chapter explores the ethical and political issues which ensued once conservation funding was secured.

Poland in Crisis: Political and Economic Decline in the 1980s

Throughout the 1980s, Poland experienced unprecedented economic hardships caused by systemic failures of its centrally planned economy.³ The most pressing issue was a deepening balance of payment crisis, exacerbated by substantial foreign debt accumulated in the 1970s due to modernization efforts. Despite state investment in new technologies, local industries struggled to compete internationally, as Poland remained reliant on heavy industry while global markets shifted towards services. As a result, the country became increasingly dependent on imports of critical goods and technology, further depleting its limited foreign currency reserves. By 1981, Poland's debt burden had weakened international standing, limiting access to new credit.⁴

Economic crises led to rampant inflation, chronic shortages, decline of real wages and lowering of living standards—fueling unrest and labor protests. These culminated in the self-imposition of martial law (1981-1983), which further restricted trade and foreign aid. Images of Poles queuing for food rations outside near-empty grocery stores became emblematic of the regime's economic failures. Repeated crises and unsuccessful reforms eroded public trust in the state's ability to govern, while economic grievances played a pivotal role in the rise of the Solidarity movement. Originating in the Gdańsk Shipyards, throughout the 1980s Solidarity evolved into a powerful force for national change.⁵

In the years preceding the fall of the communist regime, Solidarity dissident activity became closely intertwined with that of the Catholic Church. While communist authorities sought to control Church institutions, they were only partially successful. The Church retained significant

³ As was the case throughout the socialist bloc. See Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

⁴ Ben Slay, *The Polish Economy: Crisis, Reform, and Transformation*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3, 36–49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 50–85.

institutional power and, more importantly, immense influence among millions of Catholic devotees. As the regime struggled to contain mounting political pressure, it relied on the Church to defuse domestic crises.⁶ It was within this context that the Church became a symbol of Polish national identity, freedom, and universal human rights.⁷ Its alliance with Solidarity united intellectuals, religious and labor leaders, and workers.⁸ Solidarity and its allies' influence extended beyond labor rights, pushing for broader political and economic transformation, eventually contributing to the collapse of state socialism in 1989.⁹

Poland's Memory Boom of the 1980s and the Reemergence of the "Jewish Question"

With the rise of Solidarity, demands for democratization extended to historical memory. Intellectuals sought to reclaim Poland's suppressed past by introducing new anniversaries and commemorations of labor struggles and resistance to communism. It was within this broader explosion of memory that the "Jewish Question" finally reemerged.¹⁰ As Michael Steinlauf argues, liberal Catholic intellectuals increasingly viewed Jewish history, culture, and life as emblematic of Poland's interwar democratic traditions of pluralism and multiculturalism—ideals to which the country could return.¹¹

Yet, darker aspects of the Polish-Jewish past loomed beneath the surface. In 1987, Jan Błoński published his seminal essay, *The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto*, in the Catholic newspaper *Tygodnik Powszechny*. Drawing on Czesław Miłosz's poetry, Błoński confronted

⁶ Mirella W. Eberts, "The Roman Catholic Church and Democracy in Poland," *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (July 1998): 818–20.

⁷ Irena Borowik, "The Roman Catholic Church in the Process of Democratic Transformation: The Case of Poland," *Social Compass* 49, no. 2 (June 2002): 242.

⁸ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity*, rev. and updated ed. (London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991), 27.

⁹ For a history of the movement see Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution*.

¹⁰ Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust*, 1st ed, Modern Jewish History (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 97–98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101–3.

Polish indifference to Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, arguing that Poles bore a moral burden—not as perpetrators but as passive witnesses. His essay provoked fierce backlash, with over a hundred outraged letters to the editor. This response reflected the deep entanglement of Polish wartime guilt with prewar antisemitism and fraught Polish-Jewish relations, raising uncomfortable questions about Polish complicity, potentially casting Poles, in Miłosz’s words, as the “helpers of death.”¹²

A similar controversy erupted just three years earlier with the release of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), which depicted Polish bystanders as indifferent or complicit in Jewish persecution. While liberal intellectuals pushed for a critical reassessment of Polish attitudes during the war, conservatives and broader segments of society viewed these revelations as attacks on national honor. As a result, responses to *Shoah* and *The Poor Pole Looks at the Ghetto* were often defensive, reinforcing Polish martyrdom narratives rather than prompting deeper reckoning.¹³

Auschwitz as a Site of Contestation: The Carmelite Convent Controversy

By the early 1980s, the growing influence of the Catholic Church intersected with a broader memory boom, shaping new claims to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a site of national identity and political resistance. For decades, the communist regime had manipulated Auschwitz’s history, subsuming Jewish suffering into a broader narrative of Polish and international martyrdom. Under Soviet influence, Auschwitz had been framed as a site of Polish and international antifascist resistance and Soviet liberation.¹⁴ The 1947 government resolution establishing

¹² Czesław Miłosz, “The Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto.” Quoted in Jan Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1987/1, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/the-poor-poles-look-at-the-ghetto-144232>.

¹³ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 111–17; Piotr Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory: The Holocaust in Polish Public Debates*, *Geschichte Erinnerung Politik*, Band 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2013), 102–30.

¹⁴ Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 80, 93.

museums at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek officially commemorated the martyrdom of “Polish and other nations,” avoiding explicit recognition of Jews as the primary victims of systematic annihilation. The official victim count—grossly inflated to four million—further obscured the Holocaust’s specificity.¹⁵ Throughout the communist era, Auschwitz’s Jewish meaning was either diluted within Polish suffering or erased altogether.¹⁶

Catholic Poles began asserting claims to Auschwitz’s memory as early as the 1970s, further erasing its Jewish significance in the national context. However, their motivations—though politically charged—were less about imposing dogma than about shaping Auschwitz into a site of Catholic remembrance. Huener describes how the Catholic Church entered Auschwitz’s public sphere during this period, treating it as a sacred space for Catholic observances. As Poland’s most prominent memorial, Auschwitz provided a platform to elevate the Church’s visibility and affirm its historical role in Polish suffering. Themes of sacrifice and martyrdom dominated Catholic commemorations at Auschwitz, particularly through figures like Father Maksymilian Kolbe.¹⁷ By the early 1970s, large-scale Catholic ceremonies—such as the 1972 mass honoring Kolbe—had become major events, laying the groundwork for future religious commemorations.¹⁸ Pope John Paul II’s 1979 visit, and his sermon delivered to 100,000 people at the site of Birkenau, solidified Auschwitz’s status as a Catholic-nationalist site.¹⁹ While acknowledging Jewish suffering, the Pope placed particular emphasis on Catholic martyrdom, reinforcing Auschwitz as a sacred national site of Polish suffering within a narrative of Christian martyrdom and redemption.²⁰ Huener argues that while his speech delivered at the mass heralded

¹⁵ Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory*, 60.

¹⁶ Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 42–44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 202–3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208–9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 215–16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 218–19.

a new era in Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Catholic relations, as well as the rise of the Jewish meaning of the site—it also foreshadowed future conflicts over Auschwitz’s memory.²¹

The first of these conflicts was the Carmelite Convent Controversy (1984–1993). As the Church’s influence grew, many Catholics saw Auschwitz as returning to its “rightful” owners—Polish Catholics. Amid growing political dissidence, the Pope’s visit was more than a religious act—it was a defiant assertion of Polish sovereignty against communist rule. As the Church positioned itself as the moral and political opposition, reclaiming Auschwitz became part of a broader struggle for national identity.

It was within this political context that Catholic institutions sought a permanent presence at the site, leading to the establishment of the Carmelite Convent in 1984.²² Cardinal Franciszek Macharski had already authorized several Catholic institutions in the Auschwitz area, including a monastery and prayer center dedicated to Kolbe, before announcing plans for the Carmelite Convent. The convent was housed in the former theater building directly adjacent to Auschwitz I, a stone-throw away from the infamous Punishment Bloc—perhaps the most important site of Catholic and Polish martyrdom, where Father Maksymilian Kolbe was starved and executed with a phenol injection to his heart. Importantly, however, the structure had also previously stored Zyklon B canisters and prisoner clothing, making the presence of an on-site convent deeply contentious.²³

Tomasz Cebulski highlights how the Polish narrative of Auschwitz, tied to the physical site, clashed with a Jewish narrative shaped largely outside Poland.²⁴ Many Jews, unfamiliar with

²¹ Ibid., 223.

²² Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: historia, polityka i pamięć: wokół Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980-2010* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2016), 148.

²³ Geneviève Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 177.

²⁴ Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 143.

Auschwitz's Polish national significance or its physical layout, saw the erection of a convent as a Christianization of a site of crucial significance to the history of the Jewish Holocaust. They had little understanding that the convent was situated at Auschwitz, where throughout the war, mostly Polish political prisoners were imprisoned. Meanwhile, many Poles failed to grasp Auschwitz's singular importance in Jewish memory. This disconnect fueled intense memory wars in newspapers and magazines, with both sides accusing the other of historical appropriation.²⁵ For Polish Catholics, the convent extended their narrative of national and religious martyrdom, aligning Auschwitz with Poland's suffering under German and Soviet rule. For Jewish communities, particularly abroad, it was an intrusion on a sacred site of Jewish death.²⁶

Attempts at resolution led to the Geneva Accords (1986–87), which proposed the creation of an interfaith Center for Dialogue and Prayer. However, miscommunication and polarized media portrayals heightened tensions. Many Jews saw the agreement as imposed despite strong opposition, while many Poles remained unaware of its historical significance as the first institutional Jewish-Catholic dialogue since World War II. The conflict escalated in 1988 when a large cross—the one before which Pope John Paul II had spoken in 1979—was erected at the Gravel Pit, a site of mass executions near the convent.²⁷ This provoked a 1989 protest by Rabbi Avraham Weiss and other Jewish activists, who scaled the fence to demand the convent's removal. To Polish Catholics, this was an attack on a sacred space and a violation of the nuns' vows, intensifying nationalist sentiment at a moment when Polish sovereignty was already

²⁵ In his book, Cebulski covers all these controversies and pays special attention to Polish and foreign press coverage. He shows the consequences of misinformed press coverage and how it deepened controversies and disagreements. Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 144-148,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 149–50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

fragile. In Poland, Weiss's protest was widely condemned; internationally, it was seen as a necessary act of defiance against Catholic encroachment on Auschwitz's Jewish memory.²⁸

In 1992, the Center for Dialogue and Prayer was inaugurated under Catholic administration. However, as the convent still remained at the former Theater Building, no Jewish organizations participated in the inauguration ceremonies.²⁹ The controversy was finally resolved in 1993, when Pope John Paul II personally intervened, securing the convent's relocation.³⁰ Tomasz Cebulski characterizes the conflict as an example of "victim nationalism," a term coined by Timothy Garton Ash, where both sides saw their suffering as unique and failed to acknowledge the trauma of the other.³¹

The Carmelite Convent controversy revealed the deep fault lines in Polish and Jewish memory, highlighting how Auschwitz remained a contested space of national and religious significance. Yet this conflict did not occur in isolation. It unfolded at a time when Holocaust consciousness was undergoing profound shifts on a global scale, particularly in the United States and Israel. To fully grasp the stakes of this debate—not only for Poles but for Jewish communities worldwide and human rights discourse—I now turn to the broader transformations in Holocaust remembrance during the 1980s.

The 1980s: Holocaust Memory Between the National and Transnational

The 1980s solidified Holocaust consciousness as a cornerstone of Jewish identity and politics in the United States and Israel. At the same time, the Holocaust became foundational to universal human rights and civil democracy discourse, detaching it from its Jewish specificity. Holocaust memory in Israel and the United States did not remain confined to national contexts

²⁸ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 118–19.

²⁹ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 153.

³⁰ Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead*, 121.

³¹ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 155.

but shaped transnational trends. Auschwitz emerged as a symbol both of Jewish victimhood and of the universal human rights discourse founded on the moral dictum “never again,” applied to other case studies of genocide and ethnic cleansing across the globe.

Though the Eichmann trial took place in 1961, its effects on Holocaust memory continued into the 1980s. Televised and widely reported in the West, the trial publicized the Holocaust as a distinctive event in both world and Jewish history.³² In Israel, the trial marked the transition of the Holocaust from the margins to the heart of national discourse. This trend was reinforced in the next two decades by literature and film by second generation to Holocaust survivors, who shifted the narrative from collective narratives of heroism and resistance to personal and familial experiences of trauma and memory transmission.³³ In the United States, coverage of the trial aligned with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and identity politics.³⁴ As African Americans and other marginalized groups moved towards self-determination and protested social injustice, Jewish leaders debated whether Holocaust memory should serve as a universal lesson and a bridge to the wider American public, or as a means for asserting Jewish identity and distinctiveness.³⁵

The Yom Kippur War (1973) fundamentally reshaped Holocaust consciousness in Israel and the United States. Despite Israel’s eventual victory, the war’s unexpected outbreak and staggering number of casualties shattered a sense of national confidence gained with the victory

³² Yechiel Klar, Noa Schori-Eyal, and Yonat Klar, “The ‘Never Again’ State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voices,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69, no. 1 (March 2013): 10; Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff, Politics, History, and Social Change (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 2006), 96–112.

³³ Anita Shapira, “The Holocaust: Private Memories, Public Memory,” *Jewish Social Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 51–52; Dalia Ofer, “The Past That Does Not Pass: Israelis and Holocaust Memory,” *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009), 10–22.

³⁴ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, Key Words in Jewish Studies, VII (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 46–48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60–76; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 1st Mariner Books ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 7–11.

of the Six Day War (1967). In the Israeli context and the American-Jewish community, the war resurrected Holocaust anxieties and demonstrated Jewish vulnerability—proving the vital necessity of a strong, secure state for the Jewish people.³⁶ In Israel, responses entailed the institutionalization of Holocaust memory, beginning with the amendment to the State Education Law (1980) to include Holocaust awareness as a core objective,³⁷ and the subsequent incorporation of Holocaust studies into school curriculums.³⁸ By this time, the Holocaust had overtaken even Israel’s wars as the most frequently cited historical event shaping young Israelis’ identities.³⁹ Meanwhile, American-Jewish advocacy mobilized financial support and political lobbying for the state of Israel, drawing on explicit comparisons between Western inaction during the Holocaust and delayed support for Israel.⁴⁰

Already in the 1960s, media and global coverage were crucial vehicles in publicizing the Holocaust; but it was the screening of the NBC mini-series *Holocaust* (1978) that popularized it in the United States and West Germany, bringing it to non-Jewish audiences.⁴¹ For the first time, the Holocaust became a theme explored in popular culture rather than by historians.⁴² As Sidra Ezrahi eloquently phrased it, “local cultural venues were becoming global frames of reference: largely through the explosion of media technologies, audiences worldwide came to be engaged in what might otherwise have remained parochial cultural events.”⁴³ Yet such media representations

³⁶ Klar, Schori-Eyal, and Klar, “The ‘Never Again’ State of Israel,” 133; Daniel Lévy and Natan Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, trans. Assenka Oksiloff (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 114–15; Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 10; Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 151–52.

³⁷ Julia Resnik, “‘Sites of Memory’ of the Holocaust: Shaping National Memory in the Education System in Israel,” *Nations and Nationalism* 9, no. 2 (April 2003): 308.

³⁸ Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 479.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 482–83.

⁴⁰ Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 78.

⁴¹ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 12.

⁴² Lévy and Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, 97.

⁴³ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “A Personal Postscript,” in *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, ed. Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan, *Making Sense of History*, volume 21 (New York: Berghahn books, 2015), 347.

would tend to have, in the coming decades, a particularly American bend. As Levy and Sznajder note, in the United States the show represented both the Americanization of the Holocaust and its transformation into a universal symbol of absolute evil.⁴⁴

1978 saw another watershed event, as President Carter announced the President's Commission on the Holocaust, responsible for the creation of a Holocaust monument on the national mall in Washington, D.C. The museum's location underscored the Holocaust's rising role in American moral consciousness, yet its curators faced intense debates over which victim groups should be included in the initiative, and whether to frame the Holocaust as a singular Jewish tragedy or a universal warning.⁴⁵ Jewish leaders resisted efforts to universalize Holocaust memory, fearing it would dilute its historical significance, while human rights advocates argued such lessons were essential to broader human rights discourse.⁴⁶

As noted by Linenthal, the USHMM's permanent exhibition recreated European landscapes of terror and suffering on American soil, bringing home the emotional resonance of in-situ sites such as Auschwitz and Majdanek.⁴⁷ Within the Israeli context, the fortification of emotional attachment to the Holocaust was made through the introduction of youth voyages to Poland, beginning in 1987. Though early state delegations had visited Holocaust sites in the 1960s, large-scale high school trips began in 1987, reinforcing a direct, emotional engagement with the past.⁴⁸ These journeys were framed as transformative experiences, designed to instill a sense of Jewish continuity, national identity, and moral responsibility. Accompanied by

⁴⁴ Lévy and Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, 116–17.

⁴⁵ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 20–51.

⁴⁶ Michael Francis Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory: The Rhetoric of Displacement at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (SUNY Press, 2016), 155–58.

⁴⁷ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 150–58.

⁴⁸ Avner Ben-Amos et al., “Holocaust Day and Memorial Day in Israeli Schools: Ceremonies, Education and History,” *Israel Studies* 4, no. 1 (1999): 271; Jackie Feldman, “Nationalising Personal Trauma, Personalising National Redemption: Performing Testimony at Auschwitz–Birkenau,” *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*, 2010, 103; Resnik, “‘Sites of Memory’ of the Holocaust,” 309.

survivors and security personnel, participants moved through sites of destruction in carefully choreographed itineraries that emphasized Jewish victimhood and Israeli resilience.⁴⁹ Birkenau often served as the crescendo of these educational trips. The trips also played a role in privatizing Holocaust memory, shifting focus from collective national narratives to personalized encounters with history.⁵⁰ At the same time, they reinforced the Holocaust's central place in Israeli political consciousness, deepening the idea that Jewish survival depended on a strong, sovereign Israel.⁵¹ Increasingly, school curriculum, public commemorations, and political discourse emphasized the Holocaust as a unique event in the history of the Jewish people, sidetracking its universal meanings⁵² and excluding discussions of other persecuted groups such as Poles, Sinti & Roma and homosexuals.⁵³

Events in West Germany proved consequential for shaping understandings of the Holocaust on a national level, with ramifications for the transnational context. The 1985 Bitburg controversy and Germany's Historians' Debate (1986–87) sparked intense discussions on Holocaust memory in both West Germany and the U.S. When Ronald Reagan visited a military cemetery containing SS graves in Bitburg, Germany, Jewish leaders condemned the visit as a moral failure.⁵⁴ Though the main issue was the potential relativization of Nazi crimes and political expediency, American-Jewish critics also hotly debated whether the visit was an offense against Jewish memory, or a refusal to acknowledge the Holocaust as a universal warning.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Feldman, "Nationalising Personal Trauma, Personalising National Redemption," 103; Klar et al., "The 'Never Again' State of Israel," 128.

⁵⁰ Daniel Gutwein, "The Privatization of the Holocaust: Memory, Historiography, and Politics," *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 39–41.

⁵¹ Segev, *The Seventh Million*, 1st ed., 479; Klar et al., "The 'Never Again' State of Israel," 132.

⁵² Jackie Feldman, *Above the Death Pits, beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 45.

⁵³ Ofer, "The Past That Does Not Pass," 25–26.

⁵⁴ Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 117–22.

⁵⁵ Anson Rabinbach, "From Explosion to Erosion: Holocaust Memorialization in America since Bitburg," *History & Memory* 9, no. 1–2 (April 1997): 231.

American Politicians and Jewish organizations expressed intense outrage—crystalizing the central place the Holocaust had come to play in not only in Jewish but American consciousness.⁵⁶

In West Germany, the visit became another opportunity for West German politicians to openly assume accountability and responsibility for Nazi crimes.⁵⁷ Yet the German Historians' Debate (1986-1987) demonstrated the fraught nature and political stakes of such a reckoning. The stakes of the *Historikerstreit*, highly publicized in national press and reverberating in heated academic discussions in the U.S., centered on whether Germany should continue to define its national identity through the lens of Holocaust memory and moral responsibility or if it could “normalize” its past by placing Nazi crimes within a broader historical context that included other atrocities, such as Stalinism.⁵⁸ While the *Historikerstreit* revealed strong conservative attempts to reshape national identity through history, the debate made Holocaust remembrance a cornerstone of West Germany's democratic identity, reinforcing the idea that confronting the past was essential for maintaining democracy.⁵⁹

The *Historikerstreit* underscored the extent to which Holocaust memory had become a defining element of democratic identity in West Germany. Yet the link between democracy and historical responsibility was becoming increasingly anchored in other national contexts and transnational human rights initiatives.⁶⁰ By the late 1980s, the Holocaust was increasingly framed as a universal moral paradigm, shaping discussions on genocide prevention, legal

⁵⁶ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 129–31.

⁵⁷ Lipstadt, *Holocaust*, 122–23.

⁵⁸ Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9–12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 166–68.

⁶⁰ Amy Sodaro, “Museums and the Memory of Genocide,” in *Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 2023), 278.

frameworks, and human rights policies.⁶¹ The expansion of Holocaust education and the institutionalization of memorial museums, epitomized in the inauguration of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, reflected a broader effort to embed Holocaust memory into global ethics.⁶²

Long before the establishment of the USHMM, Auschwitz served as the primary site where the connection between commemoration, education, and a global ethics of human rights was first articulated. The 1963 Hiroshima-Auschwitz Peace March, held at the height of the Cold War, not only forged an explicit link between victims across national borders east of the Iron Curtain, but, as Ran Zwigenberg demonstrates, also marked the emergence of the survivor witness as a moral authority.⁶³ Also linked to Cold War politics was UNESCO's 1979 declaration of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a World Heritage Site. The organization's principal purpose was bridging Cold War divides by fostering east-west "soft power" collaborations in the realm of culture, science and technology.⁶⁴ The local Polish ICOMOS committee mobilized global and universalizing language in its nominating documents submitted to UNESCO in 1977, stating that "the museum makes an important contribution to the struggle for world peace and security," serving as an "irrefutable and concrete witness to one of the greatest crimes which has been perpetrated against humanity."⁶⁵

⁶¹ Aleida Assmann, "The Holocaust — a Global Memory? Extensions and Limits of a New Memory Community," in *Memory in a Global Age*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 109–11.

⁶² Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 12–14.

⁶³ Ran Zwigenberg, "The Hiroshima-Auschwitz Peace March and the Globalization of the 'Moral Witness,'" *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 27, no. 3 (September 2, 2013): 195–211.

⁶⁴ Paul Betts, *Ruin and Renewal: Civilising Europe after the Second World War* (Profile Books, 2020).

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, 230.

Since the 1980s, Auschwitz has increasingly been regarded as the historical justification of a universal human rights discourse.⁶⁶ At the same time, as outlined above, it has solidified as the quintessential symbol of the Jewish Holocaust.⁶⁷ It is the convergence of the site's Polish, Jewish, and universal meanings, and their increasing importance for transnational politics, which led in the 1990s to an unprecedented financial investment in the conservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, to which I turn next.

Auschwitz-Birkenau in the 1980s

Despite UNESCO's recognition of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a site of universal significance, grounding its importance in original camp relics as "concrete witness"—the organization provided no funding for the costly task of conservation. After the museum led extensive conservation measures between 1960 and 1964, described in chapter 2, only minimal maintenance was pursued. The state-funded museum struggled through Poland's economic recessions, with its conservation budget shrinking annually throughout the decade. By 1989, only 11 workers worked on ongoing maintenance of the site. In 1988, the museum petitioned the Department of Protection of Cultural Artifacts, Museums, and Plastic Creations (Departament Ochrony Dóbr Kultury, Muzeów i Plastyki) for increased funding, but their request was denied.⁶⁸

To compensate, the museum relied on external expertise and volunteer labor. While conservation needs were occasionally met through outside contracts, much of the work on the movable object collections was provided by faculty and student volunteers from the Nicolaus

⁶⁶ Joanne Pettitt, "Introduction: New Perspectives on Auschwitz," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 1 (2019): 1.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Webber, "The Kingdom of Death as a Heritage Site: Making Sense of Auschwitz," in *A Companion to Heritage Studies*, ed. William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith, and Ullrich Kockel (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 116.

⁶⁸ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 115–19.

Copernicus University in Toruń, a major institution for preservation training in Poland.⁶⁹ Since 1980, students from the Forestry Vocational School in Brynek tended to the museum's vast green areas.⁷⁰ Beginning from the early 1980s, youth groups of Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienst (Action Reconciliation Service for Peace) also became a fixture at the museum, bringing thousands of young West Germans annually for extended educational trips that included conservation and clean-up efforts.⁷¹ The presence of so many young West German volunteers at Auschwitz signaled shifting postwar relations and growing German engagement with Holocaust memory.

Relying on limited expertise and volunteer work proved insufficient. By the early 1980s, a lack of systematic preservation and minimal maintenance led to visible deterioration. This decline coincided with the museum's transformation into a site of mass tourism. Between 1980 and 1989, an average of half a million people visited annually, 70% of them Polish.⁷² The surge in Polish visitors followed Pope John Paul II's 1979 visit, but foreign tourism also rose. After martial law was lifted in 1983, Poland's tourism industry resumed its upward trajectory from the mid-1970s. While many visitors came from socialist countries, arrivals from West Germany grew steadily, and by the late 1980s, Jewish tourism from the United States and Israel increased as well.⁷³ In 1985, 10,179 Americans visited the museum; by 1989, this number had doubled to

⁶⁹ "Protokół z posiedzenia Komisji d/s Muzeum Martyrologii i Walki," 20 January 1989, 2/3055/0/1/2609, *AAN*; Nel Jastrzębiowska, "Conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial: Setting up Conservation Laboratories," *Virtual lesson*, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, accessed March 6, 2025, <https://lekcja.auschwitz.org/2021-konserwacja-en/>.

⁷⁰ Barbara Zając, "Grey or Green? Problems with the Maintenance of the Vegetation of the Museum Grounds," in *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003*, ed. Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 60.

⁷¹ Jonathan Huener, "Antifascist Pilgrimage and Rehabilitation at Auschwitz: The Political Tourism of Aktion Sühnezeichen and Sozialistische Jugend," *German Studies Review* 24, no. 3 (2001): 513–32.

⁷² Tomasz Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 125.

⁷³ Romana Kuszewska, "Foreign Tourists' Visits to Poland in 1980s," *Turyzm/Tourism* 2, no. 1 (June 30, 1992): 115–16.

20,003.⁷⁴ Poland's gradual political opening, the growing ease of travel, and familial ties to the country encouraged Jewish heritage trips, which often included visits to Auschwitz.⁷⁵

Poland's gradual opening to the West in the 1980s was reflected in its willingness to accommodate foreign requests, particularly when they promised external funding. Following his visit to Auschwitz in 1987, Jewish billionaire Ronald S. Lauder wrote to Polish state officials, alarmed by the site's deteriorating condition and the absence of a dedicated Jewish prayer space. On October 12, 1988, Rabbi Chaskel O. Besser, Chairman of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, formally requested permission from Professor Bohdan Rymaszewski, Chairman of the Council for the Protection of Monuments and Martyrdom (Rada Ochrony Pamięci Walk i Męczeństwa, henceforth ROPWiM), to erect a monument at Birkenau. Speaking "in the name of Jews around the world," the foundation pledged full financial support for a memorial to commemorate the Jewish victims of the Nazi extermination camp.⁷⁶ Though a monument had stood at Birkenau since 1964, its inscription, framed in communist internationalist rhetoric, lacked Jewish specificity.

Later that month, ROPWiM convened a new commission on martyrology museums, attended by PMO-B director Kazimierz Smoleń. While members responded favorably to Lauder's proposal, they stressed the museum's more pressing need for funds to support conservation, tourism services, and publications. They also pointed to existing Jewish commemoration at Auschwitz main camp, including Block 27's Jewish pavilion, which could serve as a space for prayer. Additionally, they cited UNESCO's 1979 declaration prohibiting new "external forms of commemorating the victims of Hitlerite crimes." However, they agreed

⁷⁴ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 126.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 125–26.

⁷⁶ "Letter from Rabbi Chaskel O. Besser to Bohdan Rymaszewski," 12 October 1988, 2/3055/0/1/2609, *AAN*.

to consider a monument at the Field of Ashes in Birkenau, where thousands of victims' remains had been scattered. The committee emphasized that any decision required consultation with the International Auschwitz Committee⁷⁷ and Jewish organizations, who "should have the possibility to influence commemoration's form at the eternal burial place of their brethren's ashes."⁷⁸

Acknowledging economic constraints, they welcomed outside financial support.

Rymaszewski ultimately responded to Lauder, proposing conservation work instead of a new monument. Lauder, deeply affected by the site's deteriorating state, agreed. At a January 1989 meeting of the Martyrology Museums Commission, participants endorsed collaboration with the Lauder Foundation as mutually beneficial. They identified urgent areas for assistance, particularly in the conservation of movable objects, archival documents, and acquiring conservation materials unavailable in Poland. The museum was tasked with drafting a detailed list of conservation needs in consultation with the conservation laboratories in Toruń.⁷⁹ However, Lauder's initial efforts came to a halt with Poland's changing political landscape.

Conflict and Dialogue: Poland's Political Transformation and The International Auschwitz Council

It was against the backdrop of these post-89' political and economic transformations that Auschwitz became a chief site of negotiation for a reconstructed Polish national identity, and especially a site for rethinking the relationship between this identity and that of Poland's various historical Others: Germans, Russians, and most importantly—Jews.⁸⁰ Ultimately, with the fall of communism, the Carmelite Convent dispute became entangled in Poland's struggle to define

⁷⁷ This was a survivor organization established in the 1950s by Auschwitz former political prisoners. It is a different organization than the International Auschwitz Council, established in 1991.

⁷⁸ "Protokół z inauguracyjnego posiedzenia Komisji d/s Muzeum Martyrologii i Walki Rady OPWiM," October 26, 1988, 2/3055/0/1/2609, *AAN*, 11–13.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz*, 99.

itself as a democratic nation, with Auschwitz serving as both a battleground and a symbol of competing victimhoods.

Sensational press coverage, as well as scholarship on both Auschwitz and Jewish-Polish relations, tended to fix on conflict and ignore efforts at reconciliation—which was usually pursued away from the spotlight. Luckily, there were some who witnessed the fracture in Polish-Jewish relations and sought to facilitate dialogue and compromise. In 1989, Jonathan Webber, a British social anthropologist and professor at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew Studies, witnessed first-hand the politicization of the site during fieldwork at PMO-B. He wrote to the Minister of Culture and Arts of the new, post-communist regime, Izabella Cywińska, advocating for the creation of an interfaith discussion forum.⁸¹ In response, Cywińska established the Group on the Future of the State Museum in Oświęcim (Zespół ds. Przyszłości Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu), initially including Webber as the sole foreign representative.⁸²

Meanwhile, Webber convened a meeting of Jewish intellectuals in Oxford in May 1990, inviting Katarzyna Marszałek-Młynczyk, Polish Deputy-Minister of Culture and Arts, as an observer of the deliberations. The convened drafted the Yarnton Declaration, which offered recommendations sensitive to Jewish concerns about Auschwitz. The document called for greater inclusion of Jewish perspectives at the site but overlooked Auschwitz's Polish national significance and the government's preservation efforts. Despite these omissions, Marszałek-Młynczyk welcomed the results of the Declaration and pledged to incorporate its recommendations in future decisions.⁸³

⁸¹ "Interview with Jonathan Webber," July 31, 2024.

⁸² Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 164–65.

⁸³ "The Yarnton Declaration of Jewish Intellectuals on the Future of Auschwitz," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 23, no. 2 (1990): 43–45.

Shortly after that, Cywińska renamed The Group on the Future of the State Museum in Oświęcim to the International Auschwitz Council (Rada Państwowe Auschwitz-Birkenau) and expanded its membership. She included world-renowned survivors, intellectuals, museum professionals, and politicians, ensuring equal representation among American-Jewish, Israeli, Polish-Jewish, Polish, and later on, Sinti & Roma stakeholders. That said, the Council's decisions were not legally binding. Instead, it served two purposes. First, it was an advising body for discussing contentious issues surrounding the site, provoked by Poland's political transformation. Second, it aimed at preventing future controversies by fostering an international coalition.⁸⁴

Auschwitz Goes to America: Recruiting Foreign Conservation Expertise

Back in New York, Ronald S. Lauder assembled a team to spearhead Auschwitz's conservation efforts. He recruited two influential Jewish leaders and Holocaust survivors, Kalman Sultanik and Ernest W. Michel, both of whom had strong Zionist political inclinations and deep ties to Jewish communal organizations in the U.S. and Israel. Born in Miechów, Poland, in 1917, Sultanik was active in the Zionist youth movement Hanoar Hatzioni before the war and later became a resistance fighter, surviving imprisonment in Płaszów and Theresienstadt. After immigrating to the U.S., he remained dedicated to Zionist causes, eventually serving as vice president of the World Jewish Congress and chairman of the American section of the World Zionist Organization. In 1981, President Carter appointed him to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council.⁸⁵ Michel, born in Mannheim, Germany, in 1923, was involved in Zionist activities before his deportation to a forced labor camp in 1939. He later survived

⁸⁴ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 164–70.

⁸⁵ Kalman Sultanik, Appendix, Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*.

Auschwitz III-Monowitz and immigrated to the U.S. after the war. Deeply engaged in Jewish philanthropy, he became Executive Vice President of the New York UJA-Federation, one of the world's largest Jewish fundraising organizations, where he mobilized financial and political support for Jewish and Israeli causes.⁸⁶ With their combined influence in the U.S. and Israel, Sultanik and Michel co-chaired the Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, tasked with assessing the state of the site and drafting an initial conservation plan.

The team quickly leveraged their New York connections to recruit top conservation experts. They enlisted James H. Frantz, head conservator at the Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who agreed to contribute his expertise pro bono with the Met's backing.⁸⁷ Frantz recruited George H. Wheeler, a research chemist, and Judith Levinson, head conservator at the American Museum of Natural History. Restoration architects from the prestigious New York-based firm Swanke Hayden and Connell also joined the effort. In October 1989, Lauder Foundation representatives Kalman Sultanik and Dr. Frank Reiss conducted an official site visit to Auschwitz to formalize the partnership, securing a written statement from museum director Kazimierz Smoleń confirming the collaboration. That December, the professional team visited Auschwitz to conduct its first site evaluation.⁸⁸

The May 30, 1990, report outlined the extensive conservation needs, necessary interventions, and estimated costs of the project. It recommended installing climate control facilities to prevent temperature fluctuations that were accelerating the deterioration of movable artifacts, at an estimated cost of \$10 million. The team also recommended the construction of a

⁸⁶ Ernest W. Michel, Appendix, Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*.

⁸⁷ James H. Frantz. "Remarks delivered at the symposium Auschwitz-Birkenau: Should the Relics be Preserved?" Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 2.

⁸⁸ Official Note, Appendix, Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*.

6,000-square-foot conservation laboratory to handle on-site preservation work and reduce the risks of transporting fragile objects, projected at \$2.4 million. The estimated annual conservation budget was set at \$5 million to support staff, materials, and ongoing projects.⁸⁹

For structural conservation, the team recommended beginning with a detailed documentation of the site's current condition, including topographical surveys, aerial photography, and photogrammetry, as well as stabilization of fencing, barbed wire, drainage systems, roads, and original canals and piping. The remaining barracks, chimneys, and stoves required repairs, while the gas chambers and crematoria ruins needed brick reinforcement and concrete slab repairs. The total estimated total cost of these efforts reached \$42 million, with \$20.9 million allocated to site stabilization alone.⁹⁰

The project received broad support across political, intellectual, and cultural spheres. The honorary committee included leading scholars of Holocaust history and memory, such as Yitzhak Arad, director of Yad Vashem; Raul Hilberg, author of the seminal *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1961); and James Young, author of *The Texture of Memory* (1993). It also gained endorsements from figures across ideological and national divides, including former West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, French Holocaust survivor and politician Simone Veil, and celebrities such as Donald Trump, Paul Simon, and Kirk Douglas. The diversity of supporters reflected the project's widespread popular appeal and the growing recognition of Auschwitz's preservation as a global responsibility.⁹¹

American financial support yielded power with the Polish government and the museum itself. In 1991, the International Auschwitz Council established the Preservation Sub-

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-20.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Commission, co-chaired by Bohdan Rymaszewski and Kalman Sultanik.⁹² Rymaszewski's extensive experience as Poland's Chief Monument Conservator (1972–1983) and Deputy Director of ROPWiM (1985–1989) lent crucial expertise, while Sultanik represented the interests of the Lauder Foundation. Lauder himself promised to continue his involvement with conservation, contributing substantial funds for the on-site conservation labs, adding to significant contributions by France, Norway, Switzerland, Greece, and Russia.⁹³ Thus, the Lauder Foundation's initial collaboration with PMA-B on the conservation report proved instrumental in representing Jewish interests within the Council, and especially in regard to conservation issues.

“Preserving the physical evidence of Europe’s darkest night”: Appealing to European States for Funding

\$42 million was a steep sum for a country recovering from years of economic stagnation. For comparison, the American National Gallery of Art's executive operations costs for conservation in 1990 were a “mere” 1.9 million dollars.⁹⁴ For Lauder and his team, it was clear that Poland alone could not bear this financial burden. Initially, they considered turning to American Jewry, but the prospects of successful fundraising seemed low. Throughout the 1980s, the USHMM and other Holocaust museums had already tapped into American-Jewish financial

⁹² Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, eds., *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003* (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 77.

⁹³ PMA-B information bulletin no. 7, January-June 1999. IA.2016.021 (Council Chairman Miles Lerman Subject Files, 1993-2001), box 1, Folder 15 (Auschwitz), *LA-USHMM*, 10; Nel Jastrzębiowska, “Setting Up the Conservation Laboratories.” *Conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial*, Auschwitz-Birkenau Online Lessons, accessed March 19, 2025, <https://lekcja.auschwitz.org/2021-konserwacja-en/>.

⁹⁴ *1990 Annual Report, National Gallery of Art*, 86 (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1991), accessed September 16, 2024, [efaidnbmnnnibpccajpcgglefindmkaj/https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1990.pdf](https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/About/pdf/annual-reports/annual-report-1990.pdf).

reservoirs, and Lauder feared donors would be reluctant to fund yet another Holocaust-related cause. Instead, he and his associates pursued a different strategy: seeking financial commitments from European states from which Jews had been deported—around twenty countries in total.⁹⁵

To lead this effort, Sultanik and Michel wielded their influence as Holocaust survivors and Jewish community representatives, lobbying foreign ministers and ambassadors over the next two years. To formally receive the funds, in February 1991, the Memorial Foundation for the Victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Death Camp was established, chaired by Marszałek-Młynczyk from the Ministry of Culture and Arts.⁹⁶ The Polish authorities allowed foreign money and influence to pour in; the alternative would have been allowing the site to disintegrate, drawing negative press coverage and an international outcry.

The strategy quickly yielded results. Greece became the first state to pledge support, donating \$500,000. The U.S. and Israel were asked for a symbolic \$100,000 contribution, rather than a substantial amount.⁹⁷ While America has just financed a leading Holocaust Museum on its soil, Israel's small donation was intended as a goodwill gesture—having the nation most associated with the victims fund their commemoration was seen as inappropriate. From the outset, Lauder expected Germany to cover the majority of the costs, targeting it for 60% of the budget. In August 1992, the German government pledged 10 million DM (\$6.5 million), followed by an additional 2 million DM raised through a national television and radio campaign. The rest of the German sum was secured in the mid-1990s. That same year, the Netherlands

⁹⁵ Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 3, USHMC Auschwitz, IA-USHMM, 5-16.

⁹⁶ Krystyna Marszałek, "Four Years of the Oświęcim Foundation: The Beginnings," *Pro Memoria* 1–2 (January 1995): 38–40.

⁹⁷ Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 3, USHMC Auschwitz, IA-USHMM, 5.

(\$1.2 million) and Belgium (\$1.4 million) joined the effort,⁹⁸ followed by Norway and Denmark in May 1993, bringing total European contributions to \$16 million.⁹⁹

Seeking to encourage more donations, in January 1993, members of the New York-based Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Working Committee planned a high-profile diplomatic event—a fundraising dinner for European ambassadors, scheduled for June 1993 in New York. In April that year, the USHMM was inaugurated with much pomp and circumstance, in a ceremony attended by numerous world and American leaders.¹⁰⁰ The high-profile inauguration of USHMM provided the crucial public relations boost necessary for financial fundraising for Auschwitz among European countries. The planned dinner highlighted the project’s supporters while pressuring hesitant governments to commit. It also gave contributing states a chance to bolster their international standing, allowing them to frame their support as a moral reckoning with their wartime past. For countries like France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, which had failed to protect their Jewish citizens during the war, participation symbolized belated compensation. By funding Auschwitz’s preservation, they could reframe their fraught national histories, retroactively integrating deported Jewish populations into their national narratives.

From a Jewish perspective, funding Auschwitz’s conservation was the least these countries could do. But Lauder, aware of the diplomatic sensitivities, framed the initiative as a European project, rooted in unity and shared historical responsibility. At the June 1993 dinner, he hailed the effort as an unprecedented moment of collective reckoning, stating: “This is the first time that European nations have come together to lend their financial, and as importantly, their symbolic support to a project dedicated to preserving the physical evidence of Europe’s

⁹⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁰ Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 1–3.

darkest night.”¹⁰¹ By positioning Auschwitz’s preservation as a uniquely European endeavor, Lauder reinforced the idea that funding the project signified a continent-wide confrontation with its past.

In their final summary of the project, Sultanik, Michel, and Lauder concluded that despite financial difficulties, European states had “joined together in an unprecedented gesture of unity and support to assure that the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps—the authentic manifestation of Nazi brutality—remain as an ever-present reminder to educate future generations about humanity’s capacity for evil.”¹⁰² This framing aligned the conservation project with the emerging post-Cold War European identity, positioning Auschwitz’s preservation as an act of collective responsibility and a symbol of European unity. By 1994, the campaign had secured another \$8 million.¹⁰³

By the mid-1990s, Auschwitz’s conservation had become a global cause. Over the next two decades, numerous European states, as well as the EU, the U.S., Israel, and Russia,¹⁰⁴ alongside corporate sponsors, city governments, and private foundations, contributed to ongoing preservation efforts.¹⁰⁵ In 2009, Władysław Bartoszewski, longstanding chairman of the International Auschwitz Council, and Piotr M. Cywiński, director of the Auschwitz Museum,

¹⁰¹ Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 23-24.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰³ By June 1995, 9 European governments committed the following sums: Luxemburg - \$28,500; France - \$1,800,000; Israel - \$100,000; Belgium - \$1,400,000; Holland - \$1,200,000; Norway - \$50,000; Greece - \$500,000; Austria - \$400,000; Russia - \$50,000; Germany – \$15,000,000. “Letter from Ronald Lauder to Stephen Kinzer, New York Times Foreign Correspondent,” June 14, 1995, Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 2.

¹⁰⁴ The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation website stresses that the Russian donation was collected before its invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁰⁵ For a partial list see “Donors,” Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation website, accessed October 23, 2024, <http://www.foundation.auschwitz.org/index.php/donors>. For a list of projects funded by the EU see “Projects EU / Preservation / Museum / Auschwitz-Birkenau,” State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau website, accessed October 23, 2024, <https://shorturl.at/k0glz>. For a partial description of projects funded by various German Lands and states see Witold Smrek, “International Support from State and Land Governments (from the Conservator’s Notebook),” *Pro Memoria* 10 (January 1999): 83–86.

established the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation to secure a perpetual conservation fund. Unlike previous one-time donations, this initiative aimed to provide ongoing financial stability for the site's conservation. The initial goal was €120 million, but as contributions grew, the fund reached €180 million.¹⁰⁶ Germany remains the largest donor, contributing €120 million, while additional €25 million came from Poland, France, Austria, the UK, Italy, and Switzerland. Smaller contributions, ranging from €50,000 to €500,000, came from numerous other European states.¹⁰⁷

This global fundraising effort complemented the original \$42 million raised in the early 1990s and additional funds for individual projects since the mid-1990s. In total, nearly \$250 million has been invested in Auschwitz's preservation. What had begun as a Polish burden had finally been embraced as a shared European and global responsibility—one of the few causes the world could rally around.

Conclusions: Placing Funding in Context

The transition of Poland from communism to democracy and capitalism after the semi-free elections of 1989 marked a dramatic shift, but the costs of this transformation were considerable. The Round Table Agreements symbolized the promise of a new era, yet the enormity of the task ahead soon became evident.¹⁰⁸ Economically, Poland faced near hyperinflation, massive foreign debt, and an inefficient state-run economy incapable of competing globally. The Balcerowicz Plan of 1990 sought to address these issues through shock therapy, implementing rapid price

¹⁰⁶ "Mission of the Foundation," Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation website, accessed October 23, 2024, <http://www.foundation.auschwitz.org/index.php/artykuly/12-articles/22-ratowac-auschwitz-birkenau>.

¹⁰⁷ "Countries," Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation website, accessed October 23, 2024, <http://www.foundation.auschwitz.org/index.php/donors/countries>.

¹⁰⁸ Piotr J. Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989-2004," in *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy*, ed. M. B. B. Biskupski and James S. Pula, 1st ed, Ohio University Press Polish and Polish-American Studies Series (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 273–78, 308.

liberalization, privatization, and currency reform. While these measures curbed hyperinflation and stimulated private-sector growth, they led to mass closures of state-owned enterprises and soaring unemployment, particularly in rural and industrial regions. These disparities deepened the divide between urban elites, who profited from economic liberalization, and marginalized rural communities that felt abandoned by the state.¹⁰⁹

Politically, the 1990s were marked by instability. The emergence of new political parties and shifting coalitions represented a varied yet fragmented democratic landscape. Frequent government changes disrupted policy continuity and eroded public trust in the political system. Meanwhile, elected officials weaponized the communist past to advance political agendas, further polarizing the public. Despite these challenges, by the mid-1990s, Poland achieved economic recovery, with GDP growth resuming and foreign investment increasing. The country's alignment with European Union standards and the influx of EU structural funds bolstered its development, particularly in infrastructure and institutional reforms. However, while economic liberalization widened inequality, leaving many disillusioned with the promises of democracy, reliance on external funding and integration into European institutions sparked debates over sovereignty. Together, these frustrations fueled nationalist and populist rhetoric that framed both economic hardship and foreign influence as threats to Poland's autonomy and traditional values.¹¹⁰

By the late 1990s, as disillusionment with liberal democracy grew, history became a battleground for competing visions of Polish national identity. The post-1989 reckoning with

¹⁰⁹ Stanisław Gomułka, "Poland's Economic and Social Transformation 1989–2014 and Contemporary Challenges," *Central Bank Review* 16, no. 1 (2016): 20–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cbrev.2016.03.005>; Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989-2004," 310–12.

¹¹⁰ Gomułka, "Poland's Economic and Social Transformation," 23–25; Wróbel, "Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989-2004," 312–14.

Polish-Jewish history unfolded alongside the economic and political transformations reshaping the country. While the early 1990s saw a surge in scholarship, public debate, and institutional Holocaust commemorations, this initial openness gave way to increasing polarization. Just as economic reforms created winners and losers, historical memory became another site of contestation, shaped by the uneven experiences of Poland's transition. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Auschwitz (or Oświęcim), situated on Poland's geopolitical and socioeconomic periphery, became the focal point of heated national disputes over its Polish and Catholic ownership and meaning, reflecting broader societal tensions. At the same time, transnational shifts in memory politics increasingly framed the site as simultaneously Jewish, European, and cosmopolitan, further complicating competing claims over its character and ownership.

The Carmelite Convent controversy became the most publicized in a series of religious and land controversies that strained Poland's fragile foreign and Jewish-Catholic relations. Even after the Carmelite Convent was relocated in 1993, the large Papal Cross remained at the Gravel Pit, setting the ground for the Battle of the Crosses (1996-1999). Jewish protest against the Papal Cross provoked local Catholic Poles to erect a field of dozens of smaller, improvised crosses around it. Intense protests by Jewish organizations around the world linked these crosses with those erected by a group of Polish Scouts in 1983 at the Field of Ashes in Birkenau—warning against the site's Christianization and demanding the removal of all religious symbols.¹¹¹

The controversies surrounding Auschwitz were not only religious but also territorial and economic. Many locals felt excluded from decision-making as the site became a global symbol, while their town suffered economic and societal decline following the post-communist transition. Disputes over a planned supermarket (1996-2002) and a disco (1999-2002) in former camp

¹¹¹ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 225–29.

buildings exemplified these frustrations,¹¹² revealing the underlying issue of the museum's undefined boundaries and the so-called Protection Zone—an area meant to restrict development to preserve the site's solemn character. Since the museum's establishment in 1947, no clear regulations had governed the use of former camp buildings outside Auschwitz and Birkenau, making reconstruction and development nearly impossible.¹¹³ As tourist traffic increased in the 1990s, straining local infrastructure, the museum benefited financially while offering little economic relief to local residents. Nationalist and Catholic activists capitalized on these grievances, portraying the situation as yet another instance of urban elites and foreign interests sidelining Polish concerns.¹¹⁴ Their protests, met with vocal Jewish opposition and sensationalized media coverage, further fueled tensions between the museum, the Polish government, local authorities, and Jewish organizations.¹¹⁵

The conflicts over Auschwitz's surrounding terrain subsided in the early 2000s with the passage of key legislation and the implementation of long-term governmental initiatives. In 1999, following intense pressure from Jewish organizations, public controversies, and negative international press coverage, the Sejm enacted the Law on the Protection of the Terrains of Former Hitlerite Extermination Camps (*Ustawa o Ochronie Terenów Byłych Hitlerowskich Obozów Zagłady*), establishing a 100-meter protection zone around all former concentration and extermination camps.¹¹⁶ At the same time, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Administration had been overseeing the Governmental Strategic Plan for Oświęcim (*Oświęcimski Strategiczny*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 221–25, 229–30.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 220, 230–32. He argues the undetermined protection zone exacerbated all 1990s disputes.

¹¹⁴ Charlesworth et al., “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz?,” 165–68.

¹¹⁵ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 220–21.

¹¹⁶ “Ustawa z dnia 7 maja 1999 r. o ochronie terenów byłych hitlerowskich obozów zagłady,” *Dziennik Ustaw* 1999, no. 41, item 412, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19990410412>.

Program Rządowy; OSPR, 1997–2025),¹¹⁷ which aimed to modernize local infrastructure, renovate the old city, protect former camp buildings and landscapes, and foster economic development.¹¹⁸ That same year, the Polish government expanded the authority of the International Auschwitz Council, tasking it with advising on all memorial sites at former Nazi camps in an effort to manage future conflicts.¹¹⁹

According to Andrew Charlesworth, the museum increasingly aligned itself with Jewish organizations to establish its reputation as a “global heritage institution” alongside Yad Vashem and the USHMM, distancing itself from its communist past and Polish antisemitic legacies. Yet this strategic shift alienated local residents, reinforcing their sense of exclusion from decisions about the site’s management and development.¹²⁰ UNESCO State of Conservation reports drafted between 1998 and 2008 identified disputes with the locality as the chief factor threatening the conservation of the site as a whole.¹²¹

The disputes at Auschwitz reflected broader tensions in post-communist Poland, where memory became a battleground for defining national identity. These tensions escalated beyond Auschwitz with the backlash against historian Jan Tomasz Gross’s publication *Neighbors*, which triggered a fierce national reckoning over Polish complicity in the Holocaust. By exposing the 1942 Jedwabne massacre, in which 1,600 Jews were murdered by their Polish-Catholic neighbors, Gross directly implicated Poles in genocidal violence, challenging narratives that had

¹¹⁷ Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, “Oświęcimski strategiczny program rządowy,” accessed March 20, 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/oswiecimski-strategiczny-program-rzadowy-etap-v-2016-2020>.

¹¹⁸ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 232–39.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹²⁰ Charlesworth et al., “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz?,” 169.

¹²¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “State of Conservation: Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940–1945),” reports from 1998 to 2008, accessed August 26, 2024, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/2241>.

framed Polish involvement as passive complicity. The book sparked a national reckoning but also fierce resistance, as critics accused Gross of shaming Poland on the international stage.¹²²

These tensions escalated in the wake of Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004, as memory politics became entangled with anxieties over sovereignty and Western-imposed narratives. Nationalist and conservative forces reasserted Poland's innocence, rejecting what they saw as historical revisionism.¹²³ As Piotr Forecki has argued, these memory debates were less about Jewish-Polish history itself than about the stakes of Poland's post-communist identity.¹²⁴ The reaction to *Neighbors* intensified with the Gross's subsequent publications, *Fear* (2006) and *Golden Harvest* (2012), which explored postwar antisemitism and Polish profiteering from the Holocaust. Right-wing politicians and media framed these works as attacks on national honor, reinforcing the same grievances that had fueled local controversies at Auschwitz.¹²⁵

By the 2010s, the post-communist memory boom had given way to what Kornelia Kończal terms “mnemonic populism”—poll-driven, moralistic, and anti-pluralist imaginings of the past that transformed Holocaust memory into a weapon for political legitimacy and national defense.¹²⁶ The grievances that emerged at Auschwitz—local exclusion from decision-making, economic marginalization, and resentment toward urban elites and foreign interests—provided a template for the broader populist mobilization of memory that would characterize the 2010s. The shift rightward was evident in the institutionalization of long-standing defensive patterns regarding Holocaust memory, as well as in legislative efforts to criminalize accusations of Polish complicity—efforts that, even when formally amended under international pressure, continued

¹²² Forecki, *Reconstructing Memory*, 133–40.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 248–49.

¹²⁶ Kornelia Kończal, “Mnemonic Populism: The Polish Holocaust Law and Its Afterlife,” *European Review* 29, no. 4 (2021): 458.

through institutional capture, parallel scholarly communities, and the creation of “memory comfort zones” that insulated Polish innocence narratives from critical scrutiny.¹²⁷ As Nikolay Kopolov demonstrates, such laws represent how “populist-promoted memory laws protect national narratives rather than the transnational memory of the victims of state-sponsored crimes.”¹²⁸ Paradoxically, this defensive turn occurred precisely as Poland became more deeply integrated into transnational Holocaust memory frameworks that, while ostensibly universal, often marginalized local Polish experiences and perspectives.

Ultimately, unlike the national context, the contentious conflicts around Auschwitz and their resolution allowed for a significant incorporation of Jewish perspectives into the reshaping of the memorial site in the post-communist era.¹²⁹ As I have shown, Jewish organizations, particularly in the United States and Israel, played a key role in advocating for preservation efforts, as European states assumed financial responsibility for the site. The International Auschwitz Council, and in particular the Subcommission on Conservation, formalized foreign influence over the site’s future, ensuring that its conservation was shaped by international, rather than purely national, priorities. Tellingly, from 2000 the sub-commission was chaired by Miles Lerman, Director of the USHMM.

The growing internationalization of Auschwitz’s conservation reflected broader European trends in Holocaust memory politics, where the genocide of European Jewry was increasingly framed as a foundational event for a unified European identity rooted in what Jeffrey Olick has termed a “politics of regret.”¹³⁰ As Dan Diner has argued, the Holocaust has become Europe’s

¹²⁷ Ibid., 465.

¹²⁸ Nikolay Kopolov, “Populism and Memory: Legislation of the Past in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia,” *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 01 (2022): 289.

¹²⁹ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 243.

¹³⁰ Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

paradigmatic lieu de mémoire, serving as a shared historical reference point that binds EU member states through a commitment to civil democracy and the protection of human rights.¹³¹ This commitment, he contends, stems from the assumption of historical responsibility for the Nazi past—a process that, while uneven across European states, nevertheless constitutes a common historical experience shaping European identity.¹³²

The institutionalization of Holocaust memory accelerated in the late 1990s, particularly against the backdrop of the Yugoslav Wars, when Europeans, confronted with genocide on their own continent once again, invoked Auschwitz as a moral and political warning.¹³³ This shift was reinforced by international initiatives such as the establishment of the International Task Force on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF) in 1998 and the Stockholm Declaration of 2000, which officially cemented the Holocaust as a moral framework for protecting minority rights and shaping European and global civil society. The European Parliament's 2005 resolution designating January 27—the anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation—as Holocaust Memorial Day further standardized remembrance practices across Europe, making participation in Holocaust memory an implicit prerequisite for EU membership. These efforts were part of a broader project, coordinated between Israel, the U.S., Germany, and other European nations, to institutionalize the Holocaust as a global memory.¹³⁴

However, as Aleida Assmann warns, the globalization of Holocaust memory, particularly through its Americanization, risks abstracting it from local contexts, flattening national variations, and sidelining Eastern European experiences.¹³⁵ Moreover, as Goldberg and Hazan

¹³¹ Dan Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse: über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust*, Toldot (Göttingen, Germany) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 37–39; Assmann, “The Holocaust — a Global Memory?,” 100.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 39.

¹³³ Levy and Sznajder, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, 160–61.

¹³⁴ Assmann, “The Holocaust — a Global Memory?,” 100–103.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

have pointed out, the Holocaust is not truly a global memory but a distinctly Western one, crucial to the moral narratives of the U.S., Europe, and Israel, yet far less central to historical consciousness in the Global South.¹³⁶ This tension is particularly evident in how Holocaust memory interacts with colonial histories. Diner highlights how European nations that embraced Holocaust remembrance were often reluctant to confront their colonial pasts. This becomes even more complex in the Middle East, “where peoples once mistreated by Nazi Germany later became complicit in colonial crimes.”¹³⁷ Even at Auschwitz, this supposedly universal framework remains deeply contested. Globalized Holocaust narratives, shaped by Western institutions and political agendas, often marginalize local perspectives, failing to address the economic and social needs of the communities surrounding the site.

The tensions at Auschwitz exemplify the broader limits of post-national memory frameworks, revealing how historical remembrance is always shaped by competing claims of local, national, and transnational actors. More significantly, they demonstrate how the very mechanisms that enable transnational memory projects—international pressure, elite consensus, and the sidelining of local concerns—can inadvertently create the conditions for populist backlash. The memory wars of the 2010s were not simply a rejection of Holocaust memory, but a response to the exclusionary processes through which that memory had been institutionalized.

The intense memory conflicts of the 1990s did not only shape Auschwitz’s symbolic ownership but also determined its material future. The site’s growing internationalization, fueled by post-communist memory politics, foreign investment, and global Holocaust consciousness, brought new questions about its preservation. With the influx of financial resources conservation

¹³⁶ Amos Goldberg and Haim Hazan, *Marking Evil: Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, Making Sense of History, volume 21 (New York: Berghahn books, 2015), xiii.

¹³⁷ Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse*, 39. My translation.

became a central concern. Yet, this transformation also exposed fundamental dilemmas: how to balance non-intervention with the need for active preservation, how to define authenticity in a site that was rapidly disintegrating, and how to accommodate the demands of different memory communities. It is this debate that I turn to in the next chapter of the dissertation.

Vignette 3: Crematorium V and the Pond

It was a warm fall day when I participated in a six-hour tour of the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex. This was October 2021, during my first days at the memorial site, where I would soon begin an internship in the conservation department. The morning had brought unexpected news—my internship start date was delayed by a month due to renovation work at the laboratory.

The first part of the tour focused on Auschwitz main camp. Our guide Szymon didn't spare us his patriotic inclinations (“The Jews had it real good in Poland, relatively peaceful!”). The group was diverse, with people from Sweden, Holland, and the USA. The Americans, it seemed, knew of Auschwitz only from the movies (“Is THIS where Schindler made his list?”). We walked in silence while Szymon delivered information through our audio equipment. I watched the faces of my group members, gauging their responses. Slowly, with every piece of information, their expressions turned ashen.

Autumn in this part of Poland is beautiful. I noticed it only when we arrived at Birkenau. My cultural imagination of the place finally encountered the actual site. The vast, open space, scattered with built shapes and ruins, is in truth a landscape made of silhouettes and empty spaces where one must imagine what once existed. Birkenau offers a vista to the horizon, filled with trees, dotted with small country houses, and light green, medium-high grass filling the spaces between the chimneys, ruins, and the low, surviving wooden and brick barracks.

It was early October—just the beginning of autumn, with only a few leaves piled on the ground. The hot sun blazed overhead. This was my second time at Birkenau. My first visit had been with my high school when I was sixteen, but I retained no clear recollection of it. Now I stood there as a fully formed adult armed with a scholarly gaze and intellectual curiosity. I was already well aware of the uses and abuses of this site.

The words of my mentor, Amos Goldberg, echoed in my head: there is no meaning that can be extracted from the senseless death of so many of my people, here on this soil mixed with their ashes, or anywhere else. There is only the posthumous reduction of their life and the crime committed against them. There is only its exploitation, however well intended. We can't really learn from our mistakes by learning history. Histories of violence especially seem to easily relocate themselves to the present, gaining momentum from their legacies of rupture.

Yet, here I was at Birkenau—a pessimist looking for some clues, some hope to locate meaning in the fullest sense possible. And as it happened, I stumbled upon the place from which meaning is generated. In one location in Birkenau, I found what felt like a black hole from which people have attempted to extract the meaning of the event, time and again.

Walking the vast Birkenau terrain is tiring. On the final part of the tour, we walked the road that encircles the internal fence. At the other end were the barracks where those deemed fit for labor would spend their tortured nights after the labor of their tortured days. Located about two kilometers from the Gate of Death was the extermination area, out of reach for regular inmates. We walked down the path until we stopped at a clearing of the forest where the trees were stretched far apart, pine needles laying between them.

Szymon told us about the deportations of Hungarian Jews to Birkenau beginning in May 1944. This was the height of Jewish extermination at the camp, and the crematoria furnaces could not keep up with the volume of transports. Here, in this stretch of the woods, men, women, and children patiently awaited their fate. Szymon showed us pictures taken by SS members of elderly women and children. The pictures captured a hot summer day, yet the people wore thick coats, the heaviness of the air visible on their faces. Some sat on their coats. These were their last few moments.

We proceeded to crematorium V. Adjacent to it was a little pond, no bigger than a few feet across, seemingly rather shallow. This is where the ashes of victims were scattered, Szymon explained. I struggled to understand. Here? In this little pond? What do you mean? How many people? How do you know this? I felt a sense of anger and distress, even revulsion and disbelief. I wanted sources. I wanted proof. I was at the place where it happened, but something deeply troubled my understanding. I picked up little stones from the ground and threw them into the pond, imitating the Jewish rite of placing stones on a tombstone. The water swallowed them, leaving only little ripples that soon disappeared. Black holes tend to swallow, reflect, deflect.

I thought: many must have come here before me and felt the same. This, perhaps, was the place where language failed but at the same time persevered. Even here people would still endeavor to describe, to account, to bear witness, to explain. This was the place from which culture will try to organize the chaos, order the words, and beat meaning into the unconscionable—to understand it, to create something out of nothing. If one gazed enough at the green grass, the pond, or at the square, flat ruins of crematorium V, out of the black hole words would materialize. The objective qualities of things would lend themselves to interpretation. Countless people would arrive at this site after the event, be in it, try to understand or imagine, fail, and still produce words. These words would both perpetuate the crime committed against bodies and communities and carry its truth to the world.

Later, at the archives, I would look for clues that could connect the attempt to extract meaning from the site of the ashes, splayed elusively across the terrain. I found a file entitled “Stosy spaleniskowie”—incineration pits. The name denotes the action: the pits which contained the overflow of corpses from the crematoria, where the bodies were burned to ashes in the open landscape. We know this happened because of rare testimonies, but also from the famous

pictures taken in secret by Sonderkommando members—four frames showing the burning of corpses and women being led to the gas chambers. The images were smuggled out of the camp in a heroic act, to prove to the world that the crime was taking place. This smuggling was, perhaps, the first attempt at meaning making which left the barbed wire.

These images are now placed on the visitor route, on stilts next to crematorium V, as blow-ups. Their placement matches the approximate spot where the photographer stood to take them. They serve, in the words of Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images in Spite of All*, as “a possible point of contact between the image and the real of Birkenau in August 1944.” The granular pictures, taken in haste, denote “instances of truth”: the utter distress of the photographer, scared for his life, having a narrow window of opportunity to snap pictures of the crime, in addition to the horrid scenes themselves.

In one shot, Sonderkommando prisoners stand over the corpses, speaking to each other. In a second shot, the prisoners grip a corpse by its hands and move it into the fire. An intense ball of smoke hovers and rises above the corpses lying at their feet. The sources of the smoke, reported by so many camp survivors and people from the locality, begin right there, where these photos were taken. The smoke in the image was at its most intense, a suffocating blanket rising over the camp. Perhaps this smoke, and not the photos, was the first to bear witness to the crime, carrying with it the unmistakable stench of death, providing temporary, fleeting evidence outside the parameters of the camp.

At the conservation archives, I learned the pond was part of a system of pits and sites where ashes were dumped and scattered. Ashes once covered the meadows and marshy lands, were scattered along the banks of the Vistula and Sola rivers. Particles of flesh rested all over the area, stretching hundreds of square miles. But at the archives, the files entitled “incineration

pits,” much like the landscape which once held them, were frustratingly empty. The most glaring absence was the file meant to hold a geological survey of the ground, commissioned in 1966. When I opened it, the survey was gone. Someone had tried to find traces of ashes in the ground, but even the record of this attempt had vanished.

As I prepare to examine the dilemmas of conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau, I am struck by the paradox that confronts those tasked with preserving the site. The pond and crematorium present the ultimate challenge: how to conserve not just material remains, but absence itself. How to authenticate a site whose most significant aspects—the ashes of victims—are dispersed beyond recovery, whose historical traces resist both preservation and representation? The conservator's task is not merely technical but profoundly ethical, navigating the tension between allowing decay and intervening to preserve, between marking absence and constructing presence. These questions lie at the heart of the complex negotiations surrounding authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

4. Preservation, Authenticity, and the Changing Meaning of Auschwitz-

Birkenau after 1989

Introduction

On May 30, 1990, barely a year from the collapse of the Polish People's Republic, a team of American conservators submitted a comprehensive state-of-conservation report on Auschwitz-Birkenau to the Lauder Foundation, the document's commissioner and primary liaison with Polish authorities. This report, part of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, would shape conservation efforts at the site for years to come. Initially a funding tool to secure \$42 million—primarily from European countries—it soon became a cornerstone for discussions on a new conservation program addressing the rapidly deteriorating terrain of the former camps. These discussions and the decisions they informed are the focus of this chapter.

The report, authored by James H. Frantz, then Chief Conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, reviewed prior preservation efforts, outlined contemporary challenges, and proposed a concrete conservation plan and budget. Frantz emphasized the site's decades-long non-intervention philosophy, which sought to protect the material composition and the context of artifacts while avoiding additions and reconstructions.¹ As I have shown in previous chapters, this conservation approach aligned with global heritage conservation standards prioritizing historical authenticity.² Frantz stressed that the museum adhered to the non-intervention principle even at the price of damage it caused to objects exposed to

¹Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 8.

² Since 1964, historical authenticity has been the dominant conservation philosophy in international heritage protection, with UNESCO leading its dissemination and application in the World Heritage Site initiative. It aims at protecting historical monuments' documentary, aesthetic, and affective values. It also entails a set of practices for ascertaining the factuality, reliability, and credibility of historical artifacts, buildings, and spaces. Historical authenticity is thus also an authority-establishing tool for creating narratives about history and heritage.

atmospheric pressures.³ The cost of this choice was the accumulated damage caused to objects, especially prisoner barracks and the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria in Birkenau. Acknowledging the fragile, impermanent materials used in the camp's construction, as well as postwar damage, he warned that the barracks, built hastily on marshy land, were on the brink of collapse.

The approach practiced before was clearly no longer feasible. "To prevent further deterioration," Frantz wrote, "will require considerable intervention." However, Frantz avoided addressing the philosophical tension between non-intervention and the aggressive measures necessary to prevent the site's collapse. Frantz admitted that this was a complex problem: "the issue as to what constitutes appropriate conservation often remains unresolved, and nowhere is its complexity more evident than in Birkenau."⁴ Despite the projected difficulties, the report ultimately pledged "to reduce this deterioration without altering the eloquence of the site as it now exists."⁵

This chapter examines responses to the inherent tension between Auschwitz-Birkenau's material decay and its preservation. It examines the period between 1993 and 2003, during which Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau; henceforth PMA-B)⁶ leveraged newly available resources to enact decades-old plans. With the securing of large sums for conservation, PMA-B was able to update these plans with new professional knowledge and enact expensive procedures. These preservation measures, particularly in

³ Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ In 2007, the museum changed its name from Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka (usually abbreviated PMO-B, or referred to as Muzeum w Oświęcimiu) to Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w Oświęcimiu: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp. The new name reflected changes in the relationship between the museum and the town of Oświęcim, and the international status of the museum, to which I will return in the next chapter. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the museum in its current name.

Birkenau, significantly slowed the decay of camp relics, extending their survival by decades. Yet this success also provoked some troubling questions: Could Auschwitz-Birkenau remain authentic even if almost every original brick and piece of wood was replaced? How did conservation choices shape the historical narrative of the site, and thus its educational and commemorative mission? Almost three decades after initiating one of the largest and most costly conservation projects on European soil, this chapter asks: what is the meaning of original camp remains and their protection in a post-1989 Europe, and in a world still rife with violence?

The early 1990s marked a period of transformation in Polish and Jewish memory politics, with Auschwitz-Birkenau becoming a focal point for debates on Polish-Jewish relations, historical revisionism, and national identity. These transformations influenced the development of a new conservation philosophy and practice that sought to balance these changes with the conservation requirements posed by rapidly deteriorating materials. As I will show below, various stakeholders' proposed solutions to this balancing act will vary considerably. Jewish, Polish, and others articulated their positions not only according to professional and national identities but also the historical significance and meaning, as well as the material state, of each site within the former camps. Contentious decisions on conservation reflected long-standing dilemmas, such as whether and how preserving material remains supported the site's historical and emotional resonance. At the same time, decisions were shaped by new financial resources and shifting political alliances in a post-socialist world. The results of these debates and the reality of conservation measures shaped the present and future of the site's commemorative and educational mission.

Conflict and Dialogue: Transformations in Memory Politics after 1989

With the collapse of the communist regime and its official memory politics, a gap emerged in which the Jewish and Polish memories of Auschwitz converged and collided. During the 1980s, growing Shoah awareness became a cornerstone of Jewish identity in the United States and Israel.⁷ Alongside this development, Pope John II's 1979 visit to Birkenau reinforced the Catholic and Polish national narratives of Auschwitz.⁸ After years of communist erasure and censorship, Poles and Jews lay competing claims over the physical space of Auschwitz-Birkenau and its vicinity in a series of contentious religious and land conflicts, which took place between 1984 and 2010, to which I will return in the next chapter.

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the contentions controversy around the Carmelite Convent led in the early 1990s to the establishment of the International Auschwitz Council. In 1991, the Council established the Preservation Sub-Commission, co-chaired by Bohdan Rymaszewski, a prominent Polish historian and conservationist, and Kalman Sultanik, a Jewish-American survivor who served as a representative of the Lauder Foundation.⁹ Rymaszewski's extensive experience as Poland's Chief Monument Conservator (1972–1983) and Deputy Director of the National Council for the Protection of Monuments of Martyrdom (1985–1989) lent crucial expertise, while Sultanik's efforts to secure European conservation funding assured conservation needs were communicated with potential donors. Thus, the Lauder

⁷ For a review of each Jewish national context, see Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999); Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, 1st ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

⁸ Jonathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003); Marek Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny: historia, współczesność i świadomość społeczna KL Auschwitz w Polsce* [Auschwitz as a Social Fact: The History, Present and Social Consciousness of KL Auschwitz in Poland] (Kraków: Universitas, 2005).

⁹ Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, eds., *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003* (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 77.

Foundation's prior collaboration with PMA-B on conservation initiatives proved instrumental in representing Jewish interests within the Council.

Birkenau's Rising Importance

Jewish stakeholders sought to revise and update PMA-B. They promoted the position that the museum should be more inclusive of Jewish and other victim groups' perspectives, thus providing a more accurate narrative of the events and their significance to non-Poles.¹⁰

Historically speaking, Birkenau was the chief site of Jewish and Roma and Sinti extermination, with the highest victim count. Furthermore, its existence and preservation were why UNESCO declared Auschwitz-Birkenau as a World Heritage Site.

Many felt that the museum did not sufficiently represent the importance of Birkenau and its victims. Before 1989, PMA-B primarily highlighted narratives of communist resistance and ethnic Poles, with all exhibitions located at Auschwitz I, where most prisoners were ethnic Poles, other non-Polish political prisoners, and Soviet POWs. Consequently, visitors often skipped Birkenau entirely.¹¹ The fall of communism finally allowed this skewed narrative to be corrected and the site's politicization to be addressed.¹² The museum generally agreed and facilitated this change. As Tomasz Cebulski shows, in the early 1990s, museum personnel were already devising plans for the site's reorientation to represent Birkenau's history and memory better.¹³

¹⁰ These reframing efforts were not always welcomed by the Polish authorities, and bitter battles were waged over some of the issues. For the full story of Polish-Jewish relations on the topic of Auschwitz in the early 1990s, see Tomasz Cebulski, "Procesy zmian miejsca pamięci Auschwitz po transformacji systemowej państwa. Funkcjonowanie Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau w latach 1989-1995," in: *Auschwitz po Auschwitz: historia, polityka i pamięć: wokół Państwowego Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1980-2010* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2016), 161-219.

¹¹ In 1990, 39% of museum visitors visited Birkenau; in 1995, 54%; by 2000, 89% of the visitors. Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 264.

¹² For a history of this transformation from a Polish perspective see Marek Kucia's seminal study, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny: historia, współczesność i świadomość społeczna KL Auschwitz w Polsce*.

¹³ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 207.

Against this backdrop, Birkenau emerged as the most significant site within the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, to which most conservation and curation resources were allocated.¹⁴

A key post-89 symbolic transformation at Birkenau was the removal of the bronze plaques at the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism, erected in 1964. The discussion began with the need to update the signage with the number of victims from 4 million to 1.5 million, following the results of Franciszek Piper's seminal study assessing the number of victims at the camp. Four million was the number the Soviets estimated based on crematorium capacity rather than deportation lists—which did not exist then. Adding to the emotional stakes of the discussion was the fact that until 1989, 4 million was used as a trope of communist propaganda. The International Auschwitz Council debated the new inscription between 1990 and 1994, revealing divides not only between Poles and Jews but also among varying religious and moral interpretations of the Shoah. According to Cebulski, this struggle underscored the challenge of encapsulating Auschwitz's meaning in words. In the meantime, the increasing volume of visitors encountered empty plaques at the monument.¹⁵

The growing inclusion of Jewish perspectives also paved the way for better representation of Roma and Sinti victims, though it sometimes overshadowed their narrative. Between 1943 and 1944, approximately 23,000 Roma and Sinti people were imprisoned in the “Gypsy family camp” (Zigeunerfamilienlager) at Birkenau, and 19,000 of them died from

¹⁴ For example, in 1994 the USHMM received a 31 million USD grant from the PEW Memorial Trust to implement changes to Birkenau's circulation, signage, and visitor services. “Report submitted by the United States Holocaust Museum for Grant Money to Fund Auschwitz Museum,” August 1994, IA.0064, box 1, folder 1, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*.

¹⁵ Cebulski, *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 193–205.

hunger, disease, or in the gas chambers.¹⁶ Postwar commemoration of these victims was fragmented and often marked by silence.¹⁷

Despite these challenges, some efforts at remembrance were initiated behind the Iron Curtain, and in 1973, a monument to the family camp was inaugurated on the grounds of Birkenau. By the mid-1990s, Sinti & Roma's history, destruction, and commemoration gained greater prominence, primarily due to the efforts of museum personnel and community leaders.¹⁸ For instance, in 1993, the first international event commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the first transport to the family camp took place, followed by a ceremony in 1994 marking the camp's liquidation. Roma and Sinti leaders also became more visible at official commemorations, further raising awareness of their experiences. Finally, in 2001, an exhibition dedicated to Roma and Sinti history at the camp was inaugurated at Auschwitz I.¹⁹

The transformations in Polish, Jewish, and Roma and Sinti memory cultures during the 1990s brought renewed focus to Birkenau and its conservation. By that time, the site was in poor condition. Apart from renovations conducted between 1960 and 1964, no major work had been undertaken, leaving it in a precarious state. As I will show, this increased attention to Birkenau would shape the museum's conservation priorities and political message for decades to come.

¹⁶ "Genocide of European Roma (Gypsies), 1939–1945," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed July 11, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/genocide-of-european-roma-gypsies-1939-1945>.

¹⁷ Sławomir Kapralski, "The Consequences of the Genocide for Roma Memories and Identities," in *The Legacies of the Romani Genocide in Europe since 1945*, ed. Celia Donert and Eve Rosenhaft (London: Routledge, 2021), 288.

¹⁸ See for example the museum's publication *Pro Memoria* 10 (January 1999) dedicated to the history and memory of Roma & Sinti at Birkenau; Since 2006, notable Roma & Sinti community leader Romani Rose serves on the International Auschwitz Council. "Romani Rose / Members of the IAC (3rd Term of Office) / The International Auschwitz Council / Museum / Auschwitz-Birkenau," accessed October 28, 2024, <https://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/auschwitz-council/iac-members/romani-rose/>.

¹⁹ Kapralski, "The Consequences of the Genocide for Roma Memories and Identities," 295.

Protect or destroy?

On June 3, 1993, the Lauder Foundation hosted a dinner with European ambassadors who pledged significant funds for preserving Auschwitz-Birkenau. Jewish-American survivors and chairs of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project, Ernest Michel and Kalman Sultanik, emphasized that conservation was vital to combating forgetfulness and Shoah denial. As Michel stated, “Already, those who would claim the Holocaust never happened are legion, and unless we take these steps now [...] we will lose both the physical evidence of Nazi brutality and those who have survived to testify.” Sultanik added, “The preservation of the unyielding, unbeatable, incontestable camp [...] will produce an awesome impression. Then words will no longer be the only eye-witness.”²⁰ Their arguments highlighted the transition from survivor testimony to reliance on the site’s material remains as a source of evidence and remembrance.

However, not all Jewish voices endorsed preservation. In a 1994 letter sent to the American-Jewish magazine *Moment*, survivor Alfred Lipson termed the site's conservation a “facelift,” sarcastically referencing its association with Ronald Lauder, heir of the Estee Lauder cosmetics conglomerate. He suggested to “let the Polish authorities continue their modest maintenance program” until Birkenau would eventually “sink into the ground.”²¹ In response, Sultanik defended preservation, stressing that “in their May 30, 1990 report, the conservators outlined the plans for preservation, not ‘refurbishment’ and no rebuilding of the site at Auschwitz.”²² He thus argued that avoiding reconstructions maintained the site’s authenticity and served to prevent claims that Auschwitz-Birkenau was a postwar fabrication.

²⁰ “Dinner Honoring European Ambassadors of Participating Countries,” International Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project Summary, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 22–25.

²¹ Alfred Lipson, “Let Auschwitz Sink into the Ground – a Sanitized and Remodeled Death Camp Will No Longer Serve the Truth of its Evil Past.” *Moment: The Magazine of Jewish Culture and Opinion*, December 31, 1994, 30.

²² Kalman Sultanik, “Physical Testimony for the Next Generation.” *Moment: The Magazine of Jewish Culture and Opinion*, June 30, 1995.

The contrasting perspectives of Lipson and Sultanik encapsulated a broader debate in the early 1990s over how—and whether—the site should be preserved. While some advocated letting the site deteriorate naturally, others supported active conservation to maintain its historical and political message. This debate mirrored discussions in postwar Poland in the 1940s and 1950s, as explored in chapter 2, and arose against another radical political transformation: the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Both the immediate postwar and post-socialist deliberations reflected the enduring political and emotional stakes of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

New voices marked the early 1990s round of discussions. By then, Auschwitz had become a global symbol of the Shoah, and the discourse now included Jewish, Sinti & Roma, and professional voices alongside Polish perspectives. The site’s years-long treatment as a heritage site made preservation a widely accepted goal, but the question of how to preserve it remained contentious.

In what follows, I outline the public discussion on and updating of the museum’s official conservation approach between the early 1990s and early 2000s. I bookend the analysis with two major conferences PMA-B organized on its terrain. The first, “Auschwitz-Birkenau: Should the Ruins Be Preserved?” convened in August 1993. It addressed whether to allow natural decay or implement active preservation, though participants usually supported the latter. The second conference, “Preserving for the Future,” was held in June 2003 after a decade of extensive conservation work. It focused on refining the museum’s methodology. By 2003, the museum had shifted its conservation strategy from protecting the site’s original character to preserving its authenticity—defined as maintaining the present, received state of structures and artifacts. At the same time, this approach raised ongoing questions about its limits and practical application. These conferences underscored a consensus that the site must be preserved but illuminated

tensions around the best practices for achieving this goal. As PMA-B increasingly defined its original terrain and artifacts as material witnesses, the museum faced complex challenges in balancing the site's material constraints, historical value, and the emotional impact of camp remnants.

The Development of PMA-B's Conservation Philosophy and Practice, 1993-2003

The 1993 conference "Auschwitz-Birkenau: Should the Ruins Be Preserved?" provided the first international forum to discuss foundational approaches to the conservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. While not a decision-making venue, it validated existing conservation practices and addressed sites and objects of controversy. By this time, the museum, financially and professionally supported by the Lauder Foundation, had already begun implementing extensive conservation measures, reviewed by the conservation sub-commission led by Bohdan Rymaszewski and Kłaman Sultanik and the International Auschwitz Council.²³ Recognizing the need for a deeper discussion on conservation philosophy, Jonathan Webber collaborated with the museum to organize the two-day gathering.²⁴ The event showcased the site's condition, presented completed measures, and proposed further interventions while inviting input from conservators, historians, and intellectuals.

Most participants agreed that preserving Auschwitz was essential, but there were sharp disagreements about how to do so. As I showed in the previous chapters, The 1979 UNESCO designation of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a World Heritage Site emphasized protecting its authenticity. Still, neither UNESCO nor the museum clarified how to define or apply this

²³ Antoni Stańczyk, "The International Council of the Museum," *Pro Memoria* 1–2 (November 1994): 6.

²⁴ "Interview with Jonathan Webber," July 31, 2024.

principle. Questions remained about which historical moment to prioritize in preservation, how to address damage and loss, and whether restoring an “original state” was even feasible.²⁵

At the conference, James H. Frantz, the same conservator who drafted a preservation program four years prior, critiqued the incoherent preservation approach. He admitted that even as a highly experienced conservator, in the case of Auschwitz-Birkenau, he had trouble formulating conservation goals. If in other museums, preservation’s objective is to retard processes of decay to preserve cherished cultural objects, then at Auschwitz, he wondered, “What exactly is it that we are being called to preserve?”²⁶

Frantz highlighted contradictions in the museum’s practices. The Polish ICOMOS committee’s 1977 nomination of Auschwitz-Birkenau to UNESCO emphasized the long history of preserving the site’s “original character.” However, the same documents detailed practices like replacing roofing tiles, barbed wire, and watchtower components, though with materials sourced from the same manufacturers as the original.²⁷ Sticking to the same raw materials, sourced and manufactured in similar locations and ways as the original, satisfied the criteria of originality presented to UNESCO. However, reconstructing the original reduced the site’s authenticity. The documents justified such replacements as necessary to maintain the site’s historical character but did not address the broader implications of such interventions.

²⁵ In the broader field of cultural heritage management and authenticity, Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe argue these problems are characteristic to memorial sites to Nazi crimes. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, *Historische Authentizität* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016), 20.

²⁶ James H. Frantz. “Remarks delivered at the Symposium, Auschwitz-Birkenau: Should the Relics be Preserved?” August 23-25, 1993, International Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project Summary, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7-8.



Figure 23. A watchtower in Birkenau pre and post renovation, 1962-1963.

Source: ADK PMA-B. KonIII/01/04

Reflecting on previous practices, Frantz raised two key criticisms. First, the museum did not set clear limits on what could be done to preserve the site's original character.²⁸ Such restrictions, for example, could be on replacement of original substance or reconstructions, but also more broadly on the number of funds invested in the project, the extent of technological interventions used to manipulate matter, or the timeframe after which conservation would cease altogether—acknowledging that all materials deteriorate over time. Second, the museum lacked a curatorial framework to guide conservation decisions. Frantz argued that such a framework was crucial to establish the values of objects, prioritize preservation efforts, and evaluate decades-long practices to decide which should continue, evolve, or be abandoned. Without this, he warned, conservation efforts risked being reactive rather than guided by clear objectives which would serve the future of the site.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 7-8.

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

Another significant challenge was the impracticality of preserving Auschwitz’s “original character” due to extensive postwar alterations. For example, prisoner barracks at Auschwitz I were converted into exhibition spaces in the 1950s, making it impossible to restore their original interiors. Frantz warned that “the effort to preserve the original character of the site may easily be confused with the effort to recreate a notion of what the site once was.”³⁰ In other words, he poignantly asked: What do we mean by ‘original’? Because of changes to the site, the idea of protecting the original in its strictest sense was impossible, rendering it an even vaguer practice.

The Overarching Approach

Frantz believed that drafting a new conservation philosophy was crucial. In his talk, he argued that the deteriorated condition of the site, rather than detracting from its impact, enhanced its evocative emotional and historical value. “To my view, little in way of conservation treatment can, by itself, augment this impact [...] indeed, in many cases, it may detract from them,” he stated.³¹ He proposed that preserving the site in its current state—showing the passage of time and natural decay—should be the primary objective for conservation. He argued this approach would most effectively safeguard the site’s documentary and emotional value.

In fact, at the time of Frantz’s talk, this philosophy was already emerging as a cornerstone of the site’s conservation. By the early 1990s, the Conservation Sub-Commission, led by Rymaszewski and Sultanik, had enshrined “preserve the present condition” as the guiding approach.³² In a later publication from 2003, Rymaszewski clarified what it meant by returning to the forefather of modern conservation science, Alois Riegl. In Riegl’s monumental *The*

³⁰ Ibid., 8.

³¹ Ibid., 12. My emphasis.

³² Witold Smrek, “Conservation Question Marks (from the Conservator’s Notebook),” *Pro Memoria* 3-4, January 1996, 53.

Modern Cult of Monuments, published in 1903, he defined key conservation values that characterize contemporary monuments: artistic, historical (or documentary), and age value.

Riegl described artistic value as encompassing a monument's form, colors, and concept, while historical value reflected a monument's significance as a representative of a specific period. A monument's originality was thus impossible to recover in the present.³³ Age value, Riegl argued, "springs from our appreciation of the time which has elapsed since it was made and which has burdened it [the work of art] with traces of age." For example, the ruins of a castle captivate us by experiencing traces of the distant past. Ruins thus represent the passage of time, which has increased the allure of an unfamiliar, evocative past.³⁴ This emotional resonance stems less from ruins' artistic or historical qualities but from their status as a reservoir of the past.

Rymaszewski emphasized that while Riegl's typology remained foundational, it required adaptation for Auschwitz-Birkenau. Riegl, he argued, could not have foreseen the need to conserve remnants of unprecedented violence.³⁵ Auschwitz-Birkenau's immense documentary value lies in its testimony to Nazi crimes, unfolding within a century otherwise characterized by progress and human rights advancements.³⁶ The camps' age value, meanwhile, is visible in their deterioration, which evokes their past and creates a powerful emotional experience for visitors.

Rymaszewski argued that the combination of these values, namely the historical and age values, as concretized in the preserved fragments of the camps, served as the chief elements of their authenticity.³⁷ This authenticity requires safeguarding the site's material substance but not restoring it to its original condition. He stressed that historical understanding could only be

³³ Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin," in *Oppositions Reader: Selected Readings from a Journal for Ideas and Criticism in Architecture, 1973-1984*, ed. K. Michael Hays, trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998 [1903]), 622.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 623–24.

³⁵ Bohdan Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2003), 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

fostered through the authenticity of place and material structures. Imagination plays a key role since an authentic historical monument serves as a stimulus “naturally aided by preserved fragments of camp structure, which inspire the contemplation of the reasons for, history and results of the tragedy that took place here.” He thus argued that relics of violence necessitated strict preservation without additions or reconstructions, safeguarding their imaginary and emotional resonance. “Nothing needs to be added or invented. Everything is tangible and painfully real,” he contended, emphasizing that authenticity precluded embellishment or additions.³⁸

Rymaszewski’s position reflects the common understanding that material authenticity is generative for grasping the meaning of historical monuments. This position aligned with conservation standards of world heritage protection of the 1990s, which supported historical authenticity as a leading value of conservation work. Moreover, scholars of memorial sites also supported this stance. For example, in his seminal edited volume *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge*, published in 1998, art historian Detlef Hofmann argued that original objects may retain traces of the past that can be transmitted to visitors in the present. In another contribution to the publication, Jörn Rüsen suggested that material remnants’ subjective, aesthetic experience generates emotional empathy, which may translate into cognitive insights. Ambiguous material remnants and their continuous curatorial framing and re-framing thus facilitate pluralities of interpretations and generate new, yet-to-be-asked historical questions. In turn, these processes are essential for maintaining both the memory of victims and the study of violent events.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 90.

³⁹ Achim Saupe, “Authentizitätskonflikte in Gedenkstätten. Umstrittener Begriff, Zuschreibung und Erfahrungsdimension,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecol, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 195–200.

However, since the mid-1990s, conservators, historians, and museum professionals have critiqued the concept of authenticity.⁴⁰ Within world heritage conservation, the term has been criticized for its Eurocentric focus on the material substance of monuments rather than their form or design.⁴¹ Bogusław Szmygin argued that this emphasis on material authenticity at Polish memorial sites overshadows its more consequential intangible values. These historical and commemorative values should direct conservation decisions and not vice versa.⁴² In the study of memorial museums, Volkhard Knigge, director of the Buchenwald Memorial, critiqued the desire for “immediate” and “authentic” encounters with sites and objects. He argued that such perceptions ignore the partiality of historical sources and inhibit critical analysis. Moreover, questioning the authenticity of sources is often perceived as disrespecting victims, complicating discussions about their limitations.⁴³

Despite these critiques, PMA-B has been mobilizing authenticity without responding to the criticisms of the concept. Since Bohdan Rymaszewski’s initial formulation of the fundamental conservation approach, the museum has provided little explanation of authenticity’s conceptual and practical meaning. Still, it boasts its feat “to preserve authenticity” in its numerous conservation publications.⁴⁴ Authenticity remains a key value in the museum’s

⁴⁰ Saupe argues that in the German context, these discussions began with the redesign efforts of the Dachau memorial, “Authentizitätskofflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 193–94.

⁴¹ See for example ICOMOS, “The Nara Document on Authenticity - 1994,” accessed July 11, 2025, <https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf>.

⁴² Bogusław Szmygin, “Miejsce Pamięci – definiowanie pojęcia dla ochrony zabytków [Sites of Memory – defining the concept for heritage protection],” in *Miejsca pamięci - definiowanie, interpretacja, ochrona = Places of memory - defining, interpretation, protection*, ed. Bogusław Szmygin (Warsaw: ICOMOS Polska, 2019), 167–76.

⁴³ Quoted and explained in Saupe, “Authentizitätskofflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 199.

⁴⁴ See for example Jolanta Banaś-Maciaszczyk and Jarosław Mensfelt, *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja pięciu drewnianych baraków dawnego KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau. To preserve authenticity: the conservation of five wooden barracks at the former KL Auschwitz II-Birkenau Concentration Camp* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2012); Oliwia Juras, Bartosz Bartyzel, and Piotr Setkiewicz, *Zachować autentyczność: konserwacja dwóch bloków dawnego KL Auschwitz I. To preserve authenticity: the conservation of two blocks at the former KL Auschwitz I* (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2013); Aleksandra Papis and Nel Jastrzębiowski, eds., *Zachować Autentyczność. Konserwacja Muzealów i Archiwarów. To Preserve Authenticity. The Conservation of*

conservation efforts, particularly as “live” survivor testimony wanes, justifying the continuous material investment in conservation.⁴⁵

Limits of Intervention

In 1903, Alois Riegl identified a potential contradiction between a monument’s historical and age value. While historical value emphasizes preserving a monument in its original, complete state, age value highlights the traces of time and decay. If both values serve as the basis of the historical monument, then the conservator might have to choose which value takes precedence. Riegl’s suggested guideline for this choice was human-centric. He contended that some degree of human interference is preferable to “the violence of nature.”⁴⁶ Slight intervention, meant at retarding the speed of decay, is better than the total disappearance of a historical monument.

Throughout the 1990s, the crux of the discussion around Auschwitz-Birkenau’s preservation was on the extent and limits of interventions. The basic assumption taken from Riegl was that minimal human intervention was preferable to the ravages of nature and time, which would result in the site’s disappearance. However, from a technical standpoint, the extremely low durability of camp materials, especially at Birkenau, constantly demanded growing intervention. One of the thorniest issues was what should be done with elements that had been or would soon be destroyed. The museum’s approach to this conundrum, drafted by

Museum Collections and Archival Materials, trans. Marta Świątoń (Oświęcim: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2021).

⁴⁵ Axel Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf, “Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Axel Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 7.

⁴⁶ Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” 636–37.

Rymaszewski's subcommission, offered a typology of sites according to a gradation of importance.⁴⁷

Camp objects and sites were divided into two categories. The first category included items directly linked to the victims or the machinery of their destruction. These were considered the most significant. In his 1993 conference presentation, PMA-B Chief Conservator engineer Witold Smrek described these sites as "engraved in the consciousness (świadomość) of a particular nation or people," even if only fragmented traces remained. At such sites, the conservator attempts "to perpetuate and enrich this consciousness through the protection of documents, and the character of constructions and devices."⁴⁸ Rymaszewski later established that victim objects should be "treated as inviolable in their authenticity," their preservation deemed essential to maintaining the integrity of the site's memory and message.⁴⁹ This approach prohibits the introduction of any additions, artistic framing, or emphasis. It mandates that the exterior and interior of these objects and spaces need to be kept in their current, received condition. The only accepted procedures are aimed at stemming decay. If new elements are introduced, they must be visibly distinct from the original and legible as later additions. This category included the personal belongings of victims, instruments of torture and extermination, prisoner barracks, the arrival ramp at Birkenau, and the ruins of gas chambers and crematoria.

In contrast, the second category comprised utility buildings and infrastructure that could be modified or adapted for practical use.⁵⁰ These structures are treated with greater flexibility to accommodate functions such as exhibitions or visitor services. For example, the prisoner

⁴⁷ Smrek, "Conservation Question Marks," 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴⁹ Bohdan Rymaszewski, "Protect or Destroy?" *Pro Memoria* 1-2, 1995, 27.

⁵⁰ Witold Smrek, "Wybrane problemy konserwatorskie Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu," Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1993, 8.

barracks at Auschwitz I have long housed permanent and national exhibitions, with interiors significantly altered to suit these purposes. Similarly, the historic prisoner reception building now serves as the museum's entrance, containing a ticket booth, bathrooms, a post office, and a small restaurant. While such adaptations compromise authenticity, Rymaszewski argued they were necessary for the museum's educational mission.⁵¹ However, the museum's position has since been revised, and future plans include relocating permanent exhibitions to non-original buildings to better align with updated conservation principles.⁵²

Despite the updated framework established in the early 1990s, the practical application of these guidelines often presented challenges. Conservators regularly faced dilemmas. Most complicated were objects in an advanced state of decay, such as the concrete posts connecting the barbed wire along hundreds of kilometers or the Sauna building in Birkenau, used during the camp's operation to receive new prisoners selected for work. Each case demanded balancing competing values and priorities, often necessitating adaptations to the overarching framework, shaping the near and far future of the site.

In the next section, I present three case studies demonstrating how the updated approach continued to present challenges, primarily in procedures that involved a choice between competing values and roles of the memorial museum. Following Achim Saupe, I term these debates "authenticity conflicts," which he characterizes as contestation about handling authentic objects, substance, and sites. Such discussions are usually provoked by changes to the design of a memorial site, encompassing issues of originality, verification, and credibility of authentic objects; and accompanying narratives and staging techniques, which further validate and create

⁵¹ Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*.

⁵² Interview with Professor Havi Dreifuss, residing member of the International Auschwitz Council, July 2024.

credibility.⁵³ I begin with the preservation of the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau. The conference discussions in 1993 and 2003 around these sensitive areas start to illustrate the breadth and stakes of conservation decisions and the complex vectors that shape their final form.

Case Study I: The Gas Chambers and Crematoria

I. Preserve or reconstruct?

The gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau remained a disputed, unresolved conservation issue even during the conference convened in 2003. These ruins, operating as the chief sites of murder and cremation from 1943 to 1944, are widely regarded as the most significant and evocative spaces at the camp. In October 1944, Sonderkommando prisoners revolted, destroying crematorium IV. In January 1945, the SS demolished the remaining structures to conceal evidence of their crimes. These ruins thus symbolize the crimes committed and the attempt to erase them. Their affective quality has made them central to the visitor experience, amplifying debates over their preservation.

In the immediate postwar period, some suggestions were made in the Polish press to reconstruct some buildings for pedagogical purposes. A reconstruction of a similar nature was done in 1947 when the museum decided to restore gas chamber and crematorium I, located on the terrain of the main camp at Auschwitz. Unlike Birkenau, however, this building was largely intact at liberation, making the intervention less invasive. The reconstruction of the Birkenau gas chambers and crematoria was eventually rejected not only because of the drastic reconstruction it entailed but because the ruins told the story of the SS's attempt to cover up the traces of their

⁵³ Saupe, "Authentizitätskonflikte in Gedenkstätten," 201–7.

crimes. Thus, leaving them in their ruinous state demonstrated the destruction of evidence, a crucial dimension of the Nazi genocidal project.

Despite this, reconstruction remained a topic of debate, including at the 1993 conference. One supporter of this stance was Jean Claude Pressac, a French Holocaust denier-turned-believer. Pressac was a student of Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson. In the 1980s, he visited the museum's archives on several occasions to study the evidence of mass extermination to disprove it. The materials he reviewed utterly convinced him of the truthfulness of the events, which he published in his study *Auschwitz: Technique and Operation of the Gas Chamber* in 1989.⁵⁴ At the 1993 conference, he proposed reconstructing crematorium III to allow visitors to simulate the victims' experience. He envisioned the visit to a reconstructed chamber and ovens as a visceral "slap in the face," demonstrating to the visitor that the Nazi operation was "insane and criminal."⁵⁵ Pressac's approach was informed by his understanding of the difficulty in persuading skeptics. He articulated the opinion that memory-like experiences, even if simulated or planted, were a valid tool to generate a meaningful encounter with mass atrocities, which would facilitate reflection and change in the visitor's stance towards them.

This proposal faced strong opposition. Critics argued that Birkenau should not become a theater of horrors and that shocking exhibits undermined the solemnity of the site. Pressac's proposal also stood in sharp contrast to the museum's conservation and curatorial tradition, which rejected reconstructions and reenactments, viewing them as a violation of the victim's memory.⁵⁶ Conceptually, his stance highlighted the ambiguity of "protecting the original," conflating preservation with attempts to recreate the camp's operational state.

⁵⁴ Jean-Claude Pressac, *Auschwitz, Technique and Operation of the Gas Chambers* (New York, NY: Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, 1989).

⁵⁵ Timothy W. Ryback, "Evidence of Evil," *New Yorker*, November 15, 1993, 68-81.

⁵⁶ Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 90-91.

Other conference participants suggested that Birkenau should be minimally maintained until it eventually disintegrates. Referring to the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria, Frantz wondered “how the values of the site would be changed if essentially nothing were done to it in way of conservation or restoration. Would the eloquence of the site be diminished by a program that stressed selective neglect or by one that favored interventive measures?”⁵⁷ His imaginary exercise demanded consideration of the changing meaning of the ruins in the future. James Young expressed a more definite stance. Despite serving on the honorary Preservation Committee of the Lauder Foundation, by 1993 (the same year he published his seminal *Texture of Memory*) he had reconsidered his position. He believed that the conservation of Birkenau would entail too much intervention, arguing that the site should be allowed to run its natural course and age “gracefully.” This position was also supported by Gertrud Koch, the producer of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.⁵⁸ Over the years, others have expressed support for this stance, most famously architectural historian and Auschwitz expert Robert Jan van Pelt.⁵⁹

While intellectual debates unfolded, the museum had already enacted conservation procedures to preserve the ruins in their current state.⁶⁰ These efforts were technically complex due to the severe deterioration of the ruins, compounded by Birkenau’s flooding-prone terrain and the effects of acid rain. Concrete components eroded, and metal elements corroded rapidly.⁶¹ By 2003, conservators warned of the ruins’ worsening condition despite reinforcement measures.

⁵⁷ Frantz, “Remarks delivered at the Symposium,” 11.

⁵⁸ Ryback, “Evidence of Evil.”

⁵⁹ Brett Popplewell, “A Case for Letting Nature Take Back Auschwitz,” *Toronto Star*, December 27, 2009, accessed October 27, 2024, https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/a-case-for-letting-nature-take-back-auschwitz/article_332ad282-6d8d-5b11-8a67-cc611ed1baa1.html.

⁶⁰ For a list of studies and procedures performed between 1964-1994, see Andrzej Deneka, “How to Preserve the Ruins of the Gas Chambers and Crematoria,” in *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003*, ed. Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 72.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 72–76.

The museum remained committed to stemming decay through intervention, albeit attempted to keep such measures to a minimum. The museum chose the latter in the Rieglian choice between letting nature reclaim the ruins or performing interventive measures. Metal beams were discreetly added for support, and detached fragments were placed nearby, maintaining the ruins' appearance.⁶² Still today, protecting the received state of the ruins is a difficult task. As monument conservation expert Leo Schmidt notes, maintaining ruins in their "immediate post-event appearance is a monumental conservation effort. [...] the less intervention, the more work is needed to create this effect."⁶³



Figure 24. Metal supporting beams added under the ruins of crematorium II. 1992. Preservation Report commissioned by Aby Nathan. Yaron Shimoni Shaham Architects, Jerusalem. ADK PMA-B.

⁶² Ibid., 74–75; Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, eds., “Discussion,” in *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003* (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 30.

⁶³ Alex Drecol, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf, “Historische Authentizität als Kriterium für die Kategorisierung von Gedenkstätten, Erinnerungsstätten, Dokumentationszentren und Geschichtsmuseen? Diskussion,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecol, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 230.



Figure 25. Loosely hanging metal elements and concrete parts, crematorium II. 1992. Preservation Report commissioned by Aby Nathan. Yaron Shimoni Shaham Architects, Jerusalem. ADK PMA-B.

The stakes of conservation were further explored during the 2003 conference, where a demonstration involving original metal elements from the gas chambers illustrated the tensions between historical and age value. Conservators presented two samples: one corroded and another cleaned to reveal the intact metal. The corroded sample emphasized age value, highlighting the ruins' postwar deterioration and evoking their history of neglect and decay. The cleaned sample, by contrast, underscored the technological functionality of the structures, emphasizing their role in the machinery of murder.⁶⁴

The discussion illuminated two competing conservation philosophies at memorial sites: preserving “as is” versus restoring objects to their operational state.⁶⁵ While cleaning the metal could enhance the educational impact by showcasing the infrastructure’s functionality, it

⁶⁴ Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, “Discussion,” 87.

⁶⁵ Saupe, “Authentizitätskoflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 206.

conflicted with the overwhelming preference to leave the ruins in their received state. Most conference participants rejected restoration, favoring a minimalist approach that preserved the evocative power of the ruins' decay. By 2003, the ruinous state of the structures had become an icon, a feature of the site visitors expected to encounter. Further, international historical preservation standards, the site's conservation tradition, and its renewed approach—unequivocally rejected reconstructions.

II. Curatorial Framing

To address the challenge of presenting the functionality of extermination devices, some conference participants proposed augmenting the ruins with additional signage and visual materials, particularly from newly opened archives in Moscow.⁶⁶ Such curatorial propositions illustrate that authentic remains never speak for themselves but rather must always be mediated and explained.⁶⁷ As James Frantz noted in his 1993 talk, preservation questions must be considered alongside curatorial approaches. At PMA-B's first permanent exhibition, curators successfully juxtaposed authentic remains and supplementary materials through intuition and even chance. However, in recent years museum curators have professionalized these techniques, applying sophisticated mediation technologies.

Since the 1990s, Birkenau's curatorial approach has focused on adding explanatory materials and visual aids in ways that do not overshadow the authentic ruins. Next to the gas chambers and crematoria II to V, original plans and minimal explanations have been placed on free-standing plaques in Polish, English, and Hebrew. In addition, curators placed next to crematorium V enlarged photos of three out of the four photos taken in secret by

⁶⁶ Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, "Discussion," 2004, 87.

⁶⁷ Hauke Petersen, "Gedenkstätten und Authentizität. Über den Umgang mit KZ-Architektur," in *Gedenkstätten und Erinnerungskulturen in Schleswig-Holstein: Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft*, ed. Hauke Petersen, Katja Köhr, and Karl Heinrich Pohl, vol. 14 (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2011), 121–24.

Sonderkommando prisoners during the camp's operation. These images are the only known photographs of the extermination process, showing open-air cremations and women being ushered into the gas chambers. Captured in great peril, the photographs provide an unparalleled perspective on the events.⁶⁸

The photographs' placement creates a powerful "time window" by evoking specific moments from the site's history. In the last fifteen years, this mediation method has become a standard curatorial mode in memorial sites.⁶⁹ Thomas Lutz argues that at memorial sites, photos and documents are often used as evidence that verifies events associated with historical locations. Furthermore, when situated together, they reinforce each other's evidentiary authority.⁷⁰ At Birkenau, curators placed the photos before the crematorium ruins at the same angle the unknown photographer stood when he took them.⁷¹ The composition allows visitors to imagine snatching the pictures while witnessing the scenes viscerally. However, the placement behind the ruins makes it clear that time has elapsed. The composition of preserved relics and

⁶⁸ The famous Auschwitz Album, found by Lily Jacob on the terrain of Dora concentration camp upon her liberation, depicts the selection process of a transport of Hungarian Jews from summer 1944 (including Lily's family). It was probably taken by SS officer from the camp Erkennungsdienst (Identification Service), and was meant to present the arrival and selection process of the arriving as an orderly and organized event. The SS personnel at camps never documented mass extermination processes, which was strictly forbidden, and endeavored to destroy all evidence of crimes. Sonderkommando photos attempted to do the opposite, acquiring proof that was meant to convey the crimes. Out of the 21 original photos on the roll only four survived. The photos were smuggled out of the camp by the Polish camp resistance.

⁶⁹ Thomas Lutz, "Materialisierte Authentifizierung: Die Bedeutung authentischer Gebäude und Objekte in Gedenkstätten und Dokumentationszentren der NS-Verbrechen," in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: Die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Dreccoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ It is crucial to note that the photographs' version used at the site are cropped. The original photographs were taken from inside the structure and were framed by the door. Because of the light contrast between the inside of the chambers and the high sun outside, the photographic depiction of the chamber's inside, and which served as a frame for the photo, developed as 'burnt out' and black. In the aftermath of the war, the blackened areas were understood to be redundant and cropped out to focus on the depicted events. French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman argues this is a distortion, as the uncropped image, with its 'burnt out' sections, reveals the progression of the photos taken, relating the story of the photographer taking them in great fear, danger and in a haste. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 30-50.

visual documentation thus succeeds in making history present and absent simultaneously, a technique Jörn Rüsen notes characterizes a successful dialectics of authenticity. In this dialectic, the aesthetic, emotional experience of the open-to-interpretation relic corresponds with cognitively understanding its historical meaning.⁷² The visual material, together with the ruins, thus provides not just evidentiary verification but a jarring, multilayered experience of history—and an opportunity for reflection on one’s standing, physically and metaphorically.

Case Study II – Wooden Prisoner Barracks in Birkenau: Reinforce or replace the original?

Another significant challenge the museum faced was deciding how to proceed when an object was partially or totally destroyed. At the 1993 conference, Chief Conservator Witold Smrek presented the case study of prisoner barracks at Birkenau. His talk traced the museum’s shift from “preserving the original character of the site” to “preserving it in its existing, received state.” It highlighted the complexities and tensions involved in this evolution.

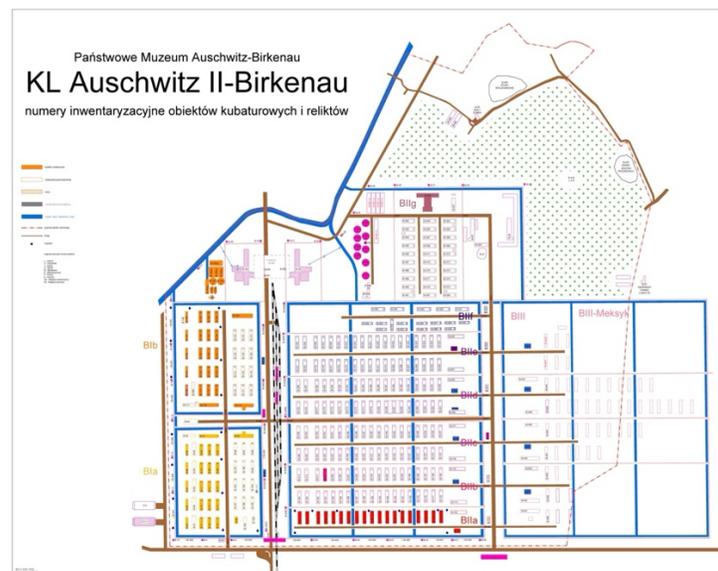
Out of the dozens of barracks that populated Birkenau during the war, only a handful remained by 1947. Most had been dismantled and repurposed by the local population and government authorities. The remaining barracks in sections BIIa and BIIb were in an advanced state of decay. Originally designed as temporary horse stables, they lacked foundations and insulation, and their contact with the damp ground accelerated fungal decomposition. By the early 1950s, the barracks were on the verge of collapse.

The barracks held immense documentary value despite their condition, providing a rare glimpse into prisoners’ daily living conditions. The museum’s initial approach was to salvage what could be saved, restoring the structures as closely as possible to their original state. In 1951, conservators decided to dismantle and reconstruct all 38 structures. However, the process faced

⁷² Saube, “Authentizitätskofflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 197–98.

significant challenges. Many elements were too damaged to reuse and had to be discarded. The remaining materials were reassembled into 19 barracks. Still, mismatched pieces and insufficient pre-dismantling documentation led to the loss of specific details, such as inscriptions, wall paintings, and internal divisions.⁷³ Furthermore, to prevent the deterioration of the remaining reconstructed barracks, they were placed on concrete foundations.

This example reveals early conservation efforts' initial ad-hoc yet creative character. Considering limited funds and expertise, the museum chose dismantling and reconstructing as the best possible route. However, conservation technologies were still in their infancy, and the necessary tools were not readily available in postwar Poland. The reassembly process was akin to solving 38 puzzles with only half the pieces. While the original materials were reused, the loss of structural integrity begged the question: were these still the same barracks where prisoners had lived and died?



Map 7. Birkenau. Contemporary conservation map drafted and used by the memorial site. Objects died with solid color are still standing structures. Section BIIa is on the bottom right. Archiwum Działu Konserwacji, PMA-B.

⁷³ Witold Smrek. "Wybrane problemy konserwatorskie," 4.



Figure 26. Reconstructed/preserved wooden barracks at Birkenau, section BIIa. Photograph by Paweł Sawicki. Source: www.auschwitz.org

Smrek further explicated this conundrum by relaying the history of the barracks' conservation over the years. Between 1952 and 1992, conservators filled gaps, replaced damaged elements, and reinforced walls with new materials. These renovations resulted in retaining about 80% of the original material. In 1992, the museum initiated another round of general renovations, performed according to National Foundation for Monument Protection guidelines. This time, each barrack was renovated individually for six months. Conservation work was preceded by meticulous documentation and inventorying of the barracks' elements, including drawings, photos, and film. The building's history and construction process were also carefully researched. The museum has come a long way since 1952, tremendously improving its conservation practices.

Nevertheless, questions about replacing original elements persisted. In Smrek's words:

Unfortunately, it's impossible to avoid replacing some elements with new ones. In this place we always encounter a problem – if the element is in an advanced level of destruction should we replace it with a new one made the same way, or should we attempt to reinforce it with metal, guy wires, supporter elements, etc.? We then ask a fundamental question: what goal do we want to achieve? Is the most important goal that visitors have contact with 100% of the original material or do we want them to understand the atmosphere of the place, encounter the conditions of prisoners' lives and the provisional character of construction? An object supported and surrounded by a metal construction is perceived differently than the appearance of the original interior with chimneys and bunkbeds on which the prisoners slept.⁷⁴

In this round of renovations, taking apart the entire structure and recomposing it using randomly chosen elements was entirely out of the question.⁷⁵ By the early 1990s, monument conservation guidelines would not allow such a gross intervention in the structural integrity of an object. The new method rearticulated the choice between replacing an original, destroyed element with a new one or reinforcing the original using new elements. New elements were marked as such, and the focus shifted to filling cavities rather than fabricating replacements.⁷⁶ This approach balanced preserving the barracks' material integrity with minimizing modern interventions.

Despite access to advanced methods, technologies, and even new guidelines, the underlying question from 1952 remained: was it better to retain deteriorated materials or introduce new ones that emulated the original? The latter choice ultimately involved a form of reconstruction, albeit a subtle one. In his talk, Smrek stressed that such decisions depended on the value and goal of conservation. Retaining original materials upheld the site's commitment to authenticity and framed the barracks as witnesses to history.⁷⁷ However, replacing elements with replicas served a pedagogical function, enabling visitors to understand better the barracks'

⁷⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁷⁵ An important clarification should be made here: the museum still practices dismantling and reassembling structures in order to reinforce their structural resiliency. However, the practice of "mix & match" and consolidate from various structures was abandoned.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 8.

wartime appearance and prisoners' living conditions. Each choice carried different stakes and consequences.

Following Smrek's presentation, some conference attendees criticized the conservation practices of the barracks, particularly the use of concrete foundations. They argued that this intervention undermined the barracks' documentary value. If prisoners had suffered from extreme heat and cold due to the lack of insulation, visitors should experience those conditions to understand their plight better.⁷⁸ Despite such critiques, museum conservators concluded that retaining the original materials without foundations would have led to the barracks' complete disintegration within five years.⁷⁹ The museum prioritized the structures' pedagogical and spatial roles within the memorial site, opting to stabilize them with concrete to ensure their survival.

The enacted conservation procedures illuminate how some procedures may subtract from the aura of an object, which visitors expect to encounter in its untouched and untreated condition—indeed, as original and authentic, and thus able to attest to its original historical time. As Kurt Buck phrases it, “A faithful reconstruction aids in understanding what once was, but it does not move us like something that is [preserved as] as original.”⁸⁰ A visit to the site is not only an encounter with evidence but an experience of its emotional resonance.

This case study demonstrates that even seemingly mundane objects like wooden barracks can pose extraordinary conservation challenges. These dilemmas underscore the broader tensions in balancing authenticity and educational goals. These issues are even more contentious in discussions about displaying and conserving victims' hair at Auschwitz I.

⁷⁸ Ryback, “Evidence of Evil.”

⁷⁹ Ibid.,

⁸⁰ Quoted in Saupe, “Authentizitätskoflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 210.

Case Study III - Victims' Hair: To conserve or not conserve?

Perhaps one of the most debated issues in 1993—still unresolved a decade later—was whether and how to conserve and exhibit victims' hair. When the Soviets liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945, they discovered 7,000 kilos of hair shorn from the corpses of thousands of women after gassing. Since the museum's 1947 inauguration, the hair has been part of the permanent exhibition, displayed alongside other victim belongings like shoes, suitcases, and prayer shawls under the title "Evidence of Mass Crimes." The hair's original framing was thus as part of a series of artifacts defined as evidence meant to prove and demonstrate the extent of the crime.

At both conferences, visitors and professional voices understood the hair on the one hand as the museum intended—i.e., as evidence—but on the other as a sacred relic. Participants often categorized the hair as human remains and, therefore, frequently articulated the position that it was a sacred object, different from other victim objects on display. Many argued the its sacred status demanded unique consideration. Insa Eschebach has noted sacralizing human remains at memorial sites seeks to reverse the effect generated by the taboo of mass murder, giving meaning to senseless death and saving the "unredeemed ghosts" of victims.⁸¹ She further argues that at such sites, social and religious institutions mobilize a language of sacralization which "tames the disaster and allows it to dissolve into a meaningful, seemingly supernaturally legitimate order." It is thus also a process that reduces the complexity and inexplicable dimensions of mass atrocities. Along healing and care, sacralization can become "an offer to resolve conflicts" by

⁸¹ Insa Eschebach, "Blutgetränkte Erde. Die Sakralisierung historischer Orte des Massensterbens," in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 18.

redeeming history and marking it as “complete and non-traumatic,”⁸² i.e., as a bygone event that does not require further reflection.

The sacralizing approach is evident in the Polish authorities pre-1989 referral to memorial museums as “historical monuments of martyrdom,” a term borrowed from Christian traditions commemorating saints. This framing married the sacred and the historical in what Bohdan Rymaszewski termed a new “science of martyrology,” studying and commemorating the suffering of ordinary people rather than saints.⁸³ This approach shaped the Polish People’s Republic’s ethics of care for its citizen victims and the sites of their deaths, often subsuming non-hegemonic ethnic and religious identities within Polish and communist narratives.

In 1993, many supported the continuous exhibition of hair, finding it to be one of the museum’s most shocking yet compelling exhibits. Visitors and intellectuals alike linked its evidentiary role to its ability to evoke profound reflection. A young Israeli visitor described the hair as symbolizing the lives that were taken, while historian Detlef Hoffmann highlighted its role in vividly conveying the crime. Similarly, Jörn Rüsen observed that the hair forced onlookers to grapple deeply with the atrocities, disrupting any return to normalcy. As visitors and intellectuals noted, the hair was an object of heightened proof and knowledge production but also symbolled the victims and their destruction. Insa Eschenach argues these combined qualities render human remains the ultimate proof. They are thus a central pillar in memorial sites’ rhetoric of factuality and authority and, consequently, of authenticity.⁸⁴

However, others thought the hair to be too disturbing and shocking to be displayed, often justifying their positions by referring to the sacred quality of hair. For instance, Frantz

⁸² Ibid., 28–29.

⁸³ Rymaszewski, *Generations Should Remember*, 79.

⁸⁴ Eschenach, “Blutgetränkte Erde.”

found its exhibition “offensive” because of its voyeuristic nature and believed the hair, given its status as human remains, should be buried.⁸⁵ A German conservation volunteer said that while the shoes should, without a doubt, be conserved, hair should be buried according to Jewish burial practices, prioritizing the dignity of human remains over their display.

Still, others found that the hair’s sacred quality did not necessarily disqualify their exhibition. Lauder Foundation representative Rabbi Michael Schudrich, later to become the Chief Rabbi of Poland, said that a case could be made for the continuous presentation of the hair but that the matter required consultation with higher rabbinic authorities. Bohdan Rymaszewski stressed that the hair and other human remains must be protected but could not determine their apt form of presentation.⁸⁶ Expressing a similar position, PMA-B Director Jerzy Wróblewski noted that the decision should be made after gathering opinions from various experts, including philosophers and religious leaders. He also added that while the hair’s continuous exhibition was the museum’s official position, he felt that the hair should be taken down. Nevertheless, it was “the ultimate proof” and thus should not be buried but placed in storage for safekeeping.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Frantz, “Remarks delivered at the Symposium,” 12.

⁸⁶ Ryback, “Evidence of Evil.”

⁸⁷ Ibid.



Figure 27. An example of a postcard sold at the post office located at Auschwitz I in the late 1950s and 1960s. Designed and printed in 1957. Zbiór Kazimierza Rusinka, 2531/350. AAN.

Ten years later, the museum had not decided on the hair's conservation and display. Conference attendees expressed similar reservations as before. For example, Jonathan Webber argued that hair was not an object of the same category as shoes or suitcases. Thus, the display was morally wrong because it objectified human remains. In addition, the exhibit's signage reinforced this objectification, referring to the postwar forensic inspection and ascertainment of traces of Cyclone B in the hair. While this was factually true, the sign emphasized the evidentiary function of the exhibit rather than its commemorative one. No signage stated that these are human remains, asking for respectful visitor behavior.⁸⁸

By 2003, the condition of the hair had worsened significantly. The hair was chemically processed during the camp's operation for use in textiles and other materials.⁸⁹ As a result of

⁸⁸ Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, eds., "Discussion," 96.

⁸⁹ Władysław Niessner, "Preservation and Ethical Dilemmas Associated with Conserving Auschwitz-Birkenau Victims' Hair," in *Preserving for the Future: Material from an International Preservation Conference, Oświęcim, June 23-25, 2003*, ed. Krystyna Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka (Auschwitz: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2004), 66.

these chemical treatments, its storage conditions during the camp years, and in its postwar exhibition, the hair became brittle and discolored, and was in an advanced deteriorated state. On a few occasions, periodic cleaning procedures and using liquid naphthalene for impregnation resulted in the loss of some of the hair.⁹⁰ It thus posed not just an ethical conundrum but a technical one.

In his 2003 talk, renowned architectural conservator Władysław Niessner explicated hair conservation's complex and costly nature. Since 1997, Niessner served as the new chair of the conservation sub-commission at the International Auschwitz Council, replacing Rymaszewski. He studied the topic closely. First, he noted that the hair's materiality and composition posed a problem. The strands comprised mixed types of hair: braids, locks, tangled clumps and individual hair, and straight or curly, which were lumped together. Every kind of hair requires different conservation procedures but would first require separating the hair according to kind. The process would have to be performed on a semi-industrial scale and would still be costly. Further, such a procedure jeopardized the hair's original organization, violating conservation guidelines that mandate protecting the object's integrity.

Perhaps most importantly, the task was unprecedented: large quantities of hair, as well as chemically treated hair, had never undergone conservation before. The procedure would be entirely novel, requiring museum conservators to devise their own technique without relying on previously tested conservation knowledge. Before any conservation, some hair must be subjected to experimental research to test its reaction to different procedures. This may result in damage and destruction. Here, Niessner explained, is where a set of ethical dilemmas open. In his words, "the hair may indeed be anonymous, but I would not want to be one of the people forced to make

⁹⁰ Ryback, "Evidence of Evil."

the decision as to which hair is again to become the victim. [...] the point is that the hair should not be subjected yet again to selection.”⁹¹ In other words, during treatment, that hair would undergo violent procedures echoing those enacted against victims during the camp’s operation. Apart from being morally dubious, this would violate the memory of the victims and, hence, also the commemorative function of the memorial.

These challenges underscored the competing values at play. In 1993, Detlef Hoffmann captured the tension by asking: “What is this place supposed to be? A memorial? A museum? A cemetery? Or all of these?”⁹² Understood this way, the hair could perform either or all three roles. First, it could serve as an authentic witness to the victims, emphasizing the museum’s commemorative role. Moreover, it may function as a metonymy for the bodies of the victims, categorizing it as (sacred) human remains. Finally, the display and conservation of hair could fulfill a pedagogical role by proving, and providing information on, the crime. These different functions prescribed different decisions about whether or not to conserve or present the hair. In 2003, Alicja Strzelczyk, who designed the museum’s conservation laboratories, argued that the institution must decide whether its primary mission is educational or commemorative.⁹³ To some, this priority was clear. For example, Jonathan Webber stressed that the dignity of the victims should take precedence.⁹⁴ Niessner supported this prioritization and suggested a practical compromise: instead of displaying or burying the hair, it would be placed in a crypt underneath the ground open for visitors.⁹⁵ Their burial secured their framing as evidence, witnesses, and human remains.

⁹¹ Władysław Niessner, “Preservation and Ethical Dilemmas Associated with Conserving Auschwitz-Birkenau Victims’ Hair,” 68–69.

⁹² Ryback, “Evidence of Evil.”

⁹³ Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, “Discussion,” 97.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁵ Niessner, “Preservation and Ethical Dilemmas Associated with Conserving Auschwitz-Birkenau Victims’ Hair,” 63–64.

Despite these debates and suggestions, no consensus emerged. In the years following the 2003 conference, the International Auschwitz Council decided to let the hair remain on display but not to undertake conservation treatments, allowing it to decay naturally.⁹⁶ This was the most accessible course of action and an elegant solution to the museum's ethical dilemma. In 2003, Webber warned that moving the hair would attract significant public attention and place undue pressure on museum personnel.⁹⁷ Non-intervention, or deliberate inaction, became the chosen path, marking an exception to the museum's general conservation approach. The decision to forgo intervention aligned with the broader principle that human remains at Auschwitz would not undergo conservation. In this case, letting the hair decay over time was seen as the least intrusive and most respectful option, acknowledging the profound challenges posed by preserving human remains in a memorial setting. Be that as it may, the decision reflected a profound shift in memory politics since the museum's establishment. If in 1947 the exhibition seamlessly recategorized hair as evidence, after 1989 many could also acknowledge its significance as human remains, even if they disputed what that meaning entailed for its display and presentation.

Conclusions: “Es gibt keine Endlösung zu der Zukunft von Auschwitz”

In examining the conservation history of Auschwitz-Birkenau after 1989, this chapter has illuminated the evolving values and intricate debates surrounding the site's preservation. The post-Communist era marked a decisive shift, where financial resources, shifting memory politics, and the rising value of authenticity converged. These changes enabled unprecedented conservation efforts and redefined the museum's educational and commemorative mission. By the early 1990s, conservation had emerged as a fundamental task, yet it also stirred fundamental

⁹⁶ Andrew Curry, “Can Auschwitz Be Saved?,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2010, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/>.

⁹⁷ Marszałek and Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, “Discussion,” 95.

questions about its goals and the political stakes. Shifting political frameworks evolved with new conservation and mediation strategies, provoking new answers to old preservation dilemmas. Yet, as Jonathan Webber aptly noted in 1993, “there is no final solution to the future of Auschwitz.”⁹⁸ PMA-B must update its conservation philosophy, goals, and procedures as the material and political landscape changes.

Authenticity is a powerful yet contentious guiding principle for Auschwitz’s conservation. While technical efforts have extended the site’s longevity, they raise questions about the impact of the growing intervention necessary to maintain the site. Can the camps remain an “authentic” witness to the Shoah if the original substance is progressively replaced or fortified? The tension between preserving the site’s physical form and allowing it to decay reflects broader debates over balancing historical testimony, emotional resonance, and the passage of time. Decay evokes closure and healing, while intervention preserves the site as an enduring warning to future generations.

Conservation measures are not neutral but inherently political. Post-1989 transformations in memory politics in Poland and beyond introduced differing national and cultural expectations for Auschwitz-Birkenau’s preservation, prompting critical reflection on how its memory is represented and which histories and voices are prioritized. Conservation is a costly and lengthy process that reflects stakeholder conflict and compromise and is embedded in political, social, and financial frameworks.

Conservation is but one facet of the museum’s work. The preservation and museological framing of violent sites are political endeavors in which authentic historical objects, their contextualization through explanations, and curatorial techniques are assembled with the goal of

⁹⁸ *Schauplatz Auschwitz. Wie renoviert man ein KZ?*

authenticating historical events, generating political narratives, and creating visions for the future. While the post-1989 reorientation of Auschwitz-Birkenau might be seen as a means of depoliticization of communist and Polish ethnic narratives of the site and a return to the factual history of the events,⁹⁹ the site still encapsulates and generates a variety of intended and unintended political messages. Such messages are understood differently by visiting groups, whether Polish, Jewish, European, or ‘neutral’ visitors.

Curation, historical narration, and visitor engagement must be considered alongside conservation to understand the message the site seeks to convey. Visitors’ interpretations of authentic sites often diverge from curatorial intentions, shaped by their subject positions, familiarity with the Shoah, and expectations. While sophisticated mediation techniques aim to bridge these gaps, the meanings generated by encounters with the site’s materiality remain plural and unpredictable. As some have argued, it is precisely this plurality that secures these sites’ potential to generate reflection on the meaning and lessons of genocide.¹⁰⁰

Interventive conservation is often justified by appealing to future generations who may lack direct knowledge of the Shoah. As Ulrich Großman observed, “Crimes that affected the world must remain in the public memory as a reminder, warning, and lesson.”¹⁰¹ This perspective underscores the role of authenticity not only as a principle of preservation but also as a tool for transmitting history. However, as Achim Saupe argues, authenticity is “a concept whose use cannot be attributed solely to strategic goals. Rather, its use reflects overlapping conceptual assumptions on how to think about the relationship between present and past,

⁹⁹ For example, Cebulski demonstrates the museum’s reorientation after 1989 to better reflect the fact the majority of the victim population at Auschwitz-Birkenau was Jewish. See especially parts 3 and 4 of his *Auschwitz po Auschwitz*, 161–275.

¹⁰⁰ Saupe, “Authentizitätskofflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 195–200.

¹⁰¹ G. Ulrich Großmann, “Authentizität als relative Größe. Überlegungen zum Zeugniswert einer KZ-Gedenkstätte,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecol, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 84.

remnants, transmission, conservation, reconstruction, and the communication of history.”¹⁰²

Despite its limitations, authenticity has been instrumental in shaping the infrastructure of commemoration and education at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other memorial sites across Europe.

Ultimately, the conservation history of Auschwitz-Birkenau raises profound ethical and philosophical questions that extend beyond the site itself. What does authenticity mean at a site of mass violence? How should it be used to convey the messages of the Shoah, and which of those should take precedence? How long can authenticity be sustained in a rapidly disintegrating site, and what should happen when the site can no longer stand? As the site moves forward with the aid of ongoing international support, it must continue navigating these tensions, balancing the imperatives of historical accuracy, memory, and the passage of time. In doing so, Auschwitz-Birkenau serves as a case study for understanding conservation's complex role in shaping historical narratives and memory politics in a world that continuously confronts new challenges to remembrance and education.

¹⁰² Saube, “Authentizitätskofflikte in Gedenkstätten,” 198.

Vignette 4: The Suitcases and My Grandfather

It was November 2021, and I had been working at the conservation laboratories of Auschwitz-Birkenau for a few weeks. Everybody brought food for lunch that reminded me of my grandmother's cooking. They would eagerly explain each dish to me, ignoring the known fact that Polish food is essentially Jewish food, or perhaps the other way around. The flavors of pierogi and barszcz carried echoes of my childhood, when my grandmother would cook these same dishes in her Jerusalem home.

During my internship, almost the entirety of the conservation team was working on victims' suitcases. My grandparents used to own a suitcase shop in Jerusalem. In the 1980s, my grandfather was commissioned by the Israeli airline El-Al to repair the suitcases that were damaged in flights. This was before everything was *really* mass-produced. He had a little workshop at the back of the shop. I used to sit with him there; he would make himself a strong cup of black Turkish coffee and fix suitcases. He used mostly a hammer and a needle, banging and twisting the shell of the suitcase to make it straight, and sewing zippers back to their place. He would always have something to say about how valuable it is to know how to work with your hands.

After the war, when he moved to Uruguay and married my grandma, he opened a suitcase factory. It gave them a livelihood and probably saved him in some way from his deep depression. Beginning in the 1950s, he went in and out of mental hospitals. At the shop, at home, during strolls, or anywhere possible—he would tell me about the war. His stories never made any sense; they had no beginning or middle or end, just dates floating around, bits and pieces of names and places. Cold and hunger were the central motifs. I was ten or twelve and cared only somewhat. He would begin the story with a quiz: “Do you know what happened on September 1st, 1939?”

I'd roll my eyes and answer, reluctantly. "Yes, *Saba Shloime*, that's when the war began." At the front of the shop, my grandma would sell suitcases, bags, and purses. She'd always get angry at customers who didn't buy anything. "Another person wasting my time!" she would exclaim and raise her hands after the client left the shop. I'd feel a little embarrassed. My favorite thing in their shop was a beautiful sign made of porcelain. It read, "Don't just stand there, buy something!" It really encapsulated their entire approach. It hangs now in my living room. My grandparents always seemed to me like remnants from a world long lost.

At the conservation lab, I discovered that the most labor-intensive item for preservation is suitcases. On average, the team spends three weeks on each of them. One day, one of the workers called me to ask if I recognized letters of the Hebrew alphabet inscribed on one of the suitcases. The victims were forced to write their names on their luggage when they boarded the trains to Auschwitz. There was some discoloring on the front part of the shell, nothing identifiable. I strained myself to find Hebrew letters but came up with nothing. She was disappointed.

So many lost stories in each of these objects. No one left to remember, except a conservator and a historian huddled together, looking for clues. The only memory the suitcase could trigger now was my own family of wandering Jews. After the conservator finished hypothesizing who owned the suitcase, based on the little traces she had, it went back into its box and was stored away. One suitcase out of several thousand.

As I worked in the laboratory, I realized that this is where the institutional process of authentication becomes most concrete. Here, the abstract principles of evidence, originality, and preservation take material form. The suitcases I helped conserve, like the ones my grandfather once repaired, had traveled across continents and decades to reach this place. Yet unlike my

grandfather's workshop, where repair meant return to function, here conservation meant freezing the suitcase in a state of suspended animation—neither fully restored nor allowed to decay.

In those weeks at the conservation laboratory, I often thought about authenticity's paradox. The more carefully we preserved these objects, the further they moved from the chaotic, traumatic reality they were meant to represent. Each cleaned surface, each stabilized zipper, each careful intervention simultaneously preserved evidence and altered it. Like my grandfather's fragmented stories, these material traces offered only partial glimpses into lives that could never be fully reconstructed or understood.



Figure 28. My grandfather, Shlomo Turim, in his workshop behind my grandparents' suitcase shop. He survived the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Jerusalem, 2009. Photography by Leon Goldsmith.

5. The In-Between Object and the Value of the Unknown: Conservation and Representation at Auschwitz-Birkenau Today

Introduction

In November and December 2021, I interned at the conservation laboratories of Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (PMA-B), thus beginning my dissertation fieldwork. This experience—handling artifacts with my own hands—formed the initial foundation of my research and represents a methodological approach distinct from the historical analysis employed in previous chapters. While previous chapters traced the historical evolution of conservation practices and commemorative paradigms at Auschwitz-Birkenau through archival documents, this chapter begins with ethnographic methods to examine the present-day reality of conservation work and its implications for Holocaust representation.

During my internship, I experienced a profound disconnect between my goals as a historian—to extract historical knowledge from artifacts—and the realities of conservation work, which aims primarily to prolong the lives of objects and materials. I often felt a sense of failure as most of the objects I handled yielded little historical information about their owners' lives. These silent artifacts transformed their anonymous owners into specters, whose existence could only be partially glimpsed through the material traces they left behind. This unsettling yet important realization—that material remnants often resist our desire for complete historical understanding—is rarely acknowledged in museum exhibitions but lies at the heart of this chapter's argument, which provides a final reflection on the ethics of contemporary conservation practices and their relationship to the long, winding road of conservation practices at PMA-B.

My ethnographic approach in this final chapter allows me to document and analyze dimensions of conservation work that remain invisible in the archival sources examined

previously: the sensory experience of handling deteriorated artifacts, the embodied knowledge of conservators, and the everyday ethical decisions that shape how Holocaust material is preserved and interpreted. This methodological shift is particularly valuable as we move into the post-witness era, where direct testimony is increasingly replaced by material evidence as the primary medium of Holocaust memory. By observing conservation practices firsthand, I examined how authenticity—the central concept explored throughout this dissertation—is constructed and negotiated in real time by professionals who serve as mediators between historical artifacts and public memory.

This chapter returns to the piles of victim belongings discovered at Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1945—objects that previous chapters have shown were central to the museum's commemorative paradigm of “presence” at Auschwitz I. Since 2004, the museum has applied new forensic methods to these collections, meticulously conserving and documenting them in ways that transform our understanding of their evidential and commemorative value. Through my ethnographic engagement with these processes, I identify a new category of artifact—the “in-between object”—that occupies a liminal space between anonymous mass objects and fully documented personal possessions.

By concluding with ethnographic observation after examining historical developments, this chapter completes the dissertation's broader investigation of how authenticity has been constructed, maintained, and transformed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. While previous chapters demonstrated how authenticity emerged as a conservation value through institutional practices and political negotiations, this final chapter reveals how authenticity is enacted through the intimate, daily labor of conservation professionals today. In doing so, it extends the dissertation's central argument that authenticity is not an inherent quality of historical remnants but a

constructed mode of producing historical truth—one that increasingly acknowledges the limits of what we can know about the past.

From “Mass Objects” to Personal Objects in Shoah Representation

Since World War II, memorial museums have sought effective strategies for showcasing the unprecedented nature of Nazi atrocities. Two fundamental questions have guided this pursuit: how can museums represent an event of extreme violence without detracting from its complexity? In what ways can museums encourage visitors to confront the ethical questions that arise from mass atrocities?¹

In the immediate aftermath of the war, survivors and activists were the first to grapple with the challenges of representation. During the late 1940s, they created exhibitions framed around the material evidence of Nazi crimes at the concentration and extermination camps where they took place. Among the most potent elements of these exhibitions were the thousands of artifacts that the Nazis had looted from their victims. The piles of glasses, prayer shawls, suitcases, shoes, prostheses, baskets, enamelware, and human hair recovered at the sites after their liberation and presented to museum visitors were meant to shock and convey the magnitude of the crime.² Mass objects became a paradigmatic representation of the scale of Nazi atrocities.³

¹ Dan Stone, “Memory, Memorials and Museums,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone, Oded Heilbrunner, and Jeremy Noakes (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 514; Harold Marcuse, “Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre,” *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (2010): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.1.53>; For more general discussions on memorial museums at large (including those dedicated to other cases of mass atrocities) see, Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Sharon Macdonald, *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* (London: Routledge, 2013).

² Zofia Wóycicka, “Sites of Memory, Sites of Forgetting,” in *Arrested Mourning: Memory of the Nazi Camps in Poland, 1944–1950*, vol. 2, Warsaw Studies in Contemporary History (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 165–81.

³ Oren Baruch Stier, “Different Trains: Holocaust Artifacts and the Ideologies of Remembrance,” in *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 27.

Since the 1990s, scholars have criticized the exhibition of “mass objects” at former camps. James Young argued that the intense focus on victims’ seized possessions reduces the richness of their lives and communities to the moment of their destruction. In addition, plundered objects framed victims narrowly within the material world the perpetrators intended to create—as pure artifacts.⁴ The presentation of these objects in piles runs the risk of further dehumanizing and objectifying victims, turning them into a non-identifiable mass, thereby reproducing the Nazi perpetrators’ intention.

Despite these criticisms, museums at concentration and death camps served as inspiration for the newly established permanent exhibitions at the USHMM and Yad Vashem that have been planned and inaugurated since the 1990s.⁵ Like their predecessors, the curators of these newer exhibitions aimed to create a “feeling” of the past by incorporating numerous authentic artifacts into the exhibition and reconstructing camp landscapes. These included the iconic piles of shoes borrowed from Majdanek. Museum professionals tried to respond to the challenge of objectifying victims through their curatorial choices, which aimed to highlight the individual victim within the mass. For example, at the USHMM, curators intended the piles of shoes to serve both as evidence of the crimes, and as witnesses to the events, and the fate of the victims. The mediation technique of the piles of shoes served this purpose: on the wall above the exhibit, the curators placed a stanza from the poem “I Saw a Mountain” by Yiddish poet Moishe

⁴ James Edward Young, “The Rhetoric of Ruins: The Memorial Camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz,” in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 123–29.

⁵ Edward T. Linenthal, “The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *American Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (1994): 421; Haviva Peled-Carmeli, *Edim domemim: Sipuram shel hafetsim me-osfe Yad vashem = Silent Witnesses: The Stories of Holocaust Artifacts at Yad Vashem* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014); Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Meditations of the Holocaust* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 110–11.

Shulstein, who refers to the shoes as “the last witnesses.”⁶ Hansen-Glucklich argues that the poem compels the visitors to become “witnesses to the witnesses.”⁷

Allyson Landsberg and others have demonstrated the subtle ways in which the piles of shoes at the USHMM are successful in evoking the individual victims. On the one hand, visitors connect with the shoes through their own subjectivities as their gaze moves from the shoes on display to their own shoes. This interchangeability between the “Other” and the “Self” produces empathy and proximity with the victims, eliciting affect and a sense of emotional comprehension and empathy beyond the cognitive dimension. On the other hand, the shoes’ visceral materiality points to the victims’ missing bodies. This presentation also underscores the voids left by the Shoah, and maintains the required distance from the event, deemed necessary for the ethical contemplation of genocide.⁸ The USHMM’s display of shoes in its permanent exhibition demonstrates the crucial role that placement, mediation, and curation play in shaping the meaning of objects.

Alongside the reframing of the piles of shoes, both the USHMM and Yad Vashem incorporated into their collections and exhibitions numerous personal objects. They intended to further elicit proximity to temporally and geographically distant events. Personal objects, in opposition to mass items, allowed the detailed tracing of stories and provenance. By collecting

⁶ Sharon B. Oster argues that it is the text that is key to deciphering the roles of shoes as witnesses; otherwise, their intense materiality overwhelms the visitor rather than provokes them to consider the victims. Sharon B. Oster, “Holocaust Shoes: Metonymy, Matter, Memory,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020), 761–84.

⁷ Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 132.

⁸ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 133–36; Michael F. Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory: The Rhetoric of Displacement at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 65–87; Jeffrey Feldman, “The Holocaust Shoe. Untying Memory: Shoes as Holocaust Memorial Experience,” in *Jews and Shoes*, ed. Edna Nahshon (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 119–30; Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*, 129–33.

personal objects and presenting them in their exhibitions, curators strove to shed light on the victims' lives and their communities before and during the war, while also making the events and their historical context more graspable and relatable. Newer historical exhibitions were carefully curated to reflect the personalization of the Shoah narrative.⁹

Notwithstanding, scholars point out several issues raised by object-laden exhibitions, whether focused on personal or mass objects. James Young famously claimed that original Nazi landscapes only represent a fraction of the Shoah's vastness, equating the fragment with the whole.¹⁰ Along similar lines, Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich argued that amassing authentic artifacts in exhibitions creates the illusion that the Shoah may be entirely grasped and known within the museum space.¹¹ Adding to this observation, Oren Baruch-Stier suggested that artifacts in museum narrations create a "fictional coherence" by illustrating and enhancing the museum's narrative components.¹² The use of objects as narration devices thus further objectifies the victims.

Stier's argument implies that the placement of objects within exhibition narratives can curtail their rich interpretive possibilities. Inadvertently, the heavy reliance on objects as narrators obscures the notion that the subjective dimension of victim experiences cannot be fully accessed—first, because of the deeply traumatic nature of such experiences, and second, because millions of these traumatic stories can never be recuperated. Museological mediation techniques and the use of objects for narrative enhancement circumscribe the multilayered meanings of authentic objects in the lives and experiences of Shoah victims.

⁹ Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 111; Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*, 121.

¹⁰ Young, "Rhetoric of Ruins," 123.

¹¹ Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*, 133; Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 116–17.

¹² Stier, *Committed to Memory*, 116.

In particular, the pervasive use of personal, narrativized objects in museum exhibitions conveys to museum visitors moving stories that elicit a meaningful affective encounter with the past; however, they also reinforce the idea that grasping the reality of mass violence requires only a mere visit to the museum. Staging Nazi genocides in museums as largely intelligible, representable, and consumable experiences undermines the museum's intent of creating space for difficult questions, which in turn facilitates critical reflection.¹³ This approach risks oversimplifying the story, subjugating its multifaceted and complicated aspects to the principles of museum storytelling, visitor expectations, and the exhibitions' underlying national (and potentially exclusionary) ideologies.¹⁴ Museums' extensive use of objects thus risks absolving visitors from contemplating the complex questions raised by Nazi genocides, framing their material consequences as mere affective encounters with a bygone past without creating space for reflection on their political, ethical, and historical meanings.

In addition, the specific use of personal, authentic objects might misrepresent not only the experience of genocide, but also the evidence left in its aftermath. While personal objects humanize the experience, they may inadvertently oversimplify the reality of finding and identifying victims in the aftermath of mass violence. Perpetrators intended and often were successful in exterminating both victims and their traces. They reduced victims to their belongings, removing these last prized possessions from their owners' personal attachments and associations with these objects. Perpetrators also worked tirelessly to hide the evidence of their

¹³ The literature on dark tourism is vast but due to space limitations I am not able to discuss here the commercial consumption of atrocities in museums. See for example, Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler: How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jeffrey S. Podoshen, "Dark Tourism Motivations: Simulation, Emotional Contagion and Topographic Comparison," *Tourism Management* 35 (April 2013): 263–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2012.08.002>; Debbie Lisle, "Gazing at Ground Zero: Tourism, Voyeurism and Spectacle," *Journal for Cultural Research* 8, no. 1 (2004): 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1479758042000797015>.

¹⁴ For an example of how the same object can serve very different underlying national narratives see Stier, "Different Trains."

crimes and destroy their victims' remains. The majority of artifacts retrieved from camps and killing sites are anonymous fragments, a reality often distorted by the emphasis on narrativized objects.

During my internship at the PMA-B conservation labs, I witnessed how rare it was to find an object's previous owner or provenance. One day, one of the collections department employees found a piece of paper with a name inside a shoe. Miraculously, the paper was matched through the database with a suitcase. Yet this match was extremely rare, and just one among thousands of victim belongings. In close collaboration with archives worldwide, the museum has made tremendous efforts over many decades to document and safeguard these objects. These efforts have now made it possible to match a single suitcase and a shoe with a name.

As the above example illustrates, the rarity of such objects may be problematic for museum representation. The heaps of anonymous objects pale in their representational force compared to the assemblage of a shoe, a suitcase, and a name. To be sure, findings such as these are precious but an exception to the rule. While personal objects can powerfully convey the experience of deportation, displacement, and even death, their exceptionality overshadows the many unknown fragments left in the wake of genocide, comprising the bulk of the evidence. Further, visitors remain unaware of the yearslong efforts of finding their owners, stories, or provenance. In this sense, presenting meticulously curated, well-narrativized, and exceptional personal objects obscures the collecting institutions' decades-long, painstaking efforts of piecing these stories together across national and temporal boundaries. Because these objects are displayed as if their stories are already fully known, visitors may not realize that such clarity is rare and hard-won. The labor of tracing provenance, often inconclusive and conducted across

fragmented national and archival landscapes, recedes behind the appearance of narrative coherence.

Considering the challenges of representation and drawing from the recent documentation and conservation of the collection of movable objects at the PMA-B, I propose an intervention in the curatorial practices of presenting mass objects. I introduce the concept of the “in-between object,” a new type of object that embodies the historical and experiential ambiguity, arguing that it is this trait that should be emphasized in their exhibition. In the following section, I describe the PMA-B’s object collections and reflect on the meaning of newly applied conservation techniques. Then, I introduce the in-between object. Following a presentation of my work at the conservation labs, I argue that caring for objects and prolonging their life without expecting them to yield any historical knowledge imparts a valuable lesson that should be transferred to the frontstage of the museum. This lesson is threefold: first, scholars cannot know everything about victims’ histories and experiences, even when faced with abundant material remains. Second, traces are often vague, opaque, and hard to read or understand. Third, museums should communicate this ambiguity to visitors.

I argue that the opacity of objects is meaningful and invaluable for critical engagement with the stories behind the materiality of the objects. In the last section, I discuss how preservation has shaped and reshaped the presentation of mass objects at the PMA-B and propose the incorporation of the in-between object into Shoah exhibitions. This mode of exhibiting in-between objects addresses many of the concerns that critics of mass objects and object-oriented exhibitions have voiced. I propose that the in-between object concretizes the value of the unknown, allowing visitors to acknowledge both their own and the museum’s limitations in narrating and explaining the past. Such objects reveal Shoah victims’ personal

choices and individual character in a way that challenges these items' role as mere narrators in museum exhibitions.

The Object Collections at the PMA-B

Conservation work at the PMA-B aligns with a forensic turn that began in the mid 1980s in the study of the Shoah and mass atrocities. According to Zuzanna Dziuban, the forensic turn refers to the use of forensics as a “means of unearthing, collecting, preserving and presenting the evidence of war crimes, genocides, and human rights violations.”¹⁵ This approach began to gain prominence due to the increased attention “to material legacies of mass political violence at sites related to the Holocaust and beyond.”¹⁶ At such sites, Dziuban argues, new forensic technologies, scientific protocols, and technical practices are used to extract knowledge from evidence and disseminate it to the public, transforming our understanding of the histories of mass violence and their aftermath.¹⁷ While scholars of forensics and mass violence have written on the meaning of new forensic practices for commemoration and artistic representation,¹⁸ they have not addressed how forensic conservation practices influence the handling and presentation of the material remains of mass trauma.

New collection and preservation procedures at the PMA-B, initiated in 2016 as part of the museum's Global Plan for Conservation, reflect a forensic turn in their work. The museum's conservation labs employ a team of twenty-five conservationists who specialize in diverse

¹⁵ Zuzanna Dziuban, “Introduction: Forensics in the Expanded Field,” in *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, ed. Zuzanna Dziuban (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ For an exploration of these new modes of representation, see Dziuban's *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn,'* particularly the final section of the book, “Beyond the Scientific/Legal Notion of Forensic,” which includes: Roma Sendyka, “Posthuman Memorialisations: Memorials After the Forensic Turn,” 291–308; Stephanie Young, “The Forensic Imagination: Evidence, Art and the Post-Yugoslav Document,” 309–28; and Johanne Helbo Bøndergaard, “Forensics and Literature After Testimony,” 329–46.

materials such as paper, metal, textile, and plastics. They apply conservation processes to the museum's collections of about eight thousand items, most of which are anonymous plundered victim possessions. For each type of object, the team tailors a meticulous conservation process adapted to the particular historical and material qualities of the collections. They use various technologies available on-site, from infrared beams to advanced lab tests for microorganisms in the treated materials to high-resolution photography. Many of the items they treat were previously only cared for en masse. For the first time since they were carried to the camp by their owners, these items receive individual, costly, and lengthy treatment.¹⁹

Conservation at the PMA-B adheres to strict scientific and technical protocols. Thus, the conservation process of each group of items in the collection includes the following procedures: assessment of the object's state and its preservation issues and needs, proposals for conservation treatments and developing individual methods of conservation based on scientific examination and analysis, and conservation treatments. Museum staff document this process in its entirety by describing the object's appearance and state, the historical context of the object and its production, the history of its conservation, current conservation considerations, and conservation decisions, procedures, and their results. This document is accompanied by photographic evidence of the object's state before and after conservation. The documents are divided by object type—suitcases, helmets, enamelware, and so forth—before the object is finally packaged and stored safely in a climatized environment.²⁰

An important outcome of conservation efforts is extending the objects' lifespans that results from the logic of framing objects as, what Susan Schuppli more generally calls, "material

¹⁹ Aleksandra Papis and Nel Jastrzębiowski, eds., *Zachować autentyczność: Konserwacja muzealów i archiwaliów. To Preserve Authenticity. The Conservation of Museum Collections and Archival Materials*, trans. Marta Świętoń (Oświęcim, Poland: Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2021), 2–17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

witnesses.” According to Schuppli, material witnesses are objects, which “bear witness” and “have recorded trace evidence of the violence that generated their contexts.”²¹ Conservator Aleksandra Papis, head of the conservation laboratories at the PMA-B, writes on the value of the museum’s collections in similar terms: “These exceptional items and documents are testimony of the fate of the victims.... They testify to the history of specific people, often being the only traces of their existence.”²²

The conservation of the artifacts’ material intactness and authenticity as traces and remnants is the project’s principal driving force. The objective of care translates into studying the material composition of objects and working to keep them in their original state. The labor of caring for objects this way is yet another trait of their testimonial value. Technically speaking, the most desired outcome is an object that reflects its state in 1945 and whose material composition is more durable and resilient to the damage of time. The object serves as a witness to past events without explicitly stating their exact nature. By focusing on the object’s materiality, rather than the historical knowledge that may be extracted from it, conservationists respect the object as a mute witness to possible, unknown histories. Items visibly show signs of wear and tear, reflect the journey and harsh conditions the objects endured, and by doing so, also allude to their owners’ fate. Thus, the team invests substantial resources to protect objects from further material deterioration rather than return them to a brand-new state.

Conservators also extract new evidentiary value from objects in the collection, which is another significant achievement of the preservation project. This effort entails applying sophisticated technologies to these objects to unearth new information about the victims or the wider historical context. According to Schuppli, another trait of material witnesses is that their

²¹ Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), 3.

²² Papis and Jastrzębiowski, *Zachować autentyczność*, 3.

value is extracted through complex “investigative, discursive, and rhetorical” processes.²³ For example, during the treatment of suitcases in the laboratories, the team revealed that they were used by more than one owner. On some of the suitcases, a new owner crossed out the name of the previous one and wrote down their own. This overwriting supported the historical assumption that suitcases, like clothing, were a rare commodity during the war and were often used by several people. The fact that each suitcase was used many times also points to the victims’ impoverished state. Thanks to infrared reflectography, conservators managed to read crossed out names covered with paint. This discovery allowed them to add more names to the museum’s victim database. Names were also cross-checked with archives worldwide, making it possible to retrieve more information about their owners.²⁴

According to Schuppli, “Material witnesses operate as double agents: harboring direct evidence of events, as well as providing circumstantial evidence of the interlocutory methods and epistemic frameworks whereby such matter comes to be consequential.”²⁵ Put differently, the materiality of objects bears traces of the past that can provide evidentiary clues. Nevertheless, the procedures applied to these traces are also inscribed on the objects. As the above example illustrates, this double agency is evident at the conservation labs, where the expert manipulation of matter reveals new information about the history of these objects, thus changing their meaning. In this case, the incorporation of suitcases into the museum’s collections entered such objects into “epistemic frameworks” which entailed forensic treatment.

Despite their sophistication, forensic epistemic frameworks also face limitations. Indeed, much of the new evidentiary information retrieved from the objects is difficult to interpret. Even

²³ Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 3.

²⁴ Papis and Jastrzębiowski, *Zachować autentyczność*, 34–41.

²⁵ Schuppli, *Material Witness*, 3. Emphasis in original.

if conservators find some information on the owner or the historical context while working with an object, it rarely reveals a name or further information. For example, during conservation work on enamel objects (such as pots, pans, cups, and spoons) conservators established a catalog of prevalent manufacturing companies and traced their origins to various places in Central Europe.²⁶ The cataloging of enamel brands could point to the victims' nationality, thus further revealing some information about their origins, but these efforts could not pinpoint exactly who carried these items to the camp or from where exactly they originated.

Forensic epistemic frameworks can also limit the interpretive possibilities of the objects themselves. Interestingly, the PMA-B deemed the cataloging of enamel producers necessary only insofar as it provided clues to the origins of the victims and was less concerned about the detailed history of the victims' lives before the war. At the PMA-B, the potential contribution of studying, for example, the consumption habits of Jews in Central Europe in the first half of the twentieth century is considered beyond the scope of their work. Yet the forensic practices applied at Holocaust sites are not always limited to studying only the violent events. Based on her forensic archaeological work at the Treblinka extermination camp, Caroline Sturdy Colls suggests that unearthing new evidence pertaining to cultural genocide may uncover not only evidence of crimes, but also "information about lost cultures and the people in which it relates."²⁷ This forensic objective is not officially pursued at the PMA-B, pointing to how epistemic frameworks can, but do not have to, delimit knowledge extraction from objects.

As I have demonstrated, new preservation procedures also face limitations, which point to the epistemic boundaries of object-based forensic knowledge production and preservation. Challenges posed by the objects' deteriorated material condition also shape these limitations and

²⁶ Papis and Jastrzębiowski, *Zachować autentyczność*, 70.

²⁷ Quoted in Dziuban, "Introduction," 31.

make the museum's conservation work distinctive within the general conservation world. First, the labs deal with the large-scale preservation of mass-produced objects, usually made from low-quality or worn-out plastics, fabrics, and metal, manufactured in the first half of the twentieth century. Other museums deal with more singular objects or mass-produced objects on a much smaller scale. In addition, during the camp's operation, prisoners sorted and sometimes separated or broke up objects for reuse. These items were also kept in piles inside or outside storage rooms, which exposed them to harsh weather conditions. After the war, the entire collection was placed in a permanent exhibition, parts of which were not climatized. All these factors accelerated the disintegration of movable objects. Perhaps most importantly, the degraded state of many items challenges the guiding principle of non-intervention in conservation, according to which the overarching goal of a conservator is to ensure that an object's appearance and structural intactness is as close as possible to how it was originally. The dire state of certain artifacts and the growing need to intervene in delicate ways in their materiality often demand costly and lengthy conservation procedures.²⁸ Such procedures force awkward questions: is this conservation worthwhile? What value does it hold for commemoration and the ethics of Shoah representation? What is the relationship between these objects and the educational purpose of the museum?

The In-Between Object

In this section, I approach the above questions by reconceptualizing mass objects in light of recent conservation efforts. During this work, conservators found what I term "in-between objects," that is, objects that provide fragmented information on their previous owners yet remain opaque and challenging to read. I argue that the central quality of this artifact is its

²⁸ Papis and Jastrzębiowski, *Zachować autentyczność*, 5.

opacity, a term I borrow from Édouard Glissant, who defined it as “that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”²⁹ The Black Martinique-born poet, writer, philosopher, and literary critic envisioned this concept as a departure point from the relationship between the postcolonial “Other” and western modes of knowledge production. I propose using Glissant’s concept of opacity to grasp the limits of extractable knowledge from forensic objects. Acknowledging this epistemic boundary is crucial for unlocking an object’s interpretive possibilities, and, consequently, for critically and ethically engaging with the past.

My primary task during the internship at the PMA-B conservation laboratories was cleaning victims’ shoes. This work entailed a tactile and visceral encounter with these items. The shoes were foul-smelling and appeared and felt like debris. During the camp’s operation, the prisoners who handled the belongings of those who had been captured by the Nazis separated pairs of shoes and removed the metal parts and soles. The shoes I handled were almost unrecognizable because they lacked a sole and their shape was flattened. Moreover, they were covered in decades worth of dust and mud. Some of this debris, I imagined, was brought to the camp by the victims themselves. Upon opening the shoe’s flattened shape to perform internal cleaning, I would often find insect cocoons hiding in the material. The team explained that these developed over the years because of exposure to various climate pressures. During this unpleasant cleaning experience, I had to constantly handle small insects. My task was to clean the outer and inner layers as much as possible without making the shoe look entirely clean, and to do so very carefully to not remove any dangling or ripped fabric or smooth creases in the leather. Using a special vacuum cleaner, I removed dust and mud. If the layer was made of

²⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191.

leather, this task was easy. If the shoe was made from fabric, this process took longer. I then opened the shoe and removed the cocoons, throwing them into a small trash can. Finally, I used a special scalpel to remove rust from the remaining metal pieces. Depending on its state, I spent between five and twenty-minutes on each shoe. When I finished, I placed the shoes in a plastic crate wrapped in fabric. I attached a number on each shoe—as part of the labs’ plan to assign a catalog number to each item. Every storage box contained about fifty shoes. The same realization dawned on me every time I finished loading a box: fifty individual shoes, fifty individuals.

My sensory experience of handling the shoes evoked an uncanny feeling that made the genocidal experience a little more palpable. As Jeffrey Feldman writes, shoes allow an onlooker “to enter into the smell of rotting leather that emanates from Holocaust shoe displays and follow it back to the experience of violence and genocide.”³⁰ Sigmund Freud argues that things that were once familiar can transform into something unsettling and even frightening, producing an uncanny feeling. The uncanny brings to light the urge that something is hidden under the surface, and that it intends to remain so.³¹ It has the opposite connotation to homely and domesticated; it is something “withdrawn from knowledge, unconscious.”³² It thus has a ghostly dimension that prompts one to question “whether the lifeless bears an excessive likeness to the living.”³³ In my tactile and sensory experience at the conservation labs, the shoe, an everyday object, transformed into something deeply rooted in its materiality, but which extended far beyond it. It still looked somewhat like a domestic item, but turned on its head—it ceased to be familiar, instead

³⁰ Feldman, “The Holocaust Shoe,” 120.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” trans. David McLintock, intro. Hugh Haughton, in *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 132.

³² Freud, “The Uncanny,” 133.

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

embodying the traces of its previous owner and signs of violence. These marks emanated subtle reminders of the atrocities, hidden just beneath the surface.

The shoes were indeed ghostly. There was, perhaps, an uncanny modernity about them. According to Jo Collins, modernity can produce a particular kind of uncanny emotion, discernible in moments that the enlightened, disenchanted world cannot explain. Such moments point to the indecisiveness and uncertainty that lies at the heart of modernity's ontology.³⁴ Uncanny modernity considers genocide as the irrational outcome of rational modern frames of thought and practices. As some have argued, the Shoah and other atrocities shook the foundations of modernity associated with progress and advancement, and called into question notions of time, place, and history.³⁵ The shoes, then, are uncanny because they point not only to their violent, secret histories, but also to the failure of the modern project itself—which produced the terrible outcome of genocide.

At the conservation labs, I worked through my uncanny discomfort. As my work progressed, patterns emerged, allowing me to generalize common features of the shoes. I handled adult shoes only. Many were simple slippers made of cheap black fabric with rusty metal buckles. My grandfather's slippers, made of the same fabric, kept coming to mind. Some were very wide, perhaps pointing to edematous feet. Why would someone wear a pair of slippers for a long journey to an unknown destination? I thought of old, tired feet. Sometimes, shoes were elegant and colorful. One memorable shoe was made of black leather with a bright and colorful plaid lining. It was preserved almost intact. What a shame, I thought, that no one could see this

³⁴ Jo Collins and John Jervis, eds., *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1–2.

³⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Saul Friedländer, *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

colorful lining once the shoe was returned to the exhibition case. I began to grasp the texture and meaning of the life behind this shoe, as suggested by this trace. The traits of shoes gave depth and character to the people to whom these shoes once belonged; yet these traces were also frustrating as I could not establish specific facts such as their appearance, origins, age, gender, or name.

A few days after the beginning of the internship, I encountered a surprise in one of the shoes. Working on a black leather shoe, I found a beautiful, printed sketch covering the internal toe box (see Figures 29–30). The sketch reminded me of Henri Matisse’s painting *The Dance*. It had some inscriptions in Hungarian. I excitedly showed my discovery to one of the conservators because this finding proved that this person came from Hungary. The conservator cooled my enthusiasm, telling me that my discovery was rather commonsensical because Jews from Hungary were among the last transports arriving in the camp for extermination. I had never thought of this fact when I first saw the piles behind the exhibition cases. Nevertheless, many curious questions remained unanswered. Who placed this sketch in the toe box and why? At first, I thought the shoe’s owner put it there so they could have something beautiful tucked away. The more realistic conservator, however, speculated that the shoemaker cut a piece of a magazine and placed it in the shoe to reinforce the structure. Despite my revelation, my discovery was not documented. As I have argued above, conservation procedures are not intended to extract evidence from these items’ prewar life. In this case, Hungarian shoemaking practices are outside of the epistemic frameworks of conservation. I could not ascertain any more information from the shoe and its story remained a mystery.

During my internship, I encountered several similar, striking examples of objects that revealed vague information about their previous owner, but nothing more. In the early days of

my stay at the memorial site, another intern introduced me to a special group of artifacts held in one of the storerooms: these items had been removed from the general pile because, during conservation procedures, something was found within them (see Figure 31). One of these objects was a baby's shoe, in which a hidden bean was found (see Figure 32). Huddled around the shoe, the other intern and I tried to understand the meaning of this find. Did the bean get there by accident? Or could this be a belief in the bean's power to protect a child? Who were the mother (or father) and the baby? How old were they? Where did they come from and when? Did the baby arrive at the camp with their parents, siblings, grandparents, and uncles? The questions multiplied the more we discussed. Frustratingly, we knew we would never have answers. The object's newfound dimension made it unique and attracted our attention, yet it was difficult to read.

Similar items were in abundance. A Hungarian bill of one hundred Hungarian Crowns folded in four and carefully tucked away inside a shoe (see Figure 33) revealed where the victim was from, but also alluded to their belief that they could use this money for survival. During the camp's operation, members of the Sonderkommando carefully scanned victim belongings for valuables. This fact made the find even rarer—it was an enduring evidence of survival strategies. The note did not reveal whether the person was rich or poor (perhaps this bill represented their whole fortune?), nor if they were from the city or the village, nor their gender, age, or family history. Similarly, a folded and disintegrating piece of newspaper retrieved from another child's shoe (see Figure 34) shed light on another survival strategy: tucking away helpful information on survival resources. This crumbling and fascinating item, neatly cut out from a German language newspaper, mentioned the Polish town of Katowice and indicated the social aid services offered there. The date of the newspaper is, perhaps, most intriguing: December 1944. This information

meant that this person arrived in the camp at least two months after exterminations were halted and shortly before the liberation of the camp. How and why did this child end up in the camp so late in the war?



Figures 29-30. A black shoe hiding a colorful plaid lining, behind which I found a printed copy of a sketch made by an unknown artist. It seems probable that the shoemaker placed it there to function as a barrier between the fabric and the leather. Photographs by author, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Laboratories.



Figure 31. Photograph depicting how objects found in the conservation process of shoes are stored and kept. Each divided space is cut to the size of the object. Shoes and matching items are cataloged and, in some cases, when most fragile, kept in plastic bags. When I interned at the conservation laboratories, we amassed about five boxes of these unique finds. Photograph by author, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Laboratories.

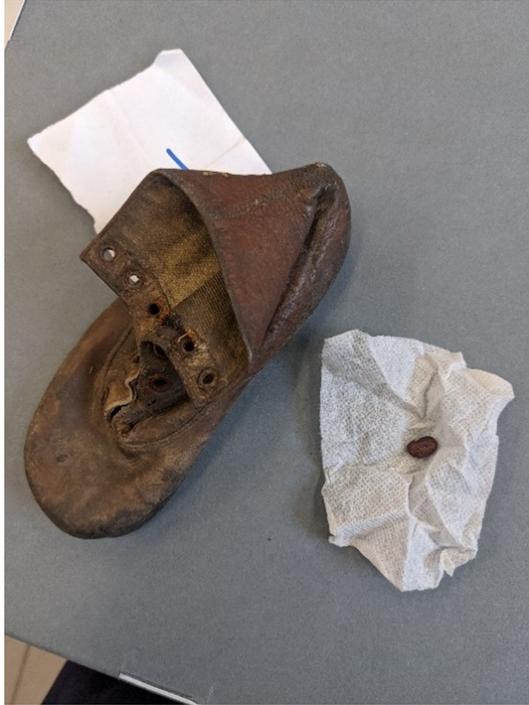


Figure 32. Bean found in the baby's shoe. Photograph by author, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Laboratories.



Figure 33. Folded bill of one hundred Hungarian Crowns found inside a shoe during its conservation. Photograph by author, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Laboratories.



Figure 34. Folded newspaper page (in German) found in one of the shoes. It includes information on public services, including food distribution, offered in certain buildings in Katowitz, Poland. December 1944 is mentioned several times, making the shoe in which this paper was kept a very late addition to the piles (most exterminations were halted in November 1944). Photograph by author, 2021, Auschwitz-Birkenau Conservation Laboratories.

I define objects, such as the ones I described above, as in-between objects: anonymous items found within the mass of personal belongings, but which provide clues about the individuals who kept them. These objects hint at their meaning and history, but they are often ambiguous and indecipherable; they invoke several interpretive options for understanding the materiality of these artifacts. Particular materials, for example, cheap or expensive leather, or a suitcase versus a basket, shed light on whether the object's owner came from the city or the village, or if they were rich or poor. Shapes and designs tell us about a person's taste and comfort preferences. Additionally, adjacent objects found inside objects, such as a piece of newspaper or a bill, reveal the language the victims spoke, and what they valued and tried to keep tucked away. Such items, however, reveal no certain or specific information. Objects such

as these engage the observer by surprising them, triggering their curiosity, and prompting them to imagine who their owners might be and the nature of their experiences. Yet the questions such objects evoke remain largely unanswerable and unknowable; they shed a dim light on the history and experiences forever lost. Because in-between objects present opaque dead-ends, shadows, and fragments of something that engage the observer's imagination about the human life behind this minuscule amount of information, they offer neither closure nor absolute certainties.

As I have suggested, one key trait of in-between objects is their muteness or silence, which requires mediation and interpretation. Trauma studies literature can offer insight into understanding and interpreting nonverbal communication. I apply insights from trauma studies based on the assumption that within the museum space, objects are material witnesses to past events. They have witnessed and subsequently also allude to their previous owner's trauma.

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer argue that Shoah witness testimony has shaped the field of trauma and memory studies by foregrounding its three key features: embodiment, affect, and silence. Thus, testimony is a means to not only provide proof, but to also communicate affect through body language (embodiment) and the silences and omissions produced by the failure of language to communicate trauma. As Hirsch and Spitzer point out, the "body language and non-verbal performance of the traumatized witness" reflects "that unspeakable and unrepresentable realm that stands outside legal discourse."³⁶ When language fails the witness, silences become an effective means of transmission because "the distance between past and present seem to collapse."³⁷ Similarly, an object's evidentiary silence moves us to imagine ourselves in the shoes of its previous owners, thus bridging the gap between past and present. This encounter, in turn,

³⁶ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies," *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698008102050>.

³⁷ Hirsch and Spitzer, "The Witness in the Archive," 158.

may produce a variety of affective responses, from understanding and empathy to shock, fear, and even disgust—all of which I experienced when I handled the shoes.

Listening to trauma should be an unsettling experience that does not collapse the distance between witness and listener but rather accentuates it. Hearing trauma narratives may generate an affective palette that makes the difference between witness and listener more noticeable and perhaps even unbearable. Committed listening maintains a distance between the person who experienced trauma and the one listening to it, acknowledging and respecting the otherness of the witness and safeguarding it as part of an ethical stance. This type of listening requires critical engagement that includes continually asking questions about the nature of the experience while holding space for the listener's inability to comprehend fully.³⁸ Dominic LaCapra terms this act “empathetic unsettlement,” a feeling that is crucial to hearing testimony and helps restore the humanity of victims taken from them in the act of violence.

Based on Hirsch and Spitzer's insights on the role of embodiment, affect, and silence in the transmission of trauma, I would like to suggest that in my experience of conserving the shoes, they “failed” to communicate the full extent of the trauma inflicted on their owners in similar ways. While there is a difference between the object and the human witness in their mode of non-verbal communication, their silence and its materialization (or embodiment) in the artifact allude to the greater experience of trauma. This muteness activates my imagination and prompts me to ask questions about the unknown aspects of the object's story, thus making space for empathetic unsettlement and critical engagement with museum artifacts.

The artifact's muteness encourages critical engagement. As I have demonstrated in the objects above, the difficult-to-read histories of mute objects allowed me to grasp simultaneously

³⁸ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), xxiv, 78–79.

the multiplicity of stories these objects might tell and the impossibility of conveying what befell their owners. Their silence is an invitation for interpretation. Ambiguous and difficult-to-read qualities of in-between objects can be read through Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity. Glissant conceives opacity as simultaneously containing two conflicting views, which in fact constitute pillars for establishing a community based on non-hierarchical difference: on the one hand, acknowledgment of the ungraspable dimensions of the Other's experiences, and, on the other hand, the foundational role of this acknowledged unknowability for ethical relations. Celia Britton explicates Glissant's opacity as "an acceptance of the unknown" and "an intersubjective concept," a right for "the opacity of the Other's difference," or "a defense against the objectifying gaze of the other."³⁹ If I attempt to make the Other utterly transparent and entirely knowable, I will inevitably force it to fit within my system of norms. In the western and universal ethical constellation, "no matter how opaque the other is for oneself ... it will always be a question of reducing this other to the transparency experienced by oneself." Consequently, "[e]ither the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated."⁴⁰ This conclusion of colonial epistemology eerily recalls the genocidal outcome of the Nazi worldview.

Glissant thinks of opacity as a crucial literary and poetic device. This device allows difference to be the foundation of non-hierarchical ethical relations between the West and the postcolonial subject. But his concept can also be useful for grasping the trauma implied in the mute artifact, even without hearing it in a narrative form. Indeed, the silence of objects embodies opacity in the materiality of its nonverbal language in which no words are uttered. Instead, what

³⁹ Celia Britton, "Opacity and Transparency: Conceptions of History and Cultural Difference in the Work of Michel Butor and Édouard Glissant," *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* 49, no. 3 (1995): 310, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/XLIX.3.308>.

⁴⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 49.

is implied in the material produces an imaginative encounter with possibilities. Consequently, the objects' opacity implies the unknowable or ungraspable aspects of victims' experiences.

Yet some argue that the muteness of objects may render them more susceptible to people's subjective interpretations and predetermined cultural dispositions. Studies of the postwar handling of Jewish artifacts show how context, media, and national politics deeply shape the interpretive possibilities of objects. For example, Ewa Stańczyk examines the circulation of "orphan photographs" depicting prewar Jewry in the work of contemporary Polish writers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). She argues that these visual depictions evolve from previously private possessions into public "objects of tender regard" in which the past is renegotiated as an idealized version that "offers a reinterpretation of Polish-Jewish relations in which inconvenient memories, such as the history of discrimination and anti-Semitic pogroms, are suppressed and effaced."⁴¹ Furthermore, such photos are read backward starting from the point of view of the looming catastrophe. Those depicted in the pictures can only be future victims, not ordinary people with mundane worries and joys.⁴²

During the conservation work, I experienced how my subjectivity and that of another conservator affected our interpretation of mute objects. On one occasion, a conservator working on a suitcase called me to inspect a faded inscription on the shell, as I am familiar with the Hebrew alphabet, which she thought she recognized. We both thought it plausible that Hebrew letters would appear on the suitcase since we knew, and perhaps also hoped, that a Jewish person carried this suitcase to the camp.⁴³ I greatly hoped to piece together some letters and come up,

⁴¹ Ewa Stańczyk, "Recycling the Orphan Photograph: The New Life of Jewish Objects," *Visual Studies* 31, no. 1 (2016): 64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2015.1128847>. Sontag's "Objects of tender regards" is quoted in Stańczyk, 64.

⁴² Stańczyk, "Recycling the Orphan Photograph," 67–68.

⁴³ Or even by a political prisoner, priest, Catholic, Sinti, Roma, and Soviet POW.

heroically, with a name. We stood in front of the suitcase for twenty minutes, flipping and turning it, but could not recognize any letters. Eventually, we gave up.

This example illustrates how our expectations shaped our encounter with the object, but also how the object's materiality resisted our interpretation. Jane Bennet's concept of materialism offers a way to understand this push and pull between an object and one's subjectivity. As Bennet suggests, matter "vibrates"—it reacts to its environment, shaping and resisting interpretation and manipulation.⁴⁴ These objects and their human interpretations codetermine each other. Accordingly, studies of Shoah objects point to how matter resists constraining interpretations. Waligórska and Sorkina demonstrate this material resistance in their analysis of the postwar fates of Jewish belongings in shtetls in Poland and Belarus. They show how, despite the local population's appropriation and repurposing of Jewish belongings, the objects still embody their previous owners' memories and traumas. Jewish objects render the past and Jewish absence from the everyday life of these towns palpable, sometimes reminding them of their silence and complicity in Jewish dispossession and murder.⁴⁵ In a divergent example, Carol A. Kidron shares the story of a spoon that a survivor carried and used throughout her camp imprisonment. After the war, the survivor continued to use the utensil to feed her own children. According to Kidron, the presence of such silent artifacts demonstrates "a person-object interaction [which] semiotically and sensuously resurrects the past."⁴⁶ These cases demonstrate how material traces of violence are activated, but also shape and resist human interpretation through interactions with their material shape and qualities. This material

⁴⁴ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Magdalena Waligórska and Ina Sorkina, "The Second Life of Jewish Belongings—Jewish Personal Objects and Their Afterlives in the Polish and Belarusian Post-Holocaust Shtetls," *Holocaust Studies* 29, no. 1 (2022): 356–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2022.2047292>.

⁴⁶ Carol A. Kidron, "Toward an Ethnography of Silence: The Lived Presence of the Past in the Everyday Life of Holocaust Trauma Survivors and Their Descendants in Israel," *Current Anthropology* 50, no. 1 (2009): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1086/595623>.

resistance can surprise and subvert familiar ways of interpretation. Objects can mirror human values but can also make one doubt and reevaluate everyday realities.

The different case studies above illustrate the nature of opaque objects and consider this opacity as something meaningful. The in-between object embodies similar opaque features: it is ambiguous and difficult to understand, but this opacity renders it meaningful, extending beyond what may be grasped in its immediate materiality. The duality between what is graspable and what lies beyond it raises some epistemic questions: how is knowledge extracted from things? What is the role of what lies beyond the intelligible in grasping the meaning of these objects?

Scholars suggest paying close attention to the limitations and dispositions of human subjectivities, how they interact with political and cultural contexts, and what lies beyond the boundaries of knowledge that shapes materiality's interpretation. For Stańczyk, orphan photos become objects into which nations pour their self-image. Kidron notes how survivors use everyday practices and objects to grapple with a past that lies beyond any conscious utterance, in living memory. An object's materiality can disturb human hubris in meaningful and telling ways, making one stop and reassess what lies beyond themselves.

Acknowledging what cannot be known about things and people, and the difference between the Other and the Self, is essential for an ethical encounter with the past. In her analysis of Shoah literature, Jessica Lang argues that the unreadability and inaccessibility of Shoah texts is fundamental for comprehending the rupture and trauma of the event. Thus, it is exactly the "failure" of authors to produce language that bears witness which points to the rich world that extends beyond the realm of expression and the boundaries of representation. In these moments of textual failure, the reader is faced with the limits of expression and is left with opaque textual

fragments and prickling questions. Lang argues that these are generative moments for an ethical encounter with traumatic experiences.⁴⁷

When I encountered different in-between objects, I soon grasped their textual silence, and everything I could not grasp about these items' stories. Acknowledging the epistemic boundary of the objects' unknowability facilitated this reflective encounter with a violent past. While the dead-ends of in-between objects may be experienced as frustrating, they can also inspire a type of listening that preserves the distance between past and present or the historical Other and Self. The past troubled me since the objects were linked to their traumatic histories, to my own sensual experiences of handling them in the present, to my scholarly and practical work, and to my personal and family histories. The whole was made of all these connections and trajectories. In-between objects can have surprising materialities that undermine one's cultural imagination and prompt visitors to view the stories that lie beyond the museum space, thus acknowledging the value of the unknown. Objects' susceptibility to various interpretations is more indicative of how a visitor responds to the Other's trauma than of a desire to know them as a person.

New Modes of Representation

I now discuss how the value of the unknown, materialized in the in-between object, can be transferred from the conservation labs to Shoah museum exhibitions. Scholars of Shoah artifacts often focus on the objects' presentation, overlooking the processes of collecting, archiving, and safekeeping.⁴⁸ Given the forensic and material turn in studying the Shoah, it seems crucial to expand the conversation on representation to include the backstage museum

⁴⁷ Jessica Lang, *Textual Silence: Unreadability and the Holocaust* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 1–8.

⁴⁸ One notable exception is Laura Levitt's book, *The Objects That Remain* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

work which shapes the possibilities for public engagement. Conservation becomes especially important given the aging and material deterioration of Shoah artifacts, often demanding increasingly greater interventions in their material components to prevent disintegration.

Traditional museum spaces, such as the PMA-B, Yad Vashem, and the USHMM, prominently feature survivor testimonies in their exhibitions. Trauma discourse and the centrality of survivor testimonies have contributed to the personalized narrative approach with video testimonies and personal objects taking central stage. Importantly, trauma literature has placed victim experiences at the heart of the discourse on genocide. Survivors' recorded testimonies concretize human destruction by giving individual texture and depth to violent events.⁴⁹ Collecting and listening to survivor testimonies and incorporating them into research, history, education, and representation has given a central place to the psychological and cultural devastation produced by atrocities.⁵⁰

The material and forensic turns in genocide and Holocaust studies also influence representation in new ways. In recent years, the value of human testimony has been eroded, making way for the ostensibly more reliable testimony of material evidence.⁵¹ This change has been apparent in representation, yet insufficient attention has been dedicated to its influence on traditional exhibitions of Nazi genocides. The testimonies of people and objects have always been the two central pillars of Shoah representation. Yet the forensic turn is creating new avenues for interactions between human and material witnessing. Much can be said on this issue, especially when considering the ongoing collection efforts of the USHMM and Yad Vashem,

⁴⁹ Saul Friedländer was a pioneer in bringing the voice of victims' experiences to the forefront of historical accounts in his *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁵⁰ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 155.

⁵¹ Dziuban, "Introduction," 18.

and the growing emphasis and resources invested in conservation. Here I would like to argue that in the museum space, unlike the legal and political realms, human and material testimonies interact and inspire new modes of representation. This claim perhaps goes against Dziuban's argument of a "dramatic reversal" between witnessing and forensics.⁵² I agree with Francesco Mazzucchelli's assertion that "Rather than discuss the end of the era of the witness as an isolated topic, I prefer to speak of an extension of the discursive role of the witness to non-human subjects, assuming a Latourian position: materiality has increasingly become a 'delegate' for collective memory, 'stealing' the narrative role that until now has been assumed by human witnesses."⁵³

Ironically, even though museum professionals crowned the object as the new storyteller, only a few were willing to acknowledge that things, just like people, do not last forever—especially if they were subject to the harsh conditions of war. The growing scale and cost of conservation, as well as the new technologies now dominating the field, shape the physical attributes of preserved objects anew. The renewed object after preservation might look as it did before, but it is often different in its material composition and subsequent handling, thus influencing its placement, presentation, and narration in exhibitions. These material changes raise questions on the meaning of new conservation technologies for representation techniques and the influence of new mediation strategies for forensic methods of conservation.

Diana Popescu defines the contemporary period as transitioning from "living memory" to "a culturally and politically mediated memory work realized by post-witness generations."⁵⁴ The

⁵² Dziuban, 18.

⁵³ Francesco Mazzucchelli, "From the 'Era of the Witness' to an Era of Traces," in *Mapping the 'Forensic Turn': Engagements with Materialities of Mass Death in Holocaust Studies and Beyond*, ed. Zuzanna Dziuban (Vienna: New Academic Press, 2017), 174.

⁵⁴ Diana I. Popescu, "Introduction: Memory and Imagination in the Post-Witness Era," in *Revisiting Holocaust Representation in the Post-Witness Era*, ed. Diana I. Popescu and Tanja Schult (New York: Springer, 2015), 3.

new, mediated nature of memory raises a set of questions on “afterwardness,”⁵⁵ history, representation, and the very future of memory. In the museum, forensic evidence and procedures interact with preexisting modes of representation that are significantly influenced by “traditional” mediated human witnessing. These two interacting trends address one of the most potent questions in the minds of memory stakeholders over the last three decades: how are we to remember Nazi genocides now that the flesh-and-blood witness is no longer alive?

Some museum professionals have responded to this question by turning to the personal object and designating it as the successor to the flesh-and-blood witness. This shift is most evident in Yad Vashem’s approach. In 2013, the museum published a collection of object stories in a book entitled *Edim Domemim* (Hebrew: עדים דוממים, English: *Silent Witnesses*). Curated from their collection of thirty thousand artifacts, painstakingly collected from survivors, along with their personal stories over the last thirty years, the book presents some of the more remarkable and moving material possessions donated by survivors. In the preface, Avner Shalev, then chairman of Yad Vashem, states that the Yad Vashem’s collection principles are based on a new museological approach, whereas “the object is not just presented as an illustration or a symbol for something else, either abstract or concrete—but as a storyteller, separate and distinct on its own.”⁵⁶ At the Yad Vashem collections, the bearer of testimony has been quite literally transferred from the individual witness to the individual object.

As the above example shows, in this post-witness moment, curators and scholars see objects as holding the potential to convey testimony as powerfully as people. Similar to survivor testimonies, personal objects can highlight the psychological and cultural devastation produced by atrocities which is not apparent in mass objects. Much like a testimony, an object’s value goes

⁵⁵ Popescu, “Introduction,” 3.

⁵⁶ Peled-Carmeli, *Edim domemim*, 9.

beyond the realm of historical facts ascertained in documents or eyewitness accounts to reveal the long shadow of trauma over individuals and communities.⁵⁷ Beyond material objects, video testimonies are verbal but non-dialogic; the encounter with the witness is indirect and mediated through technology. One cannot converse with the witness or ask them questions. In opposition to that, objects are dialogic but non-verbal. They remain silent, but their muteness may generate a set of troubling, unanswered questions, which require the observer to make a substantial effort of decoding and interpretation.

Despite their potential for generating dialogue, the piles of victim belongings have become an iconic representation of the Shoah that may hinder and prevent critical reflection. As I have shown, cultural imagery and human subjectivities can interfere with the interpretation of material objects. In response to this issue, the in-between object offers a powerful tool to subvert the piles' iconicity. According to Oren Baruch-Stier, an icon is an artifact that comes to signify something else to the degree that it becomes stripped from its historical specificity. For example, the number "six million" has now become an icon of the Shoah, referring more to the shocking magnitude of the event than the number of victims. Icons are reproduced, used, and reused time and again, and through repetition, their symbolic meaning is remade and reinforced. There is an interaction between the history of the item during the event and its history and meaning afterward—all these layers are consequential for its interpretation. Icons provide "an aesthetic contact with encoded meaning whose depth is beyond direct ratiocination."⁵⁸

Icons become encoded through individual and collective processing: first one recognizes that things are important, then interprets their meaning, and then this meaning becomes constant

⁵⁷ Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 96–144; Michal Givoni, *The Care of the Witness: A Contemporary History of Testimony in Crises* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 4.

⁵⁸ Dominik Bartmanski and Jeffrey C. Alexander, quoted in Oren Baruch Stier, *Holocaust Icons: Symbolizing the Shoah in History and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 7.

through cultural dissemination which then reinforces it further. A person is exposed to an object repeatedly and in different ways until it eventually transforms into a “short circuit,” understood as “noncognitive access to the larger, hidden reality,” in the words of Stier.⁵⁹ Francesco Mazzucchelli explains this mechanism through an example: when people visit Birkenau today, they conflate the remaining chimneys of the prisoners’ barracks with the chimneys of the crematoria. They do so even though the chimneys of the crematoria have been destroyed. Nonetheless, visitors associate the icon of the chimney with the material landscape of the memorial site and this association produces the wrong identification of chimneys as objects of mass extermination.

The above example demonstrates how the visitors’ cultural imagination is permeated with Shoah-related symbols and icons, which circulate and reinforce each other, shaping understanding and knowledge. This “collective cultural archive,” as Landsberg terms it,⁶⁰ coalesces into a network of signs through which meaning is instantly processed without pause for deeper reflection. This coalescing also happens at the memorial site, especially at a site as infamous as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Museum visitors arrive with a wide array of Shoah-related cultural imagery and knowledge acquired from books, films, social media, and other sources. These snippets of images and information can help them understand and interpret what they see; yet these references can also obscure their vision. A case in point is the pile of victims’ belongings. Visitors expect to see them and perhaps even expect to feel specific things when finally encountering them in person.

⁵⁹ Stier, *Holocaust Icons*, 7.

⁶⁰ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 122.

Mazzucchelli argues that preservation efforts at the PMA-B further stabilize a symbolic image of the site.⁶¹ In his words, “Preservation ... is the act of re-writing the sense of place. This act results in a semantic transformation of the site, morphing it into a symbolic landscape whose perception can also be influenced by other semiotic representations circulating in our culture.”⁶² According to Mazzucchelli, icons are based on material traces that tell stories. The stories are informed by how visitors understand these material traces, an understanding which “feeds” on their iconicity, thereby amplifying and stabilizing their symbolic meaning.

Stier rejects the shoe as a case study for his analysis. He searches for icons that have come to stand for the event regardless of their context. Indeed, a shoe can mean many things if stripped from the context in which the Shoah is represented or discussed. For this case, however, I argue that the shoe is an icon because of its specific placement at the PMA-B among the other shoes in the pile. This is a logic I extend to other iconic victim belongings, for, as Alison Landsberg argues, “the piles are central to ... an emerging Holocaust iconography.”⁶³ Together with their placement within the exhibition, these piles have come to symbolize the Shoah and been transformed into an icon. As Stier suggests, they hint at the Holocaust, but also at the history of its representation in its aftermath. The piles of victim belongings allude to wartime Jewish dispossession across Europe, as well as their postwar histories as notable icons of representation in the permanent exhibitions of the Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial sites. In the 1990s, the USHMM borrowed the piles of shoes from Majdanek for their permanent

⁶¹ Mazzucchelli, “From the ‘Era of the Witness,’” 170.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶³ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 118.

exhibition. These iconic piles have been “reproduced,” and millions of people have visited them, reinforcing their iconic status.

That said, visitors’ experiences of artifacts varies when they finally encounter the piles of shoes in person with all their sensory presence. At Shoah museums, visitors experience the iconic objects for the first time without the aid of technological means (photography, video, and so forth), thus outside the realm of imagination and expectation. The piles’ odor and visual qualities, as Jeffrey Feldman suggests, engulf and overwhelm the visitors, potentially subverting the cultural imagery with which they came.⁶⁴ Feldman argues that in their sensory experience, the piles appear like reliquaries or sacred remains and evoke a solemn emotion. But encountering the shoes, as my experience in conservation work suggests, may also produce an uncanny and unsettling feeling. In her analysis of the piles, Sharon Oster argues that without textual mediation, the piles’ materiality shocks the visitor, preventing them from grasping the life implied in them.⁶⁵

Oster’s insight suggests that visitor encounters with artifacts are always also shaped by mediation practices. At the PMA-B, even if unintentionally, new conservation procedures and curatorial traditions may interact and produce an encounter of relative ease between a visitor and the objects, rather than prompt them to consider the lives implied by the objects. An example from the conservation labs at the PMA-B demonstrates the outcomes of the interconnectivity between visitor expectations, the cultural imagination of the Shoah, conservation decisions, and curatorial practices. During the conservation work of shoes, the team was able to reveal some of the original colors of the footwear. Interestingly, some red shoes better survived the damages of time, so their color was still vivid after a surface clean. The rest of the shoes remained worn-out

⁶⁴ Feldman, “The Holocaust Shoe,” 123–28.

⁶⁵ Oster, *Holocaust Shoes*.

and faded, retaining their grayness. The PMA-B curators reincorporated the red shoes into the exhibition cases, and they now dot the gray pile with red color (see Figure 35). I believe the curators hoped that the individual red shoe might catch a visitor's eye, making them pause to take a second look. Perhaps the museum even wanted to display the success of preservation work. Yet the result only reinforces the iconicity of the pile. Instead of surprising the visitor, it feeds on prevalent cultural imagery. The red color is reminiscent of the girl in the red coat from Steven Spielberg's (iconic) film *Schindler's List*. The film, shot almost entirely in black and white, features color only in three scenes. In the scene (shot also in black and white), the shoes allude to Oscar Schindler, standing with his horse on a hill, overlooking the unfolding chaos of the ghetto's liquidation. He notices a little girl walking alone in the bloody streets, wearing a red coat. In a later scene in the film, the red coat appears again, this time more faded, as we see the dead body of the girl laying on a pile of other corpses. The two scenes, highly charged with the red color symbolism, speak to Jewish children's fate during the Shoah. The red coat marks the child as a target but also points to her uncorrupted innocence. Going back to the piles at the PMA-B, the mass of gray shoes with some red dots uncannily reminds us of Schindler's mise-en-scène. The conserved red shoes were put back in the exhibition, ostensibly arranged as they always have; yet conservation changed the shoes' material composition, and the arrangement now alludes to a film's color scheme, rather than pointing to the victims. This example illustrates the influence of icon-laden cultural narratives on how curators (perhaps subconsciously) frame and mediate material traces.



Figure 35. The piles of shoes at PMA-B's permanent exhibition. Photograph by author, 2021.

Conclusions

The conservation history of Auschwitz-Birkenau raises profound ethical and philosophical questions that extend beyond the site itself. My ethnographic examination of conservation practices at PMA-B reveals how the “in-between object”—neither fully anonymous nor completely known—challenges established paradigms of Holocaust representation. These objects embody what Édouard Glissant calls “opacity”—a quality that resists complete understanding yet demands ethical engagement. Their partial legibility forces us to acknowledge the fundamental unknowability of certain aspects of the Holocaust, not as a failure of conservation or historical research, but as a constitutive feature of any engagement with mass atrocity.

This acknowledgment of opacity marks an important evolution in the construction of authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As previous chapters have demonstrated, the site's commemorative paradigms emerged through a complex interplay of material conditions,

institutional imperatives, and political contexts. At Auschwitz I, the paradigm of presence took shape through deliberate curatorial staging that created narrative coherence. At Birkenau, a paradigm of absence emerged, valorizing ruins and empty space as powerful testimony to what cannot be fully represented. The in-between object now offers a third mode of authenticity—one that foregrounds partiality, ambiguity, and the limits of historical knowledge.

In the conservation laboratories, this theoretical understanding becomes tactile reality. The folded Hungarian banknote hidden in a shoe, a scrap of newspaper tucked inside a child's boot, or a bean concealed in an infant's footwear—each offers a glimpse into individual lives and survival strategies while simultaneously highlighting the vast scope of what can never be known about the victims' experiences. My sensory experience of handling these objects evoked an uncanny feeling that made the genocidal experience palpable in ways that archival research alone could not access. The weathered leather, the remaining fabric fragments, and the hidden personal items all gestured toward individual lives while refusing complete narrative closure.

This tension reflects broader transformations in Holocaust memory as we move deeper into the post-witness era.⁶⁶ With the passing of survivors who could provide direct testimony, material objects increasingly bear the burden of witnessing. Yet as my work in the conservation laboratories revealed, these objects do not speak for themselves, nor do they readily yield complete narratives. The forensic turn in conservation—with its sophisticated technologies and meticulous documentation—does not resolve this fundamental tension. Instead, it makes visible both the possibility and the limitations of material evidence as carriers of historical truth.

The institutional investment in preserving these objects—even those that yield minimal historical information—represents a significant shift in how authenticity is constructed at the

⁶⁶ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

site. In the immediate postwar years, as Chapter 2 showed, authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau was primarily understood through forensic verification (authentication) and experiential staging (authenticification). By the 1960s, authenticity had become increasingly aligned with material integrity and non-intervention. After 1989, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, conservation became an international moral imperative, supported by unprecedented financial resources. Today's meticulous preservation of in-between objects extends this trajectory while introducing a new dimension: the conscious preservation of epistemic openness.

This evolution is inseparable from the political and economic conditions explored in previous chapters. The post-1989 internationalization of Auschwitz-Birkenau's conservation, particularly through Jewish and European funding, created the infrastructural and financial conditions for today's sophisticated conservation laboratories. What began as a Polish national responsibility has become embedded in transnational networks of expertise, funding, and commemorative practice. The forensic turn in conservation thus reflects not only technical advances but the complex moral economy of Holocaust memory in post-communist Europe.

The conservation of in-between objects represents a different kind of moral imperative—not only the preservation of what is already known and documented, but the maintenance of a space for what cannot be fully narrated or explained. Their presence in the museum's collection challenges both the mass anonymity of the iconic piles of possessions and the narrative coherence of personal objects with known owners and stories. They remind us that authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau must involve not only the material integrity of artifacts but also a commitment to preserving the epistemological openness that acknowledges the limits of representation.

By incorporating in-between objects into exhibitions, museums can create space for visitors to confront the inherent gaps and uncertainties in our understanding of mass atrocity. Rather than presenting overly coherent narratives that imply complete comprehension, an approach that foregrounds opacity and partiality may foster what Dominick LaCapra terms “empathetic unsettlement”—a form of engagement with trauma that acknowledges both our obligation to understand and the impossibility of complete comprehension.

The in-between object thus concretizes the value of the unknown, allowing visitors to acknowledge both their own and the museum's limitations in narrating and explaining the past. Such objects reveal the personal choices made by their owners and thus their individual character and stories that are broader than the items' role in the museum's exhibitions and narration of events. By preserving these objects in their opacity, by refusing to smooth over their ambiguities, and by acknowledging the limits of what material traces can tell us, conservators and curators at Auschwitz-Birkenau participate in a form of ethical witnessing that may prove as important as the preservation of more legible evidence.

As Auschwitz-Birkenau moves further into the twenty-first century, the preservation and presentation of in-between objects may become increasingly central to its commemorative mission. These objects—with their stubborn resistance to complete interpretation—serve as powerful reminders that even the most sophisticated conservation techniques cannot fully recover what has been lost. In this way, they embody the fundamental tension at the heart of Holocaust remembrance: the simultaneous necessity and challenge of its representation. In the end, the most authentic approach to Holocaust memory may be one that acknowledges authenticity itself as partial, contingent, and forever incomplete.

Conclusions. Beyond Preservation: Constructing Authenticity and the Moral

Economy of Holocaust Memory

This dissertation has traced the transformation of Auschwitz-Birkenau's preservation from a technical responsibility of the Polish state to an international moral obligation. By examining how authenticity was negotiated, constructed, and redefined over nearly eight decades, I have demonstrated that conservation practices at this iconic site reflect broader shifts in Holocaust memory, European identity formation, and heritage politics. My analysis reveals that authenticity is not an inherent quality of historical remnants but a constructed mode of producing historical truth through institutional practices, conservation decisions, and curatorial framing—each shaped by political and material contingencies. What began in 1947 as an improvised attempt to preserve a devastated site under conditions of political constraint evolved, over decades, into a bifurcated commemorative grammar and eventually an internationally supported moral imperative.

The global significance of these findings becomes particularly evident when considered alongside recent developments in heritage policy. Over the last twenty years, as more nations have nominated sites associated with recent conflicts to the World Heritage List, ICOMOS has produced reflection papers addressing the complex challenges these nominations present. The overarching question these documents grapple with is: how should UNESCO reconcile the static nature of a World Heritage designation with the inherently evolving character of memory?¹

¹ ICOMOS International, *Evaluations of World Heritage Nominations Related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts*, discussion paper (France: ICOMOS International, 2018), accessed May 3, 2025 <https://publ.icomos.org/publicomos/jlbSai?html=Pag&page=Pml/Not&base=technica&ref=7EBA7A13DECF9E793C979CBF94A746BA>; ICOMOS International, *Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention: Reflection on Whether and How These Might Relate to the Purpose and Scope of the World Heritage Convention and Its Operational Guidelines*, discussion paper (France: ICOMOS International, February 2020), accessed May 3, 2025, <https://whc.unesco.org/document/184969/>.

At the heart of these debates is a deeper tension between established heritage frameworks and the complexities of sites of violence. The ICOMOS reflection papers increasingly question whether mechanisms designed to assess physical attributes, defined boundaries, and artistic achievement can account for places where “associative values are of greater importance than the material ones.”² This tension is particularly acute for atrocity sites, which complicate traditional World Heritage criteria such as “human creative genius” or “exceptional testimony” to cultural traditions. These debates mirror the dilemmas I trace at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where authenticity has always required balancing material preservation with the evolving, contested nature of memory. As one ICOMOS paper warns, “fixing Outstanding Universal Value at the time of inscription” may contradict “the evolving nature of such memories,” which persist long after the events themselves.³ This dilemma—stabilizing material traces while allowing for shifting memory—has shaped Auschwitz-Birkenau’s conservation history, from its forensic origins, through the emergence of dual commemorative paradigms, to its internationalization as a moral and political project.

These contemporary dilemmas echo tensions embedded in Auschwitz-Birkenau’s own transformation from a devastated postwar landscape into a global symbol of atrocity. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, efforts to preserve authenticity at Auschwitz have never been limited to stabilizing material remains; rather, they reflect broader negotiations over historical truth, institutional power, and the evolving politics of memory. These dynamics became formalized on the global stage in 1979, when the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List under criterion (vi), the provision that allows inscription of sites “directly or

² ICOMOS International, *Evaluations of World Heritage Nominations Related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts*, 4, 18.

³ ICOMOS International, *Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention*, 16.

tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance.”⁴ In other words, Auschwitz-Birkenau was inscribed based on its associative values—its direct, tangible connection to historical atrocity—rather than on architectural or aesthetic significance.

Julia Röttjer has demonstrated that the Committee’s decision emphasized Auschwitz’s singularity while simultaneously prohibiting similar sites from being added to the list. Drawing on internal documents from the nomination process, Röttjer shows how French heritage official Michel Parent explicitly framed Auschwitz as an exceptional case that should, in his words, “stand alone among cultural properties... bearing witness to the depth of horror and suffering, and the height of heroism,” with all other comparable sites symbolically represented through it.⁵ This logic of exceptionality formalized Auschwitz not only as a preserved space of atrocity, but as a moral singularity whose authenticity, and whose very inscription carried global representational weight.

Yet the very dilemmas that have shaped preservation practices at Auschwitz-Birkenau also underpin ongoing tensions within global heritage policy. As ICOMOS reflection papers reveal, the prohibition on similar inscriptions has proven increasingly untenable, particularly as more nations nominate sites associated with recent conflicts. The 2018 ICOMOS paper outlines three persistent challenges that mirror the tensions I trace within Auschwitz itself. First is the problem of commonality and division: How can a site be recognized as having “outstanding universal value” for all humankind when its memory remains nationally specific, politically

⁴ International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), *Advisory Board Evaluation (ICOMOS) / Evaluation de l'organisation Consultative (ICOMOS)* (Paris: ICOMOS, 1978), 3, accessed August 26, 2024 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/31/documents/>.

⁵ Julia Röttjer, “Authentizität im UNESCO-Welterbe-Diskurs: Das Konzentrations- und Vernichtungslager Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Drecol et al. (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 41–44.

contested, or even deepens historical divides? The 1996 inscription of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial exemplifies this dilemma. While framed as a “powerful symbol of peace,” the nomination provoked opposition from states such as China and the United States, who argued that Hiroshima’s memorialization risked marginalizing the broader context, particularly Japan’s wartime aggression and the suffering of other Asian nations. As ICOMOS notes, such conflicts reveal how atrocity sites may fracture rather than unify global heritage, destabilizing UNESCO’s foundational principle of shared human significance.⁶

Second is the question of uniqueness and representation: Auschwitz’s exceptional inscription leaves unresolved how to commemorate atrocity globally without reducing divergent histories to generalized symbols or allowing material authenticity to become the sole arbiter of moral authority. Third, ICOMOS emphasizes the difficulty of evaluating sites grounded primarily in intangible values—traumatic memory, moral testimony, or affective experience. Such nominations often reflect particularistic narratives, reinforcing national histories or political projects rather than fostering shared heritage.⁷

These challenges reveal that authenticity, as both a conservation principle and a commemorative tool, is never neutral. As Auschwitz-Birkenau’s history demonstrates, authenticity is a fragile, negotiated quality shaped by institutional decisions, geopolitical tensions, and the evolving needs of communities confronting legacies of violence. The same contradictions that structured its preservation—balancing global symbolism with local complexity, stabilizing material traces while memory evolves—continue to shape debates over atrocity site recognition worldwide.

⁶ ICOMOS International, *Evaluations of World Heritage Nominations Related to Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

Rather than adapting existing frameworks, the ICOMOS 2018 paper suggests that alternative heritage initiatives beyond the World Heritage List may better accommodate sites of memory—for example, UNESCO’s Memory of the World Program or the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. These platforms, the paper argues, are better equipped to address the ongoing challenges such sites present: balancing documentary evidence with affective experience, acknowledging multiple perspectives without relativizing history, and preserving material remnants while allowing for the evolution of meaning and memory.⁸ As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, responding to these challenges demands not only technical expertise but sustained ethical engagement with how material traces of atrocity can serve as witnesses to history—without foreclosing the ongoing work of reconciliation and understanding.

At stake in these debates is a question central to my analysis: how can the preservation of sites of memory meaningfully support global peace efforts? As one ICOMOS reflection paper asks, “if the purposes of the World Heritage Convention relate to positive messages and to UNESCO’s Peace Mandate, then consideration needs to be given to how the World Heritage List supports such purposes.”⁹ This concern about the appropriate boundaries of heritage inscription mirrors the dilemmas I trace at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where museum professionals gradually sought to frame authentic traces of atrocity around commemorative and educational goals, in the hope that the lessons of Auschwitz might contribute to world peace. Their efforts reveal not only the limitations of this project, but the complex, often fragile interplay between material preservation, historical responsibility, and the political uses of memory. As the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau makes clear, supporting peace through heritage preservation requires more

⁸ Ibid., 7–9.

⁹ ICOMOS International, *Sites Associated with Memories of Recent Conflicts and the World Heritage Convention*, 21.

than safeguarding material remnants; it demands careful, ongoing negotiation between authenticity, interpretation, and the evolving needs of communities shaped by violence.

Reframing Authenticity: From Technical Activity to Moral Imperative

This dissertation has traced a profound transformation in the preservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau—one that reflects broader shifts in how we understand the relationship between material conservation and Holocaust memory. What began as a technical responsibility of the Polish state evolved into an international moral obligation, revealing how the material care of this site has become inseparable from collective ethical reckonings with the past.

In the immediate postwar years, conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau was framed primarily as a practical matter of forensic evidence preservation and national commemoration. The Polish state's 1947 declaration that the terrain of the former camp was to be “preserved for all times” offered a legal mandate but little practical guidance.¹⁰ During this formative period, the site's preservation was shaped by what Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe distinguish as dual processes of authentication (*Authentifizieren*) and authentication (*Authentisieren*)—the first dealing with forensic verification and documentary evidence, the second with affective staging and experiential truth.¹¹

Two distinct commemorative paradigms emerged from these early efforts. At Auschwitz I, the museum developed what I have called a logic of presence: structures were restored, objects were displayed in thematic exhibition blocks, and the narrative arc was stabilized through documentary authority and spatial coherence. At Birkenau, by contrast, a different

¹⁰ Polski Sejm, *Ustawa z dnia 2 lipca 1947 r. o upamiętnieniu męczeństwa Narodu Polskiego i innych Narodów w Oświęcimiu*, *Dziennik Ustaw* 1947, no. 52, item 265, accessed March 26, 2025, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19470520265/O/D19470265.pdf>.

¹¹ Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe, “Einleitung,” in *Handbuch historische Authentizität*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022), 11.

commemorative grammar took shape. Initially born of neglect and material constraint rather than deliberate design, the vast, ruined landscape gradually acquired symbolic power through what I have termed a logic of absence. Collapsed barracks, partially destroyed crematoria, and barren fields became themselves a form of testimony, articulating through emptiness what could not be fully represented through curatorial staging.

Yet this bifurcated commemorative framework left certain spaces in a state of liminality, neither fully integrated into the narrative presence of Auschwitz I nor absorbed into the aesthetic absence of Birkenau. These “internal peripheries,” such as the incineration pits and first improvised gas chambers (Bunkers 1 and 2) at Birkenau and the SS Kommandantur and Höss villa near Auschwitz I, remained physically present but symbolically marginal.

The pivotal moment in the transformation of preservation from technical activity to moral imperative came in the late 1980s, as communist Poland faced economic crisis and political transition. The 1987 visit of Jewish politician, entrepreneur, and philanthropist Ronald S. Lauder marked a critical juncture. Shocked by the site's physical decay, Lauder initially proposed erecting a monument for Jewish victims at Birkenau, but after discussions with Polish authorities, he agreed to focus instead on conservation. This shift in priorities fundamentally altered both the funding structures and conceptual frameworks for preservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Conservation was reframed as a responsibility to preserve Jewish history and honor the memory of the victims, reflecting broader changes in Holocaust consciousness that had been developing since the 1970s.

These developments unfolded in the context of broader contestations over the site's meaning and ownership in post-communist Poland. The Carmelite Convent controversy of the 1980s and early 1990s revealed deep tensions between Polish-Catholic and Jewish claims to

Auschwitz's memory. The establishment of the International Auschwitz Council in 1990 and the Preservation Sub-Commission in 1991 created formal mechanisms for international cooperation and compromise while introducing Jewish stakeholders' influence over the site's future.

The financial internationalization was accompanied by a conceptual shift: preservation became an expression of collective European identity and a means of moral reckoning with the continent's participation and collaboration in Nazi crimes. As Lauder declared at a 1993 fundraising dinner for European ambassadors, this effort represented “the first time that European nations have come together to lend their financial, and as importantly, their symbolic support to a project dedicated to preserving the physical evidence of Europe's darkest night.”¹²

This transformation was made possible by specific economic and political conditions. Poland's post-communist economic difficulties created both necessity and opportunity: necessity in the form of funding shortfalls that the Polish state could not address alone; and opportunity in the opening of new transnational partnerships that would have been impossible under communism.

The Evolution of Conservation Practices

From improvised postwar repairs to sophisticated institutional practice, conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau has undergone a profound transformation over seven decades. This evolution traces not only the physical maintenance of a memorial site but also the changing political, ethical, and commemorative frameworks through which atrocity has been preserved and presented.

The earliest conservation efforts were characterized by pragmatic urgency rather than coherent methodology. In the immediate aftermath of liberation in 1945, the site was treated

¹² “Dinner Honoring European Ambassadors of Participating Countries,” International Auschwitz-Birkenau Preservation Project Summary, Spring 1993, IA.0064, box 1, folder 5, USHMC Auschwitz, *IA-USHMM*, 22–25.

primarily as a crime scene, with physical elements preserved for their evidentiary value in war crimes investigations.

To recall, the 1947 Polish Sejm resolution offered no guidance on what such preservation might entail. A significant shift began in 1957, when the museum initiated its first comprehensive conservation planning process. This plan represented the first attempt to systematically address the site's preservation needs. Museum professionals differentiated between zones requiring different levels of intervention, acknowledging that not all areas could or should be preserved in the same manner. At Auschwitz I, the focus was on maintaining structural integrity and creating usable exhibition spaces. At Birkenau, the emphasis shifted toward selective stabilization and the preservation of ruins “as is.”

By the late 1960s, conservation principles at Auschwitz-Birkenau had begun to align with emerging international standards, particularly those codified in the 1964 Venice Charter, which emphasized minimal intervention, respect for historical layering, and the preservation of monuments “in the full richness of their authenticity.”¹³ This shift reflected broader developments in Polish conservation theory, particularly the transition from a postwar restorationist mindset which aimed to reconstruct national cultural heritage, to one more aligned with international trends of non-intervention. UNESCO’s 1979 declaration of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a World Heritage Site was based on evaluations according to the principles of material authenticity. Yet it offered no financial resources for the vast conservation needs of the site. Set against Poland’s economic hardships in the 1980s, the site fell into relative neglect and disrepair.

¹³ ICOMOS, *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter 1964)*, accessed May 24, 2025, https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf.

The fall of communism in 1989 marked a watershed moment in Auschwitz-Birkenau's preservation history. As Poland transitioned to democracy and a market economy, the museum faced both challenges and opportunities. The involvement of Jewish philanthropist Ronald S. Lauder catalyzed a broader international effort to preserve the site. The conservation challenges identified by James H. Frantz in his 1990 report prompted two major conferences at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The first, “Auschwitz-Birkenau: Should the Ruins Be Preserved?” convened in 1993, addressed fundamental questions about the purpose and ethics of conservation. The second, “Preserving for the Future,” held in 2003, reflected on a decade of conservation work and refined the museum's methodological approach.

The establishment of dedicated conservation laboratories at the museum in 2003 marked a culmination of this professionalization process. Equipped with advanced technologies and staffed by specialists in various materials, these laboratories enabled a level of precision and expertise previously unavailable on site. The most recent phase in this evolution began with the establishment of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation in 2009, which created an endowment of €120 million to fund perpetual conservation for decades to come.¹⁴

Throughout this evolution, several key transitions stand out. First, conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau shifted from reactive emergency measures to proactive, systematic planning. Second, conservation evolved from a peripheral museum function to a central institutional mission, reshaping not only how the site was maintained but how it was interpreted and presented to the public. Third, the philosophical basis of conservation shifted from an

¹⁴ Wojciech Soczewica and Adam Szpaderski, eds., *The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation: Genesis, Development, and Future*, trans. William Brand (Warsaw: Fundacja Auschwitz-Birkenau, 2019), accessed June 1, 2021, http://auschwitz.org/gfx/auschwitz/userfiles/auschwitz/fundacja/en/foundation_folder/fab-folder_informacyjn_ang.pdf.

emphasis on restoration and rebuilding toward a more nuanced understanding of authenticity and minimal intervention as conducive for mediating the affective and historical value of the site.

The Two Commemorative Paradigms Revisited

The emergence of two distinct commemorative paradigms at Auschwitz-Birkenau between 1947 and 1979—Auschwitz I as a site of evidentiary presence, and Birkenau as a site of absence—has profoundly shaped how the Shoah is remembered, taught, and understood far beyond Poland's borders.

At Auschwitz I, the paradigm of presence took shape through deliberate curatorial interventions, exhibitions, and museum functions established in former camp buildings. Former prisoner barracks were reconstructed to house thematic exhibitions, while significant spaces were meticulously restored to represent their wartime function. The result was a space of narrative coherence, where evidence was organized to convey a legible history of Nazi crimes. The 1955 permanent exhibition established a temporal framework focused on the camp's operational phase from 1940 to 1944, which shaped conservation decisions—including reversing postwar changes to restore wartime conditions, as seen in crematorium I. The museum's collection, storage, and protection of documents reinforced its authority to tell Auschwitz-Birkenau's story. This combination of in-situ conservation, exhibitions, and archival functions later became the foundation for memorial museums globally,¹⁵ from former concentration camps across Europe,

¹⁵ Amy Sodaro, "Museums and the Memory of Genocide," in *Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2023), 276–78.

to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum¹⁶ and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia.¹⁷

Young's analysis in his seminal study *The Texture of Memory* illuminates how these commemorative paradigms emerged from what he calls “the rhetoric of ruins.” He observes, “When the killing stopped, only the sites remained, blood-soaked but otherwise mute.” Time created an estrangement between sites and events, requiring “a deliberate act of memory” to reconnect them.¹⁸ At Auschwitz I, this manifested through curatorial staging that created narrative coherence. Yet Young warns against mistaking “the debris of history for history itself,”¹⁹ reminding us that artifacts are always “framed for us by curators in particular times and places.”²⁰

In stark contrast, Birkenau emerged as a site defined by absence and minimal intervention. Its vast, marshy terrain with hastily constructed wooden barracks posed different conservation challenges. Many structures had already collapsed when the museum was established; others were dismantled for materials during the immediate postwar period. What remained was a landscape of ruin that powerfully evoked the scale of destruction through its emptiness.

¹⁶ While the USHMM is not an in-situ site, its holdings include object collection of over 130,000 artifacts relating to the Holocaust, which lend the museum, through their authentic value, the authority to present the story of the Holocaust and speak in the name of its victims.

¹⁷ See the following landing pages of memorial museums, which direct visitors to more information on all of the abovementioned functions, including exhibitions, archives, library, research, and collections: “Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,” accessed May 11, 2025, <https://tuolsleng.gov.kh/en/>; “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.ushmm.org/>; “KZ-Gedenkstätte Dachau. Stiftung Bayerische Gedenkstätte,” accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.kz-gedenkstaette-dachau.de/en/>; “Památník Terezín (Terezín Memorial),” accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz/?lang=en>.

¹⁸ James Edward Young, “The Rhetoric of Ruins: The Memorial Camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz,” in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 119.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 128.

The absence of comprehensive intervention at Birkenau began as a pragmatic response to material and financial constraints. Yet, as visitor Kazimierz Koźniewski observed in 1948, this neglect paradoxically preserved “that horror” more effectively than restoration could have. Over time, what began as neglect evolved into a commemorative principle. By the late 1950s, museum professionals articulated a conservation approach that valued Birkenau's ruined state not as a failure but as a form of witness—a “negative aesthetics” that has come to dominate Holocaust and atrocity commemoration worldwide.²¹

Rather than attempting comprehensive reconstruction, Birkenau's approach harnesses what Young calls “the magic of ruins,” where the site appears “seemingly charged with the aura of past events, as if the molecules of the sites still vibrated with the memory of their history.” Yet this power isn't inherent in the ruins themselves. As Young emphasizes, “by themselves, these crumbling sites of destruction lack what Nora has called 'the will to remember.'”²² Birkenau's empty landscape achieves its commemorative power through the deliberate decision to maintain this state of ruination—converting material decay into memorial grammar.

These paradigms emerged through the recursive interaction of material conditions, institutional capacities, and commemorative politics, reflecting deeper tensions in representing atrocity. Auschwitz I offers visitors a sense of comprehension, suggesting the horrors can be grasped and morally absorbed. Birkenau resists such containment, its vastness gesturing toward what cannot be fully represented. The 1979 UNESCO World Heritage inscription validated both these approaches, transforming the preservation of Auschwitz I as curated presence and Birkenau

²¹ See especially chapters 1 and 5 of James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 28–49, 119–54; Harold Marcuse, “Holocaust Memorials: The Emergence of a Genre,” *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 1 (2010): 60, 78–84.

²² Young, “The Rhetoric of Ruins: The Memorial Camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz,” 119.

as a landscape of absence from a practice into an ethical commitment—an official approach to remembering atrocity through material remains.

The dialogue between presence and absence at Auschwitz-Birkenau creates a dynamic interplay between what can be documented and what remains beyond full representation. Visitors moving between the exhibition-centered Auschwitz I and the primarily empty landscape of Birkenau experience this fundamental tension: on one hand, the necessary attempt to organize, explain, and comprehend through material evidence; on the other, the humbling recognition of what remains inexpressible and resistant to complete understanding.

The two commemorative paradigms established at Auschwitz-Birkenau have had lasting influence far beyond the site itself. Auschwitz-Birkenau's influence extends globally as one of the earliest examples of the memorial-museum.²³ The dialectic between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility has become foundational to Holocaust memorial design worldwide.²⁴ The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum incorporated both approaches in its permanent exhibition, juxtaposing documentary displays with empty spaces that evoke the void left by genocide.²⁵ The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin similarly draws on an aesthetics of barren emptiness through its field of abstract stelae,²⁶ while the Tuol Sleng

²³ Amy Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 32–33.

²⁴ Hansen-Glucklich examines how Yad Vashem, the Jewish Museum Berlin, and the USHMM navigate the tension between comprehensibility and incomprehensibility through architectural and curatorial strategies. While the USHMM employs metonymy and iconic objects to create a seemingly coherent narrative, Yad Vashem and the Jewish Museum Berlin emphasize fragmentation, voids, and disfiguration to evoke absence and rupture, resisting the illusion of narrative closure and underscoring the Holocaust's inherent incomprehensibility. Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 76–81, 143–44, 217–18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91–101.

²⁶ Irit Dekel, *Mediation at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41–42.

Genocide Museum in Cambodia adopted Auschwitz I's approach of preserving and displaying evidence of atrocity in situ.²⁷

Even beyond genocide memorials, these paradigms have influenced how societies remember collective trauma. The National September 11 Memorial employs the aesthetics of absence through its twin reflecting pools, while the memorial museums at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combine documentary evidence with preserved ruins in ways that echo the Auschwitz-Birkenau approach.²⁸ Thus, what emerged as pragmatic responses to specific conditions at Auschwitz-Birkenau has evolved into a global paradigm for commemorating mass atrocity, one that continues to shape how societies around the world confront difficult pasts through material remains.

The Politics of Peripheral Spaces

While the core commemorative spaces of Auschwitz I and Birkenau have dominated public awareness and scholarly attention, the history of the memorial site cannot be fully understood without examining its peripheries. The physical and symbolic margins of Auschwitz-Birkenau reveal complex tensions in Holocaust remembrance that are often obscured in analyses focused solely on central memorial spaces.

The incineration pits and first makeshift gas chambers at Birkenau were sites of profound historical significance. It was here that the systematic mass murder at Birkenau began, claiming approximately 100,000 lives between 1942 and 1943. Yet despite their historical centrality, these spaces remained physically marginalized and symbolically unsettled for decades after the war.

²⁷ Caitlin Brown and Chris Millington, "The Memory of the Cambodian Genocide: The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum," *History Compass* 13, no. 2 (2015): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12214>.

²⁸ Nicholas S. Paliewicz and Marouf Hasian Jr., "Mourning Absences, Melancholic Commemoration, and the Contested Public Memories of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum," *Western Journal of Communication* 80, no. 2 (2016): 140–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2015.1128559>; "Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum," accessed May 12, 2025, <https://hpmuseum.jp/?lang=eng>.

This marginalization was not purely intentional but resulted from a complex interplay of factors: the sites' remote location at the edge of the camp, their ruined state after SS demolition, and the postwar institutional prioritization of more intact structures.

The neglect of these killing sites also reflected broader commemorative hierarchies. During the communist period, Jewish victimhood was consistently downplayed in favor of Polish political martyrdom and international antifascist resistance. The incineration pits and first gas chambers, sites almost exclusively associated with Jewish extermination, consequently received minimal curatorial attention. This spatial marginalization had profound consequences for Holocaust memory. By concentrating commemorative resources on the brick barracks of Auschwitz I and the more visible crematoria ruins at Birkenau, the museum effectively privileged certain parts of the Holocaust narrative while relegating others to the periphery.

The case of the SS Kommandantur and Höss villa reveals a different dimension of peripheral politics. Unlike the incineration pits, these perpetrator spaces were never physically marginal. Indeed, they were situated at the very heart of the camp's administrative core. Yet these crucial sites remained narratively peripheral, excluded from the museum's commemorative framework despite their physical centrality. In the immediate postwar period, the villa was returned to its original Polish owner, while the SS administrative building was repurposed for residential use, often housing museum employees (many of them survivors).

The ambiguous status of these perpetrator spaces reveals competing “moral geographies,” to use Andrew Charlesworth's term.²⁹ For local residents and museum staff seeking to rebuild their lives after the war, the repurposing of these buildings represented a form of spatial and

²⁹ Andrew Charlesworth et al., “‘Out of Place’ in Auschwitz? Contested Development in Post-War and Post-Socialist Oświęcim,” *Ethics, Place & Environment* 9, no. 2 (2006): 149.

moral reclamation. For international visitors and some memorial advocates, however, this domestic reuse appeared as a form of historical erasure or inappropriate normalization.

Roma Sendyka's concept of “non-sites of memory” (*nie-miejsca pamięci*) helps illuminate how certain zones become symbolically excluded even when materially present. Sendyka defines these as post-genocidal sites that contain human remains but lack formal commemoration, places marked not by absence but by “active silencing.”³⁰ Both the incineration pits and the perpetrator spaces at Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned as such non-sites for decades, materially present but symbolically marginalized, haunting the landscape without being fully incorporated into its commemorative narrative.

The fate of these peripheral spaces changed dramatically after 1989, reflecting broader shifts in Holocaust memory politics. As Poland transitioned to democracy and Holocaust consciousness increased globally, Jewish organizations gained greater influence over the site's interpretation and preservation. This shift allowed for the reintegration of previously marginalized Jewish spaces into the commemorative landscape. Similarly, after all victim groups were incorporated into the commemorative narrative, perpetrator spaces could finally be incorporated into the memorial space as well, receiving greater scholarly and curatorial attention in the post-communist period. However, the museum's reluctance to fully incorporate SS areas into the museum core demonstrates that it still favors victim over perpetrator narratives.

Finally, peripheral spaces challenge conventional understandings of authenticity at memorial sites. If authenticity is traditionally associated with preservation and material continuity, how do we understand spaces that were deliberately neglected, repurposed, or left to decay? The incineration pits and the perpetrator buildings demonstrate how authenticity might be

³⁰ Roma Sendyka, *Poza obozem: nie-miejsca pamięci - próba rozpoznania*, Nowa Humanistyka, t. 63 (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2021), 47–48.

understood not as the preservation of a single historical moment but as the accumulation of historical layers—including the history of remembering and forgetting itself. At PMA-B, authenticity's focus is on the years 1939-1945, a choice which erases the postwar transformations of these peripheral sites of memory, effectively overwriting awkward or uncomfortable institutional histories.

In-Between Objects and the Forensic Turn

A further dimension of complexity emerges through the forensic turn in conservation practices at Auschwitz-Birkenau. What I term “in-between objects”—new objects which have recently been discovered during conservation work—reveal both the potential and the limitations of material artifacts as bearers of testimony. These objects, neither fully anonymous mass items nor traceable personal possessions, occupy a liminal space in the moral economy of the site. They provide fragments of information about their owners yet remain fundamentally opaque, challenging our desire for comprehensive knowledge.

A folded Hungarian banknote hidden in a shoe, a scrap of newspaper tucked inside a child's boot, or a bean concealed in an infant's footwear—each offers a glimpse into individual lives and survival strategies while simultaneously highlighting the vast scope of what can never be known about the victims' experiences. The discovery of these in-between objects through sophisticated conservation techniques at the PMA-B's laboratories illustrates a paradox at the heart of the site's moral mission: the more we invest in preserving and examining material traces, the more we confront the limits of what material evidence can reveal.

These objects embody what Édouard Glissant calls “opacity”: a quality that resists complete understanding yet demands ethical engagement.³¹ Their partial legibility forces us to

³¹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191.

acknowledge the fundamental unknowability of certain aspects of the Holocaust, not as a failure of conservation or historical research, but as a constitutive feature of any engagement with mass atrocity. The conservation of these in-between objects represents a different kind of moral imperative: not the preservation of what is already known and documented, but the maintenance of a space for what cannot be fully narrated or explained. Their presence in the museum's collection challenges both the mass anonymity of the iconic piles of possessions and the narrative coherence of personal objects with known owners and stories. They remind us that authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau must involve not only the material integrity of artifacts but also a commitment to preserving the epistemological openness that acknowledges the limits of representation.

The decision to invest substantial resources in meticulously conserving mass-produced everyday items—often deteriorated and yielding limited historical information—reflects the evolving nature of Holocaust commemoration. This approach is continuously updated not only with the latest material discoveries, but also with new technologies, media forms, and shifting memory politics. As this dissertation has demonstrated, growing temporal distance from the Holocaust has inspired new commemorative approaches that respond to the interplay between material constraints, technological possibilities, and changing symbolic meanings. The forensic conservation efforts described here reshape our understanding of these iconic mass objects, reinvigorating their capacity to evoke what Dominick LaCapra terms “empathetic unsettlement”—a form of engagement with trauma that acknowledges both our obligation to understand and the impossibility of complete comprehension.

Theoretical Contributions

This dissertation advances several theoretical contributions to the study of authenticity at sites of atrocity, filling significant gaps in our understanding of how material preservation intersects with memory politics. While previous scholarship has often treated authenticity as a static quality or focused narrowly on curatorial representation, my analysis reveals the dynamic processes through which authenticity is produced and maintained over time through institutional practice. At its core, my work challenges prevailing assumptions that authenticity derives primarily from material integrity or historical accuracy. Instead, I demonstrate how authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau functions as a mode of producing historical truth—one constructed through the interplay of institutional authority, conservation techniques, and commemorative frameworks. This insight addresses a critical blind spot in memory studies, which has often overlooked the technical and financial underpinnings of memorial sites in favor of analyzing their symbolic dimensions.

My analysis of the dual commemorative paradigms at Auschwitz I and Birkenau provides an original theoretical framework for understanding how different approaches to materiality can coexist within a single memorial complex. Previous scholars have noted the contrasting presentation of these sites but have not systematically analyzed how these differences emerged from specific historical contingencies rather than deliberate design. By tracing the evolution of these paradigms from pragmatic responses to ideological principles, I offer a new perspective on how commemorative practices develop and become institutionalized.

Another key theoretical contribution emerges from the analysis of how authenticity was reconceptualized at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the 1990s through the application of minimal intervention and the conservation of objects in their received state. Drawing explicitly on Alois Riegl's theories, Polish conservator Bohdan Rymaszewski articulated a conservation framework

that balanced documentary evidence with affective experience. This approach sought to reconcile competing imperatives: preserving historical evidence with minimal intervention while simultaneously fostering emotional connection to the past through what Riegl termed “age value”: the visible traces of time’s passage.

Yet, as Jörn Rüsen warns, an overdetermined curatorial framing of authentic objects and sites risks transforming them into predetermined emotional or political triggers. Unless their inherent absence and multivocal interpretation are foregrounded, such framing effectively obscures their historical function. For Rüsen, the challenge lies in maintaining minimal intervention and allowing the “open, indeterminate, and immediate meaningfulness” of remnants to emerge as a “still little-utilized opportunity for historical meaning-making.”³² Thus, the delicate interplay between emotional and intellectual comprehension requires a conservation and curatorial strategy that resists overinterpretation and instead foregrounds the ruins’ inherent voids and unresolved histories, marking them as meaningful.

While at Auschwitz-Birkenau the balancing act of emotional and intellectual comprehension was embraced as the most fitting approach, in recent years the heavy reliance on affective encounters with sites in a ruinous state has been critiqued. As Volkhard Knigge and Insa Eschebach have cautioned, the emotional impact of remains can overshadow their historical interpretation, leading to a new sacralization that may hinder critical engagement.³³ Auschwitz-Birkenau is a site of escalating intervention, calling into question the very capacity of these

³² Jörn Rüsen, “Über den Umgang mit den Orten des Schreckes: Überlegungen zur Symbolisierung der Holocaust,” in *Das Gedächtnis der Dinge: KZ-Relikte und KZ-Denkmäler 1945-1995*, ed. Detlef Hoffmann (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1998), 333–34.

³³ Volkhard Knigge, “Gedenkstätten und Museen,” in *Verbrechen erinnern: die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Volkhard Knigge et al. (Munich: Beck, 2002), 388–89; Insa Eschebach, “Blutgetränkte Erde: Die Sakralisierung historischer Orte des Massensterbens,” in *Authentizität als Kapital historischer Orte?: die Sehnsucht nach dem unmittelbaren Erleben von Geschichte*, ed. Alex Dreccoll, Thomas Schaarschmidt, and Irmgard Zündorf (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 28.

authentic remnants to provide the kind of historical understanding that Rüsen conceptualizes—a form of meaning-making that depends less on affective resonance than on the recognition of absence as an intrinsic and irremediable aspect of both authenticity and the consequence of genocidal crimes. This raises a critical ethical question: Should the ruins be perpetually maintained, their materiality preserved indefinitely? Or should the site eventually adopt a stance that allows the remnants to decay and disappear? With substantial resources invested in preservation, this question looms large over Auschwitz-Birkenau, highlighting the unresolved tension between safeguarding evidence and accepting the inevitability of loss.

The dissertation also contributes to theoretical understandings of authenticity by examining the paradox of maintaining authenticity through increasing technical intervention. Conservators at Auschwitz-Birkenau faced a fundamental dilemma: original materials were deteriorating rapidly, yet interventions to prevent decay risked compromising the site's perceived authenticity. This paradox mirrors what Achim Saupe describes as “authenticity conflicts” in memorial sites—moments where the desire to preserve original substance clashes with the need for technical intervention.³⁴

The conceptual framing of authenticity as both a technical goal and a moral imperative represents another significant theoretical contribution. Authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau functions simultaneously as a conservation standard guiding professional practice and as an ethical position concerning how the Holocaust should be remembered. This dual character explains why authenticity became such a powerful rhetorical tool for mobilizing international support for conservation after 1989.

³⁴ Sabine Moller, “Historische Erfahrung,” in *Handbuch historische Authentizität*, ed. Martin Sabrow and Achim Saupe (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2022), 201–7.

The concept of “internal peripheries” that I introduce advances our understanding of spatial hierarchies within memorial landscapes. While existing scholarship has focused primarily on central commemorative spaces, my examination of marginal zones at Auschwitz-Birkenau reveals how certain sites can remain physically present yet symbolically excluded from dominant narratives. This framework helps explain why some aspects of atrocity remain unincorporated into memorial discourse despite their historical significance. Similarly, my identification of “in-between objects” offers an important theoretical tool for understanding artifacts that resist categorization within existing museological frameworks. Neither fully anonymous mass items nor traceable personal possessions, these objects challenge established representational paradigms and foreground the limits of historical knowledge. This concept contributes to ongoing debates about how museums can acknowledge the inherent gaps and uncertainties in their collections rather than presenting overly coherent narratives.

Finally, my analysis of the transformation of conservation from technical activity to moral imperative provides a novel perspective on how memorial sites become anchored in transnational networks of funding and expertise. By examining the economic and political conditions that enabled Auschwitz-Birkenau's conservation to become an international project, I reveal how material preservation becomes inseparable from broader processes of memory politics and identity formation. This approach bridges a gap between heritage studies' focus on technical conservation and memory studies' emphasis on representation, showing how these dimensions are mutually constitutive.

Broader Implications: Preserving Sites of Atrocity

The conservation approaches developed at Auschwitz-Birkenau have become influential models for memorial sites worldwide. Yet these approaches emerged from specific political,

economic, and cultural contexts that may not translate readily to other settings. This section examines how the lessons from Auschwitz-Birkenau might inform—and be limited in—the preservation of atrocity sites globally.

The most significant implication of this research concerns the relationship between economic resources and commemorative possibilities. The extensive conservation work at Auschwitz-Birkenau was made possible by unprecedented financial support—approaching \$250 million over the past three decades—that transformed how preservation could be imagined and implemented. This level of funding remains unattainable for most other atrocity sites globally.

Sites of atrocity in resource-constrained settings face profound limitations in preserving material remains, regardless of their commemorative intentions. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia struggles with basic preservation challenges due to limited funding, tropical climate conditions, and insufficient technical expertise. As documented by the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia, the museum has between “3,000 and 5,000 artifacts that have never been properly treated or preserved by professional experts.”³⁵ Conservation efforts have been piecemeal, often dependent on international grants like the \$55,510 provided by the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation in 2017, a fraction of what European Holocaust sites receive annually.³⁶

Similarly, memorial sites across Rwanda face immense difficulties preserving material evidence of the 1994 genocide. According to Randall Mason, who has worked with Rwanda's National Commission for The Fight Against Genocide, “Deterioration of buildings, sites, and

³⁵ U.S. Mission Cambodia, “Signing Ceremony on Conservation of Ethnographic Objects at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,” *U.S. Embassy in Cambodia*, December 8, 2017, accessed May 12, 2025 <https://kh.usembassy.gov/signing-ceremony-conservation-ethnographic-objects-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum/>.

³⁶ “Conservation of 20th-Century Ethnographic Objects at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum,” Culture in Crisis, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://cultureincrisis.org/projects/conservation-of-20th-century-ethnographic-objects-at-tuol-sleng-genocide-museum>.

artifacts threaten the ability of Rwandans to mourn, commemorate and interpret the deeply meaningful and troubling events surrounding the 1994 genocide.” At the Nyamata Memorial in Rwanda, collections of victims' clothing and other artifacts are deteriorating rapidly, with conservation challenges growing “with urgency each passing year” due to insufficient resources and facilities.³⁷

These disparities reflect broader global inequities in memory resources. Holocaust sites in Europe and North America have generally received far greater financial support than memorials to colonial violence, indigenous genocide, or more recent atrocities in the Global South.³⁸ The Auschwitz-Birkenau model, with its emphasis on material authenticity and extensive technical intervention, presupposes economic resources that simply do not exist in many contexts. This raises critical questions about whose memories are preserved, whose histories are materially stabilized, and whose suffering is deemed worthy of substantial investment.

Another crucial implication relates to the relationship between commemoration, heritage sites, and the local community. The relationship between Jewish organizations, European states, and local communities established at Auschwitz-Birkenau offers both a model and a warning for other contested sites. The International Auschwitz Council has demonstrated the potential for collaborative governance to mediate competing claims and interests.³⁹ This multi-stakeholder approach has enabled a degree of consensus-building that would have been impossible under more narrowly national or institutional frameworks.

³⁷ Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania, “Rwanda Genocide Memorial Conservation & Training,” accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.design.upenn.edu/work/rwanda-genocide-memorial-conservation-training>.

³⁸ Paul Harvey Williams, *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*, English ed. (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 181, 188.

³⁹ And which have resulted in the formation of the Strategic Plan for Oświęcim, a multiyear plan for the infrastructural updating of the entire Oświęcim area. See for example “Oświęcimski strategiczny program rządowy,” Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.gov.pl/web/mswia/oswiecimski-strategiczny-program-rzadowy-etap-v-2016-2020>.

However, the incorporation of local perspectives at Auschwitz-Birkenau has been uneven. Residents of Oświęcim and surrounding areas have often felt marginalized in decision-making processes, particularly regarding land use restrictions and economic development. Their alienation illustrates the potential costs of prioritizing international memory frameworks over local needs—a tension that manifests at memorial sites worldwide.

Finally, the centrality of authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau reflects specific historical conditions and cultural assumptions that may not translate across contexts. The emphasis on material authenticity aligns with European conservation traditions that privileged physical integrity over other forms of cultural continuity. In contexts where material preservation has not historically been the primary mode of remembrance—where oral tradition, ritual practice, or landscape knowledge carries greater cultural weight, e.g., in the genocide of Native Americans or records of the Transatlantic Slave Trade—different frameworks for understanding the relationship between materiality and memory may be more appropriate.⁴⁰

The global proliferation of memorial museums has sometimes led to the uncritical exportation of Western memorial paradigms to other cultural contexts. The “Auschwitz model” of site-based memorialization, with its emphasis on preserved original structures and artifacts, has been influential far beyond Europe. Yet this model presupposes certain institutional capacities, conservation resources, and cultural frameworks that may not exist in other settings. As memorial practitioners worldwide grapple with how to represent difficult pasts, there is a growing need for approaches that respond to local conditions, values, and commemorative traditions rather than imposing standardized models.

⁴⁰ Stefanie Hunt-Kennedy, “Silence and Violence in the Archive of Slavery,” *English Language Notes* 59, no. 1 (2021): 222–24, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00138282-8815104>; Jamila J. Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Archival Memory,” *Archivaria* 82, no. 1 (2016): 3–26.

As sites of atrocity worldwide navigate the complex intersection of memory politics, conservation challenges, and educational imperatives, the Auschwitz-Birkenau case offers important insights while also highlighting the need for approaches tailored to specific cultural, historical, and material conditions. The challenge for memorial practitioners is not to replicate the Auschwitz-Birkenau model but to engage critically with its implications, adapting its insights to diverse contexts while remaining attentive to local needs, values, and commemorative traditions.

The preservation of sites of atrocity is not merely a technical challenge but a profound ethical and political endeavor. It requires not only material resources and conservation expertise but also careful attention to whose stories are centered, whose suffering is commemorated, and whose futures are served by these memorial practices.

Concluding Reflections: The Ongoing Work of Authenticity

The preservation paradigm at Auschwitz-Birkenau that now appears inevitable was in fact the product of strategic decisions made at key historical junctures. What visitors encounter today as “authentic” is the result of deliberate choices that could have developed along dramatically different trajectories.

The post-1989 decisions about Auschwitz-Birkenau's conservation represented a pivotal realignment of power. Poland's economic collapse coupled with the physical deterioration of the former camp created a vacuum that international actors quickly filled. Ronald S. Lauder's intervention and the subsequent mobilization of international financial support transformed not only the site's material stability but also control over its symbolic representation. This shift reflected pragmatic economic necessities more than ideological transformations.

For European and especially German donors, funding conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau served clear strategic interests. Supporting preservation allowed European countries and institutions to demonstrate historical responsibility while positioning themselves as European partners committed to European unification.⁴¹ Jewish organizations similarly pursued practical objectives, ensuring their historical narrative would be properly represented after decades of marginalization under communism. Both parties leveraged financial support to secure influence over the site's interpretation.

UNESCO's 1979 World Heritage designation formalized Auschwitz-Birkenau's exceptional status while reinforcing a particular preservation approach. The designation privileged material authenticity, understood as a vessel for intangible values, and established conceptual frameworks that would shape conservation practices at PMA-B for decades. At the same time, it limited recognition of other atrocity sites lacking comparable material integrity, institutional continuity, or financial resources. Ultimately, the emphasis placed on material authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau generated an atrocity site commemorative model that remains untenable at many other sites of mass violence.

Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau evolved from improvised interventions into sophisticated institutional practice. The technical protocols, funding mechanisms, and ethical frameworks that emerged did not simply preserve the site—they actively constructed particular understandings of what it represents. Conservation choices reflected pragmatic negotiations between historical documentation, commemorative function, and educational objectives, all embedded in complex political contexts.

⁴¹ As substantially explored by Jeffrey K. Olick in his *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

The funding mechanisms established for Auschwitz-Birkenau, culminating in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation's perpetual preservation fund, demonstrate how financial structures institutionalize specific power relationships. As support became more stable, conservation practice shifted from emergency interventions to systematic protocols that created their own momentum, establishing routines that reinforced particular approaches while marginalizing alternatives. These approaches reflect more broadly a politics of memory that favors the representation of Jewish victimhood, guaranteed through material preservation—an enterprise that can seem neutral and depoliticized at first glance but in fact carries and generates symbolic capital: for Jewish individuals and organizations, as well as for Poland and Israel, among others.

Looking forward, Auschwitz-Birkenau faces the challenge of maintaining institutional relevance as the Holocaust recedes into history. This requires balancing the aesthetic experience of the site with its educational function—creating space for visitors to encounter historical facts while formulating their own responses. This balance serves the strategic interests of the museum and its stakeholders while adapting to changing political contexts.

This analysis reveals a fundamental insight: authenticity at Auschwitz-Birkenau is not an inherent quality but a constructed asset requiring maintenance, negotiation, and strategic deployment. Ultimately, conservation at Auschwitz-Birkenau produces rather than merely preserves meaning. The resources devoted to this work reflect political calculations about which aspects of the past matter and who controls their representation. The transformation of conservation from postwar improvisation to international obligation reveals Auschwitz not just as a symbol of atrocity but as an institution embedded in networks of power, funding, and geopolitical interests.

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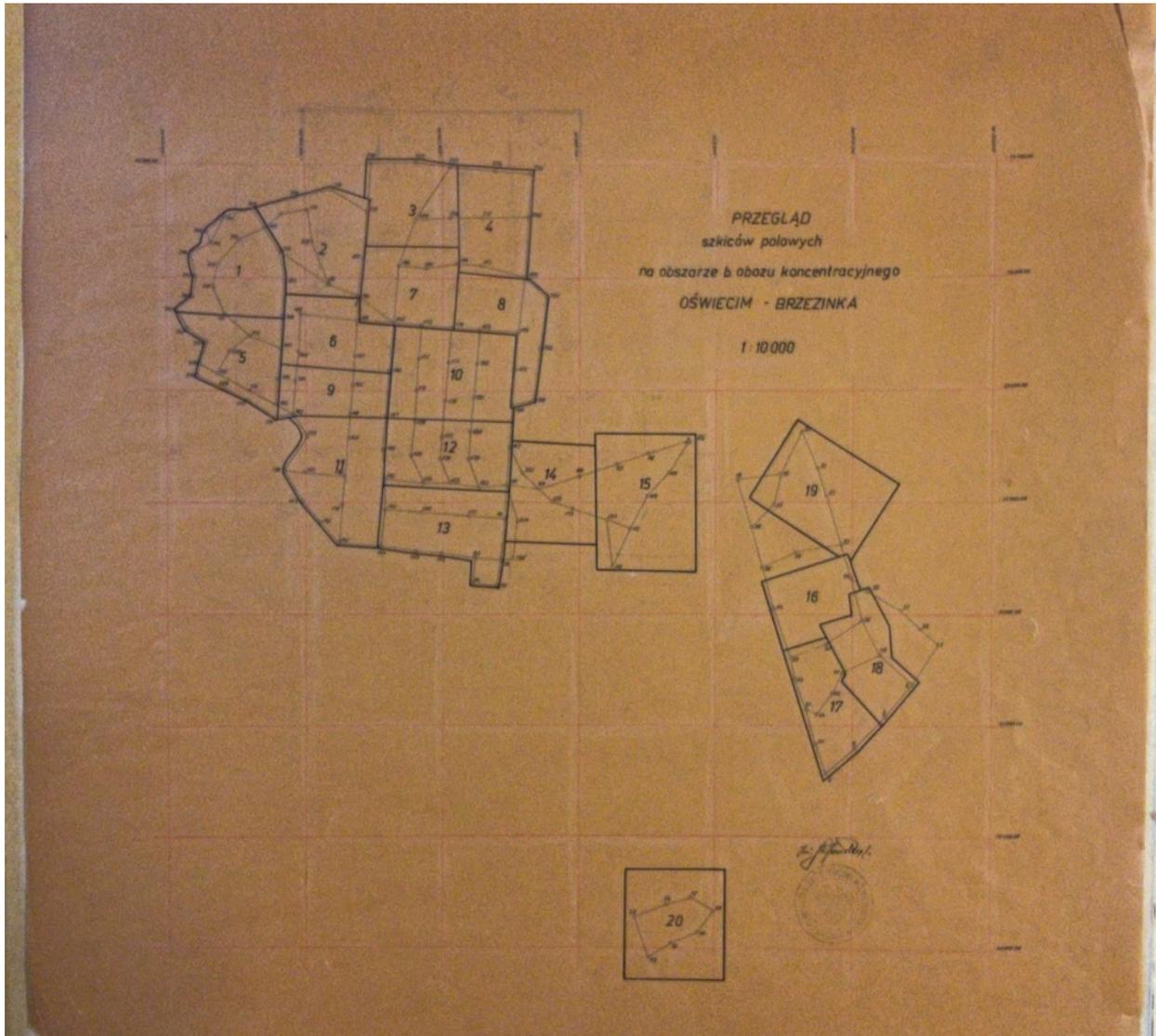
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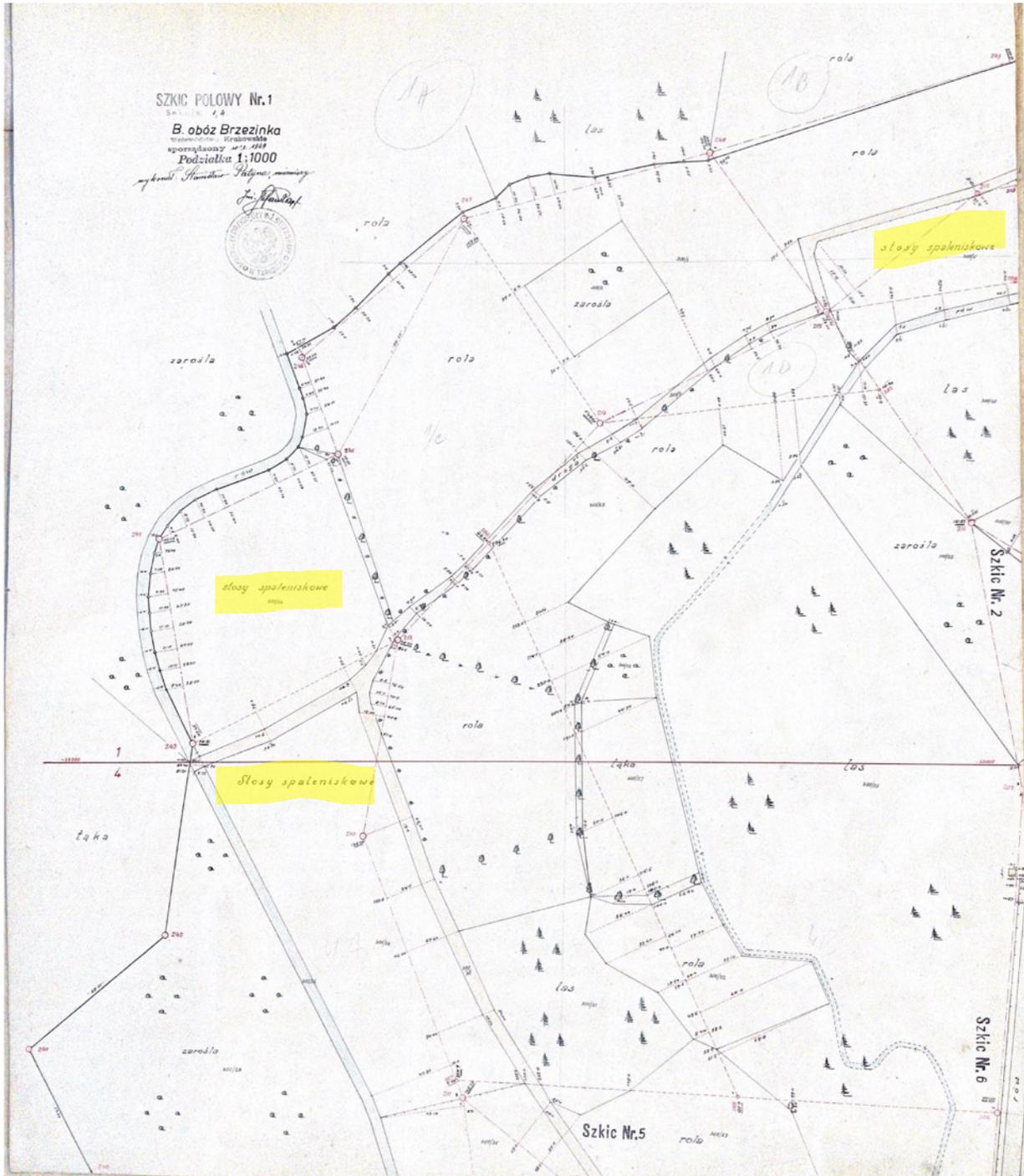
Appendixes for Chapter 2

Maps 8-11: Stefan Rapf's measurements of the incineration pits' sites, 1949-1950.

Map 8: The division of the terrain according to numbers. The areas of the marked pits are 5, 1, and 2.



Map 9: In this sketch, three pits areas are highlighted in yellow.



Map 10: In this sketch, two more pits are highlighted in yellow. The “Little Red House” is highlighted in blue (clearly marked outside the museum terrain), and the mass grave of Soviet POWs in green.

