

A memorial trip to Warsaw and Łódź in November 2021

- by Marianne Bühler, Wittlich

In October 1941, more than 500 people of Jewish faith were deported from Luxembourg and the Trier region to the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. That was the reason for my trip to Poland, which was inspired by the German and Luxembourg side and organized by "MemoShoah" in Luxembourg.

Twenty-three people from Luxembourg and the Trier/Wittlich area took part; it was a mixed age group.

Eighty years ago and under completely different conditions, the train had travelled from Luxembourg to Litzmannstadt. It was one of the first deportations to the East from the West of Europe; many would follow. On this train were also over seventy people , who were either born in the district of Bernkastel-Wittlich or lived there in 1941. Eleven people came from Wittlich itself. Many also came from the Moselle between Bernkastel-Kues and Neumagen and from the Hunsrück. Only one, Josef Ermann from Veldenz, came back.

WARSAW

Warsaw is booming. This was the first impression on the way to the city and the surroundings of the hotel.

In the background, behind a high-rise building by Libeskind, you can see the Palace of Culture, which was built in the 1950s by order of Joseph Stalin and is (still) the tallest building in Poland.



(Memorial in Radegast/ Łódź)

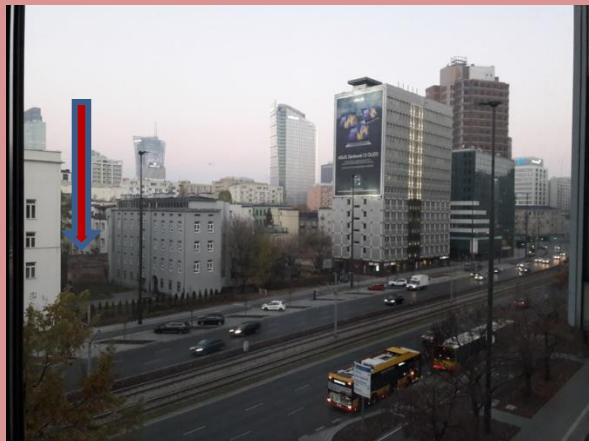
The trip had two main focuses, Warsaw and Łódź, which had been renamed "Litzmannstadt" in the time of National Socialism. In both cities we tried to find traces of the past and to investigate the fate of the deportees. But the focus was, also emotionally, the visit to Łódź and especially to Kulmhof.

The largest ghetto established by the Germans during the National Socialist era after the occupation of Poland in September was the one in Warsaw. From autumn 1940, a district in the middle of the city, where many Jews had already lived, was separated as a "Jewish residential district" and surrounded by a wall. All Jews of the city and the region, but also many from other parts of Europe, were brought there. Warsaw had the largest Jewish community in Europe before this war. In total, about 500,000 people were brought to the ghetto. There they lived in indescribable conditions, cramped, without sufficient food intake, with rapidly spreading diseases. From the summer of 1942, the ghetto was "dissolved", in which transports repeatedly drove to the murder sites, from Warsaw especially to Treblinka.

The time of National Socialism and thus of the ghetto can hardly be found in original places in Warsaw. This is because the Germans completely destroyed the ghetto after the 1943 uprising, as well as the city as a whole. In the old photo you can see the extent of the destruction.



(Von Zbyszko Siemaszko, photographer of Central Photographic Agency (CAF) in Warsaw - The book: "Warszawa 1945-1970"; Publisher: Wydawnictwo Sport i Turystyka, Warszawa, 1970, page 76-77, Gemeinfrei, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2970476>)



From my hotel window I could see a small piece of the former ghetto wall, which was preserved and which we then visited from the other side.

It is one of the few remaining places from the ghetto period and has therefore become a memorial site, which has been maintained and preserved by the private sector for a long time.



Two stones were removed from the wall, which are now at Yad Vashem in Israel and the Holocaust Museum in Washington. In the immediate vicinity there is also the building of the former hospital, which was used as a children's hospital after the war. Today's PIS government wants to turn it into a museum of the ghetto, which initially seems like a good idea (although, there is already the big museum, see below), but is also associated with political intentions. This is an attempt to interpret the role of the Poles vis-à-vis the Jews exclusively positively.

Also not far away is a monument commemorating a bridge that crossed a large road that was not part of the ghetto.



It became very clear to me at this point how big the difference was between a ghetto and a concentration camp. In the ghetto, people were still in their city, but cut off from normal life. The tour guide told us that some people only walked over the bridge to see something of the normal life in the city. Was that easier or even more painful? (picture left side: Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-270-0298-14 / Amthor / CC-BY-SA 3.0, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=5410657>)

Of course, the structures of a ghetto were also completely different. The Jewish self-government in the ghettos was very ambivalent, but ultimately a very perfidious strategy, because in this way the Germans were able to stay out of the massive problems of everyday life. Even worse, the responsibility for those who had to organize deportations to the murder sites was deputed to the "Jewish elder" and his staff. Adam Czerniaków, the "Jewish elder" in Warsaw, could not stand this tension. In the summer of 1942, when he was supposed to assemble a daily transport of about 7,000 people to the murder sites, he ended his life.

A single synagogue from the pre-war period survived the horror, was renovated and is now home to the Jewish community in Warsaw: the Nozyk Synagogue. It had been built in 1902, was badly damaged, but could be rebuilt. As early as 1945, the first divine service after the war took place there.





About 15,000 Jews live in Poland today, most of them in Warsaw. Before World War II, there were 3.5 million Jews in Poland, 90% of whom were murdered under National Socialism.

Our path in the footsteps of the ghetto was lined with monuments of various kinds, marking the original sites that no longer exist. Very impressively designed is the so-called "Umschlagplatz" (transportation point), where the Jewish people were collected from the ghetto to be transported to death. Since it is not possible to put all the names on one wall with this large number of murdered, it has been agreed on the most common first names, which can now be read there in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and English.



Another famous monument commemorates the Jewish uprising in the ghetto in the spring of 1943. Among other things, it has become very well-known through the kneeling of the then Federal Chancellor Willi Brandt in 1970, which is also commemorated by a small plaque. The reverse of the monument, which deals with the deportation from the ghetto, is reminiscent of biblical scenes. Only a few have survived the ghetto in Warsaw and its dissolution.

In this context, I am concerned with the story of a young woman: Celina Fein, born in Warsaw, WHO wrote down her memories in 1990. Like her entire family, she had been taken to the ghetto, but after several attempts managed to escape. Through relationships, disguised as a Polish forced labourer and given a different name, she came to work in Wittlich and survived the war and persecution here. I would like to work through their fate for the local public.



On the square of the monument there is now the large museum "Polin", which commemorates the entire history of the Jews in Poland. It is very interesting both architecturally and in terms of its design. However, our time frame was limited. If you want, you can get an idea of it on the Internet. The many multimedia elements through image, music and lighting effects are difficult to capture with the camera. Very worth seeing!

A special experience for me, as well as later in Łódź, was the visit to the Jewish cemetery. Both are among the largest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. One could write one's own report on the abundance of gravestone ornamentation. Here are just a few impressions:





There are monuments in various places in the city to Janusz Korczak, the famous educator, who ultimately accompanied the children of his orphanage to their deaths. There is also a very impressive one in the cemetery:



You can see that it is often visited.

A thought-provoking evening was then held in Warsaw at the Luxembourg Embassy. Apart from the fact that I was invited to an embassy for the first time, the food and drinks were excellent and the reception was very friendly and familiar, especially being together with the guest of honour was an impressive experience. Marian Turski, now 95 years old, was first in the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, then in Auschwitz. In the end, he had to go on a death march to Buchenwald and then on to Theresienstadt, where he was liberated. After the war he went to Warsaw and worked as a journalist. He has been very honoured internationally and is still active. Among other things, he is on the board of the museum "Polin" in Warsaw.



(Foto: Internet)

He was also one of the protagonists in the film "The Living Witnesses", which tells the story of the Luxembourg Jew Claude Marx and three young people from Luxembourg on a trip to Poland (very rewarding to find on the Internet!). The film was commissioned by "MemoShoah" from Luxembourg, who also organized our trip. We watched the film in the embassy and then had a conversation with Turski. His motto:

"The eleventh commandment is: Don't be indifferent!"

Łódź

On the way to Łódź, which led us not only over the highway, the country is very flat; only shortly before the city it gets a bit hillier. Driving along the country roads, a sea of flowers of white and yellow chrysanthemums and candles could be seen everywhere in the Catholic cemeteries. It was shortly after All Saints' Day, which is still a very important holiday in Poland, where you go to the cemeteries and visit the family, even from afar. In the villages and small towns you can see many new houses, but also some old and in need of renovation .



The old industrial town of Łódź welcomed us with rain, but also a conciliatory rainbow. Łódź, about 130 km southwest of Warsaw, had its heyday since the 19th century. Above all, the textile industry settled there, and with this industry many Germans and Jews came to the city. In 1897, 314,000 people lived in Łódź, 40% of whom were Germans. Business was particularly successful when it was linked to the market in the East, i.e. under Russian rule. At that time, Łódź was also called the "Manchester of the East". During World War II, Łódź was the second largest city in Poland and also had the second largest Jewish community. At the moment, this is no longer the case, but efforts are being made to give the city a new image, for example through the largest shopping and experience centre in Poland, "Manufaktura". In this complex was also our hotel. The whole thing is housed on the site of the former textile factory of Israel Poznanski, the city's greatest Jewish industrialist, whose huge palace is now the city's museum. In the Jewish cemetery, for which Poznanski provided the site, his monumental grave is still located today – we visited it.



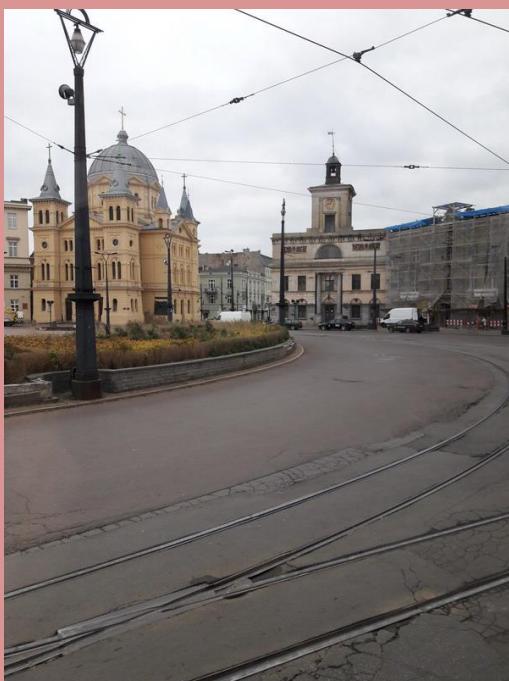
In Łódź, too, only one synagogue has survived from the pre-war period: the Reicher Synagogue. It remained standing mainly because the ownership was unclear and it is also located in a backyard. Unfortunately, its condition cannot be compared with that of the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw. Partly because of still unclear ownership, but also because the Jewish community in Łódź is so small, that it does not really need this building. It is very neglected from the outside and inside. There was probably once an initiative of the Lauder Foundation from the USA, which is committed to Jewish life in Poland, but unfortunately it probably remained only with some painting work. For a while it was used again by the community, but at the moment only sporadically. Disappointing because it is an interesting building that was built at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century.



The small Jewish community now has its centre with a prayer room, day care centre, a small hostel and a hall for catering elsewhere. There we were allowed to enjoy a kosher dinner.



During a short tour through the city, we were able to discover some of the old backyards, which in the early years not only served the textile workers for living, but were also production facilities. This was an intermediate phase between working from home and industrial production. One backyard was totally mirrored in an artist project – unfortunately the sun was missing to be able to enjoy it completely.



The Church of the Holy Spirit and the State Archives, where a large part of the documents from the ghetto are kept.

Already on 8 September 1939 Łódź was occupied by the German Wehrmacht. At the end of 1939, the city, which was located in the district later called "Warthegau" in Western Poland, was annexed by the German Reich like this entire district. The Germans acted similarly quickly with regard to the Jewish population. The old town (Stare Miasto) and the two districts of Bałuty and Marysin were designated as the "living quarters of the Jews". From February 1940 the Jews had to move there, on April 30, 1940, the ghetto was sealed off.



Even before that, as in Warsaw, a large part of the Jews lived in the area designated for the ghetto. There was no sewerage there; the whole thing was one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city. One part consisted of wooden houses that no longer exist today. But unlike Warsaw, there were also free spaces: Green areas where you could grow something and areas on the edge of the ghetto where you could send f.e. children to relax. But one must not be under any illusions: the ghetto was completely overpopulated, the living conditions here were catastrophic. Here, too, as in Warsaw, there were thoroughfares that had to be crossed by bridges.

"Our only way is work!" was the motto of the "Jewish elder" of the ghetto "Litzmannstadt", as Łódź was renamed after Germanization. Chaim Rumkowski, like the other Jewish elders, always sat between the chairs, was initially appreciated by the ghetto inhabitants, but was then seen more and more sceptically. In 1944 he and his family were murdered in Auschwitz. In keeping with the tradition of the city, the ghetto became a production site for the textile industry. The German Wehrmacht, but also other large German companies such as Neckermann, had their products manufactured there. In accordance with this maxim, the elderly, the sick and the children were singled out and systematically deported from 1942 onwards, especially to Kulmhof.

As mentioned at the beginning, more than 500 Jewish people from Luxembourg and the Moselle-Eifel region were also deported to the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. They arrived there in October 1941. A total of about 20,000 people from the territory of the Reich came here, in addition to the 160,000 Polish Jews already living here. This caused friction and conflict, but in the end they almost all shared the same fate: at Radegast station they were "resettled", i.e. taken to the murder sites and killed.

With a lot of time you could have found some homes of the deportees, but I was not able to do so due to our schedule and the number of possible addresses.

But a look at still existing houses from the ghetto period or at a model of the ghetto can give a small impression.

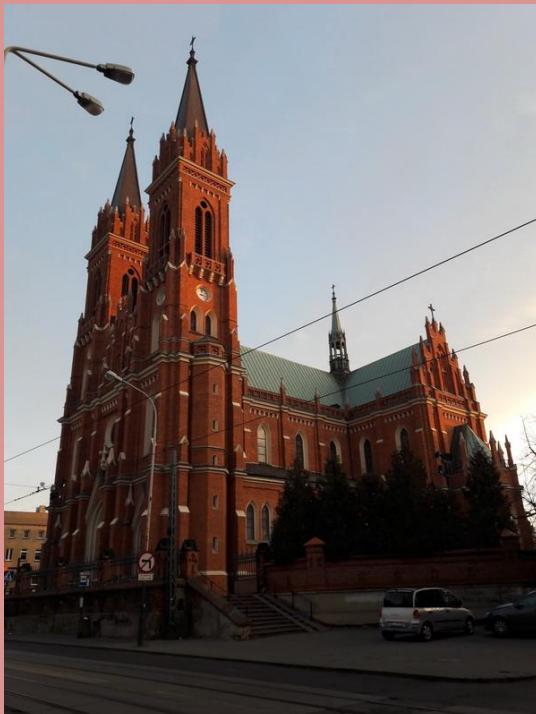


Model of the ghetto. In the middle you can see the market, a central point in the ghetto.



In this building you had to register on arrival; it was also registry office for weddings and other important occasions. But it was also the place where the chronicle of the ghetto was written with the approval of the "Jewish elder", but secret from the Germans; today a very valuable source for the history of the ghetto.

Across the street is St. Mary's Church. In the ghetto period, it was a collecting point for the clothes and belongings of the people murdered in Kulmhof. The things were sorted, and sometimes one found clues to relatives or acquaintances and could imagine the fate of the former owners.

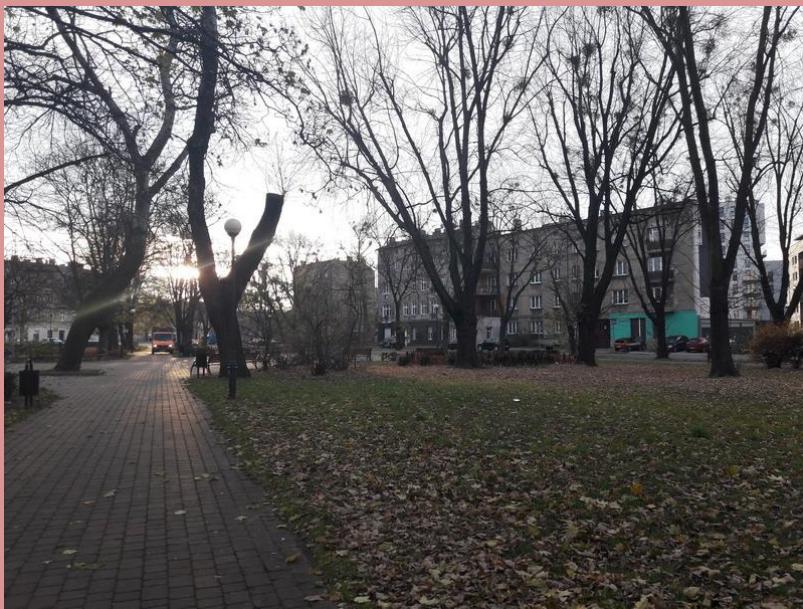


A manhole cover in front of the church also dates back to the ghetto period.



Behind the church: the building of the "Kripo" of the ghetto, officially since 1942 "Kriminalkommissariat Getto". The building was the confiscated rectory of the parish. It was used to investigate and punish the "crimes" within the ghetto like smuggling, disobedience etc. Of course, this facility was a horror for all the ghetto inhabitants.





Today this place seems peaceful and on early Sunday morning still very deserted. In the ghetto times it was the place for the public executions that were supposed to have a deterrent effect.



In this rather inconspicuous building you could sell jewellery and other valuables to get money for survival.

Conclusion: From the spatial extent and from some buildings you can get an idea of the real life there with overcrowding, hunger, stench, violence, fear and death. How did the "settled" feel and find their way around? For example the three older sisters from Thalfang, who had not left the Hunsrück all their lives? Or the primary school children from Brauneberg on the Moselle? Or Hugo Friedmann and his wife, who had worked as a Jewish teacher on the Moselle for many years and most recently lived in Luxembourg? Or the Bermann family, who had not managed to leave the country? Or Jakob Ermann and his wife, who had moved to Trier but could not leave Germany?

Or... or....

Only one came back from the Moselle, Josef Ermann from Veldenz, a young man. The others either died in the ghetto or were "ausgesiedelt (relocated)". Some were already dead after half a year. Some were sent to their deaths in Kulmhof in May 1942. The young Lieselotte Mendel from Wittlich, like her parents, remained in the ghetto for almost three years until they too were murdered in Kulmhof in July 1944. Their work activities in the ghetto are given as "crocheter", "knocker" and "air raid warden", perhaps they were protected by the work for a while.

There is a big difference between the Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw and Łódź as far as the ghetto period is concerned: in Łódź they managed that all those who died in the ghetto get their own grave site. Initially, these could still be provided with a border; later they were buried in a large field.



Over forty thousand people died in the ghetto. They were executed or died of brutal violence.

However, many also died of hunger, disease or the consequences of the rigorous exploitation of their labour.



On the cemetery wall there are old pits that were excavated a long time ago. They were intended for the last inhabitants of the ghetto. After they had completed their clean-up work there, they were to be executed directly in front of the pits. Fortunately, the Soviet army was faster, and the pits remained empty...

On the cemetery grounds in Łódź there is still the old cemetery hall, an old hearse and the facility for washing the dead.



On the cemetery wall there are many commemorative plaques of the Jews deported from the West, including one for the people who came from Luxembourg.

Radegast

The hub for the ghetto was Radegast station, located north of the ghetto. Here the goods for the supply were delivered, here the people from Western Europe arrived and then went on foot to the ghetto. From here, however, the transports to Kulmhof and other concentration camps or murder

sites also departed. Some inhabitants of the ghetto were also transferred to work somewhere on the highway or elsewhere in a sub camp. Today Radegast is a memorial site, which was unfortunately closed during our visit, but also offers a lot of information in its outdoor areas.



Symbolic gravestones mark the destinations of the deportations to death from the Litzmannstadt Ghetto and its Radegast station.

Chelmno nad Nerem – „Kulmhof am Ner“

About 80 km northwest of Łódź lies Chelmno nad Nerem, a small town on the Ner River and near to a railway line. There was an old, empty manor house there during the war. This place seemed suitable to the National Socialists to murder thousands of people here and to "dispose of" them in the nearby forest. Before the murders began, the town was evacuated, the church became a storage place for the clothes and luggage they had brought with them, because even for this last journey, people had still been given the illusion of being "resettled" for work. Many succumbed to this hope, because everything seemed better than staying in the ghetto any longer. From December 1941 to March 1943, the murder site was in operation. A total of about 170,000 Jews, Sinti and Roma were murdered here by discharging gas into converted trucks. The manor house was blown up in 1943, but in the rather redesigned memorial the floor plan is preserved. In the summer of 1944, many people were killed again in the "forest camp", where only the bodies had previously been brought. Many "Eingesiedelte" (residents) from the West were deported and murdered there in May 1942, including Mrs. Hirsch from Neumagen-Dhron with her disabled twenty-one-year-old daughter, or Sigmund Frank from Osann-Monzel, who had lived with his family in Trier. A massive memorial stone in the entrance area commemorates them all.



The former mansion was the last illusion before the assassination. There are photos of the commander standing on the balcony and receiving the people in doctor's coats – it could hardly be more perfidious. Those destined for death had to undress in the basement (to "shower"!) and were then driven through a narrow corridor to a back exit of the building. There they had to get into a truck standing on standby. This was sealed, exhaust gas and gas were introduced, and in a short time the people were dead. It is hard to comprehend how thousands of people could be killed in this way. They were then taken to the "Waldlager (forest camp)", buried there in mass graves or later burned. After the manor house was blown up in 1943, Jews from the Litzmannstadt ghetto were killed directly in the forest. The killing by gas in trucks had previously been used in the T4 actions (murder of disabled people). In Auschwitz-Birkenau and elsewhere it was "perfected" by the construction of gas chambers.

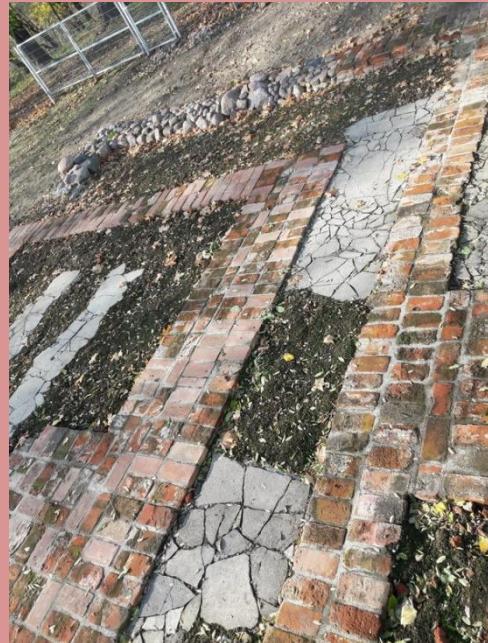
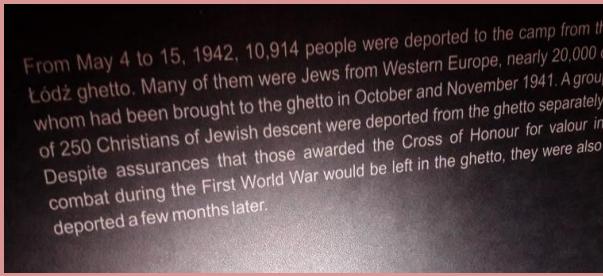


Our group in the entrance area of the Memorial in Chelmno.



In the background is the fence in front of the site of the former manor house.

The last path before death led people through a narrow corridor to the back exit, where the truck was waiting for them. The original pavement has been preserved.



The "Waldlager" is a huge cemetery with mass graves where you fall silent. There, Jewish communities from the surrounding area, as well as many others, tried to remember the deportees, murdered in their own way.



Commemorative plaques can be placed on a specially built wall. We hope that this will also be the case for the deportees from the Moselle-Eifel-Hunsrück region in the foreseeable future.



With the photo of a monument in the forest camp in "Kulmhof" I would like to end this report. The hope remains that such an industrially organized mass murder will no longer take place in the future. And that a peaceful and respectful coexistence of all people does not always remain just a vision, but becomes more and more reality.

Marianne Bühler, January 2022 (thanks for help with the translation to Pauline, Werner and the Internet!)