

## FOREST CEMETERIES – USAGE AND DIRECTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT. EXAMPLE OF CENTRAL POLAND AND EAST GERMANY

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### Abstract

The aim of our research is to determine what changes in cultural and natural values as well as land use are visible in the selected forest cemeteries located in the central region of Poland in Central Europe (especially from Poland). We also look for trends of ecological burials in forests visible strongly in Eastern (East Germany). In our preliminary study we test multiple forest cemeteries regarded to the ecological premises of burial and how they can be preserved and used for future generations. In our research, we selected different Polish forest cemeteries especially in communities, many neglected and abandoned historic cemeteries are material evidence that not only Polish but also German or Dutch communities lived in these areas.

**Keywords:** Central Poland, confessional cemeteries, ecological burial, memorial forests, sacred zone

### Introduction. Research of multiaspects of cemeteries

The main reason for undertaking research on forest cemeteries is the study of urban cemeteries on the example of large cities in Poland (such as Warsaw, Łódź) and Germany (Leipzig). For a long time, we have been interested in people's relationships and their attitude to cemeteries (Haase, Dushkova and Długoński 2018; Długoński 2021; Długoński, Dushkova and Haase, 2022). Nevertheless, an important but also little touched upon in previous research topics are cemeteries and specifically located in forests, i.e. outside cities. More and more often the idea of ecological cemeteries comes to us from neighbouring countries, but nowadays it conflicts quite strongly with the law (Dz.U. 2023 poz. 887) and the attachment of Poles to Christian religion traditions. What is more, especially in Poland, as a homogenous society we can distinguish a completely different idea about cemeteries in forests, e.g. strictly moral ones. These aspects we would like to focus in our article more strongly.

### Material and methods

The research consists of camera and field studies which were then supplemented by a short synthesis and guidelines for further work and recommendations on ecological burials in cemetery forests. In the camera study, we reviewed the literature on cemetery forests and forest cemeteries. We also reviewed the literature on religious cemeteries in order to take a closer look at the specificity of forest cemeteries (Michałowski ed. 1996, Tanaś, 2008 Haase et al. 2020). Information about ecological burials was also important, and websites dedicated to research institutes and funeral companies dealing with ecological burials (Franczak 2020; Pogrzeb w lesie, 2024; UMŁ 2024). Moreover, we conduct a field vision (field research) of selected forest cemeteries located in different places in Central Poland in the Łódzkie, Mazowieckie, Świętokrzyskie voivodeships (Machejek 2019). In our paper we use an observation method for Zeisel (1981) and Niezabitowska (2014), which consisted in inspecting the actual development state of cemeteries. The material for further research was photographic documentation of forest cemeteries carried out in the years 2020-2024.

### Results. Current usage and new ideas of forest cemeteries development.

In Poland we can distinguish 3 types of cemetery forests. The first group are memorial cemeteries commemorating the period of the First and Second World Wars. There are a lot of them, meanwhile in the central region of Poland where we gather front lines so-called little-known Battle of Łódź (Daszyńska 2023). From this period and so the years 1914-1915 (Machejek 2019) it is possible to select several small cemeteries small cemeteries with a symbolic monuments eg. located only in the close vicinity of of the Łódź city, Zgierz, Gąsowice Małe (Łódzkie voivodeship), or Palmiry close to Warsaw city (Mazowieckie voivodeship).

in Central Poland. Also from this period there are many mausoleum cemeteries commemorating these war events meanwhile in the Łódź region. The second group of forest cemeteries in Poland are also cemeteries-monuments commemorating the plane crash, e.g. in Kabaty district in Kabacki forest in Warsaw city. It should be mentioned here that monuments and commemoration of history, especially in Poland, has been very popular since times. The last group of forest cemeteries can be referred to places where it was planned to bury the dead in forest site. This issue is presented by cemeteries forest located eg. in Izabelin / Laski near Warsaw city, (Figure 1).



Fig. 1: Burials in Izabelin / Laski near Warsaw city (Mazowieckie voievodeship). Central Poland. Photo by Hubert Śmetanka, 15.12.2006

The cemetery in Laski is buried, among others, eminent persons such as the Prime Minister of Poland Tadeusz Mazowiecki. The cemeteries have a typical forest character and there are no tombstones and the natural wood and other local material is used in cemetery equipment.

In addition, instead of tombstones, plants that decorate cemeteries are used. Nowadays, this idea is far away for the Polish thinking about cemeteries because to a large extent several granites are used which reach the right size. By this the cemetery area ceases to place any form of green. This is a problem and a challenge for the future. It can be mentined that only the vegetation in the composition is still used on the territory of rural cemeteries in the south of Poland, which largely results from the gardening tradition and the past from the times of partition and attachment of a given ethnic group (e.g. Małopolsanie, Silesian). These trends are also visible in Germany and southern Europe, for example. Czech Republic and Slovakia where the German nations in the past had a great influence on the cultures of these regions. It should be noted that there is also another group of forest cemeteries which over time have become forest forms. These are former religious cemeteries of ethnic groups living in the area of present-day Central Poland. The Evangelical-Augsburg cemeteries together with characteristic vegetation still preserved from interwar times e.g. Maples (*Acer sp.*), linden (*Tilia sp.*), ivy (*Hedera helix*) are a bit wild and unfortunately falling into ruin due to lack of funds and erroneous management of de facto monuments which are not necessarily but often listed on the list of monuments and heritage. This is undoubtedly the last moment to take care of these places in the future showing the history more readable for future generations. However, Polish law does not provide for special conservation of these sites. On the contrary, it is proposed that historic sites be dismantled, especially if their physical condition is critical or if they threaten the safety of users. It is therefore necessary to motivate different social groups to prevent the loss of this valuable cultural heritage in the future. A good example is the forest cemetery area of a former Dutch settlement near Kielce city (Świętokrzyskie Voievodeship)- Holendry located near Chmielnik (Figure 2). In 2013, a group of interested volunteers decided to find the location of the old cemetery where were buried the indigenous Dutch Mennonites who came to Poland before the 1st World War. The place was found on the basis of information of locals and their families in the nearby forest on a hill where, according to the literature of the subject, it fits into the information about the location of many evangelical cemeteries located, for example, in the

territory of East Prussia (Ogrody Pamięci, 2024). Nowadays the place is restored although after the old buried found many elements it however put on this hill a large cross and a keel of stones together with an information board about the whole event and place. There are certainly more such places in Poland, but their memory is no longer salvaged. Therefore, it may be necessary to save just such cemeteries located in forest scenery.

In eastern Germany we can observe burials in forests under trees with a minimum amount of information. Sometimes it is a sign on a tree with a name or a separate zone where there are only symbolic stones. These burials are more and more often chosen form of burial. In Poland, the stage of development and storage in biodegradable urns is only at the stage of ideas. However we observe the first such idea in Łódź, where it is planned to build such a place in the Szczecińska municipal cemetery in forested part. It is to be a designated area of about a few hectares on the territory of the current cemetery surrounded by old trees. The local authorities wants the name of this place to be a memory place so-called the Forest of Remembrance (UMŁ, 2024). In this case, it is estimated that the first burials could take place in June 2024, but currently it is still impossible due to Polish law restrictions.



Fig. 2: Location of forest cemetery hill in Holendry village near Kielce city (Świętokrzyskie voievdeship). Central-Eastern Poland. Photo by Andrzej Długowski. 7.04.2024

#### **Discussion. Forest cemeteries – traditional sacred zones or ecological burials sides**

In Poland forest cemeteries are still considered sacred. However, modern cemeteries resemble concrete squares rather than green areas (as originally planned) due to the fashion for erecting a granite monument even after the period of the PRL (1989 - present). The managers of historical cemeteries are more and more often decide to cut down historic trees and placed in their place other graves (formal barrier, impossibility of widening the boundaries of the cemetery, e.g. within the city or village). Moreover, Poles, as ardent Catholics, especially in All Saints, will find it difficult to break with the tradition of buying chrysanthemums and lanterns. For this, a generational and systemic change is needed. Thus, in this way cemetery forests idea will be adopted also in Poland. Given Poles' attachment to tradition and reluctance to cremate, and traditional form of burial may become popular only in a few decades. Besides, at the moment Polish law does not allow introduction of such activities (Dz.U. 2023 poz. 887). However, the first ideas for a memorial forest were created, for example, in Łódź city (Central Poland) instead of the traditional burial in the open area of the communal cemetery, is possible to bury the ashes of peoples loved ones among the trees. This trend known and common also in USA, Canda or Western Europe like Germany or Switzerland might be a premise to introduce sch kind of burial also in Poland.

## Conclusion. The developmntal premises of forest cemeteries

It is worth noting that forest cemeteries are currently the least recognized group of green areas, which is poorly characterized in terms of spatial management and landscape architecture field as well as ecological purposes of development. In order for this issue it is worth noting to returning to the idea of memorial green areas or museum parks with the left sepulcher architecture and valuable historic vegetation of these places testifying to the history of these areas, which may become newly available not only for the needs of passive recreation but also for thanatourism, especially for the needs of visitors looking for their old relatives or recreating family genealogy. In turn, fashionable ecological burial sites designated cemeteries can be a challenge for local authorities to cope with the lack of burial space. Such a place may be surrounded by a graveyard who may be more anonymous in accordance with nature, which corresponds to modern trends in ecology.

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## Souhrn

V Polsku jsou lesní hřbitovy pamětními místy a parky připomínajícími historii (např. období první nebo druhé světové války), stejně jako staré konfesní hřbitovy dané komunity viditelné ve středních oblastech Polska. Je jich hodně, zejména ve středním Polsku, kde se nacházela frontová linie tzv. Operacja łódzka/ Bitwa łódzka (1914-1915). Z hlediska počtu se jedná o hřbitovy německé, evangelické nebo sovětské a židovské. Některé z nich, například v Holendrech u Kielců (Świętokrzyskie vojvodství), získaly rekultivačním procesem novou funkci,



nově se pohřbívá například v památném lese v Lodži (Łódzkie vojvodství). Přestože jsou kulturním dědictvím, zůstávají kvůli nedostatku finančních prostředků nebo špatnému hospodaření do značné míry znehodnoceny. Existuje několik novodobých lesních hřbitovů (např. Laski, Izabelin), kde je forma pohřbívání v souladu s přírodou (hrob z prken, kříž z větví, květiny v zemi) jako les. Ve východním Německu převažují lesní hřbitovy jako nová forma pohřbívání spíše anonymní a biologicky rozložitelné urny se skromnou symbolikou. Těžko říci, zda se nové ekologické využití lesních hřbitovů prosadí také v Polsku. Nicméně první myšlenky smířčího parku vznikly například ve městě Lodž (střední Polsko). Místo tradičního pohřbívání na volné ploše obecního hřbitova je možné popel blízkých pohřbít kolem stromů.

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