

## MEMORIAL GARDENS IN THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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### The specificity of the shaping of burial complexes

Cemeteries are an integral part man-shaped cultural landscape. Amongst the numerous traces of Poland's past, a special place is occupied by memorial parks, historic cemeteries, graves and tombstones. They are part of the country's culture and constitute an important source of information for historians, sometimes being the only remaining traces of a bygone era. In the Polish landscape Catholic cemeteries prevail, but there are also cemeteries of other faiths. Even if only their remnants have survived, they highlight the diversity of Polish culture, which was inspired by different ideologies, traditions and customs.<sup>1</sup> Cemeteries in Poland fall into several basic groups: burial grounds, war cemeteries, symbolic cemeteries, pre-historic grave fields, and specific-purpose cemeteries (for the burial of animals).<sup>2</sup> They reflect the overall trends of a given epoch while preserving their local features and character. Their very existence after all those years provides invaluable testimony for the identity of the cultural landscape, but they also play an important role in the shaping of the national consciousness.

### Churchyards

Churchyards were used as the primary burial places for Christians until the end of the eighteenth century. They were located in the immediate vicinity of the church so that the dead could experience the blissful effect of the sanctity emanating from the House of God. The churchyard was perceived as an extension of the church, and the presence of the graves was a reminder of the transience of this world and of the real purpose of human existence. Known as "gethsemanes", they were relatively small, almost always too small, and the densely

placed graves were not permanent. Periodically, the graves would be re-dug to make room for the next burials. The churchyards were used for burying the poor and low-status members of the community. For distinguished citizens, the church (the porch, vaults, nave floor, or sepulchral chapels) became their final resting place. Initially, the privilege of being buried in the church was intended for the dignitaries of the church and for church founders and donors, but it was soon extended to prominent and honoured laymen. The tombs were given ever more attractive forms, and on the stone slabs words commemorating the deceased were engraved. The tombstone inscriptions were to protect them from oblivion. The desire to preserve one's name for posterity was the reason why, starting from the sixteenth century, it became common practice to prepare one's burial place while still alive.

The requirement to bury the dead in the church or in its yard, i.e. on consecrated ground, was emphasised by the Council of 1059, and was reaffirmed by the Synod of Bishops of the first half of the eighteenth century and later ones. However, not everyone obeyed the recommendations of the Church and burials continued in unconsecrated ground, not approved by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Initially, for fire safety reasons, trees were planted along the fence around the churchyard. This later became a widespread tradition, as evidenced by the usually well preserved old trees around many churches. Trees accompanying the churchyards became a characteristic feature of man-shaped landscape and its hallmark, alongside a church tower and castle buildings.

Starting from the mid-eighteenth century, as part of the general public hygiene policy launched in Europe, new cemeteries were located outside towns. The reason for this were the rising numbers of deaths, a natural consequence of the rapidly growing town populations. Churchyards became over-

<sup>1</sup> E. Szerszeń, *Rola cmentarzy w kulturze narodu*, [in:] *Ochrona cmentarzy zabytkowych*, Studia i materiały, Ośrodek Ochrony Zabytkowego Krajobrazu, Warszawa 1994, pp. 13, 17.

<sup>2</sup> L. Majdecki, *Ochrona i kształtowanie cmentarzy*, a paper delivered in Szczecin on 1st July, 1997.

crowded, leaving no room for new graves. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the overcrowded graveyards in the cities were the source of odour so acute that in France Louis XVI issued an edict in 1776 ordering the transfer of the burdensome burial grounds out of the cities. This became a model procedure for other European countries, including Poland. Thus separate cemeteries were established outside the built-up areas. This was a long-lasting process enforced by the law, and in the initial phase there was a lack of social acceptance for burial sites not accompanied by a church.

### Detached cemeteries

The newly established cemeteries localized outside the cities and away from villages in rural areas, were initially founded on plots in the shape of simple geometric figures, most often of an elongated rectangle if the local conditions allowed. Each cemetery were surrounded by a fence, which apart from the practical function also had a symbolic significance. On the one hand, it regulated access to its grounds by forcing the users to enter through the main gate and side doors, and on the other hand it marked off the area of the *sacrum*. The fence was the border between two worlds: the sacred and the profane. The symbolism of the gate is similar to that of the fence, as it also marks the boundary between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Crossing it signified a transition from death to life eternal. On the gates, symbols were often placed indicating the purpose of the place. Rural cemeteries were fenced off using the locally available materials. Initially, they were surrounded with earth banks or walls of field stones. Brick walls or wooden pales were erected. The practical function of the fencing was to bar entry to predatory animals. It is worth noting that the gates of rural cemeteries were left open, but still animals were not able to enter thanks to a clever solution. A pit was dug in front of the gate, and it was covered with a wooden lattice masked with vegetation. The grid was easy to cross for humans, but animals' feet were trapped in the holes in the lattice thus preventing them from crossing the border of the cemetery. Along the fence, on the inside,

trees were planted. Attractive-looking species were chosen, not devoid of symbolic significance.<sup>3</sup> In the open rural landscape, a cemetery presented itself as an impressive group of trees, hiding its real purpose.

The inner space of the cemeteries was organised according to one of a few different patterns:

- based on a regular rectangular arrangement of 4 rectangles delimited by two intersecting tree-lined lanes forming a cross,
- based on a regular rectangular arrangement without the crossing lanes, with trees along the fence
- based on a single- or multiple-axis symmetrical arrangement,
- irregular non-symmetrical, a free arrangement.

The most common solution, however, was a rectangular plan with its internal division designated by a system of intersecting roads. Even though the entire area of the cemetery had been consecrated, its central part at the intersection of the principal lanes, often highlighted by the presence of a chapel, a big cross, or a holy figure, was believed by the rural population to possess a greater concentration of holiness. This part was called “Heaven” and was earmarked for the burial of the most important and the most deserving people. Thus the idea of equality in the face of death obviously remained a merely theoretical notion.

The places close to the fence, and in the left-hand corner of the cemetery, were called “Hell” and were thought suitable for unbaptized children, suicides, and those who had died a violent death. These places were treated as unconsecrated ground.<sup>4</sup> In some country cemeteries special sections were set aside for burying baptized children. Most often they were located in a corner of the cemetery other than the “Hell”. “... in the space of the cemetery, its areas by the fence and in the corners, even though no longer looked upon so negatively today, still have a low standing in the hierarchy of places ...”.<sup>5</sup> The location of graves by the lanes was considered particularly advantageous. The deceased buried along the lanes could more often count on remembrance and a prayer from a passer-by. In addition to the trees on the borders of the cemetery, trees were also planted to emphasise the borders of its inner rectangles, but there were also trees accompanying

<sup>3</sup> K. Gendek, *Cmentarz wiejski jako kulturowy wyznacznik miejscowego krajobrazu historycznego*, SGGW, Warszawa 1998, p. 33.

<sup>4</sup> A. Majdecka-Strzeżek, *Zieleń obiektów sakralnych w Polsce*, [in:] *Ogrody przyświątynne i klasztorne*, Wrocław 2003, pp. 97–98.

<sup>5</sup> K. Gendek, op. cit., p. 34.

individual graves. The cemetery was perceived as a garden filled with greenery, a clear sign of memory of the dead inscribed in the landscape.

A newly formed cemetery was linked with the church by a road with rows of trees planted on either side, which had its extension within the cemetery. This lane was particularly important: Called *the last way of the deceased*, it was a symbol of the passage into afterlife. Thanks to being lined with trees, it stood out in the surrounding countryside, which gave it grandeur and at the same time helped create a special mood.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the change of trends in the shaping of gardens contributed to the change in the arrangement of cemeteries. In addition to the existing cemeteries based on a regular plan there emerged beautifully arranged cemeteries modelled on parks (Fig. 1). In the nineteenth century, natural irregular compositions were valued where the relationship between the deceased and nature was especially accentuated. Being primarily a memorial garden, a cemetery acquired the role of a sacred space and of a private area that was given a public form. A cemetery became a public park and a museum in one, a text produced by contemporary culture that highlighted its connections with the past. Such inspiration led to the formation of such cemeteries as Père-Lachaise in Paris, the Rossa in Vilnius, of the Rakowicki Cemetery in Kraków.<sup>6</sup>

### Vegetation in the burial complexes

An important role is played at cemeteries by the vegetation: it has a symbolic significance, which applies both to the place where the plants appear in the cemetery and to their symbolic sense. Initially, trees were planted in cemeteries as fire protection, but later they became a means of organising the space in accordance with the trends of the given epoch. Already in pre-Christian times trees were considered to be sacred. It was believed that they provided shelter for the souls of the deceased.<sup>7</sup> Especially highly valued were long-lived trees that could reach impressive dimensions, such as oaks and lindens. These trees are closely associated with cemeteries. The *Quercus Robur* oak was looked

upon as a symbol of strength and power, and was associated with immortality. In the Christian tradition the linden (lime tree) was treated as a holy tree. It was attributed with having the significance of the tree of the Last Judgement. *Tilia cordata* trees were planted along the roads leading to the cemetery, while oak trees were often planted along its borders. Also planted along the lanes were such trees as hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*), chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) and ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*). Ashes were attributed with magical properties, and it was believed that if the deceased was buried in a coffin made of its wood, he or she would immediately be granted a peace of mind and the soul would not trouble the living. A tree characteristic of and closely linked with cemeteries all over the country is *Thuja occidentalis*. It was commonly regarded as a symbol of death, grief and mourning. At the same time, as an evergreen, it was regarded as a tree of life. Similarly treated was the yew tree (*Taxus baccata*). Its durable wood was seen as the opposite of the fragility of human life.<sup>8</sup>

In folk culture, it was commonly believed that the presence of “prickly” trees prevented the dead from getting out of the cemetery and visiting the living. That is why black locusts (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and hawthorns (*Crataegus sp.*) were planted along the borders of a cemetery. *Betula pendula* birches were planted by the graves close to the head of the deceased. These trees symbolised compassion and kindness. Due to their silhouettes they were thought to mourn the dead and envelop them with their twigs. *Salix alba Tristis* willows were regarded similarly, but they are encountered a lot less often in cemeteries. It was believed that maples (*Acer platanoides* and *Acer pseudoplatanus*) looked after the souls of both the living and the dead, and beeches (*Fagus silvatica*) provided peace and security.

Great significance at the cemeteries was also attached to shrubs and the low-lying plants forming a dense carpet over the entire area of the cemetery. They had a complementary role and were directly linked with graves. Rose bushes, especially those blossoming in white, were often planted as a symbol of death and transience, but also of love and mystical rebirth. *Viburnum opulus* was planted by

<sup>6</sup> J. Kolbuszewski, *Cmentarze*, Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, Wrocław 1996, p. 62.

<sup>7</sup> D. Forstner, *Świat symboliki chrześcijańskiej*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1990.

<sup>8</sup> A. Majdecka-Strzeżek, op. cit., p. 100.

the graves of girls and young men. Its presence at an old cemetery points from afar to the grave of a young person. Boxwood (*Buxus sempervirens*), often planted in cemeteries, symbolized death, but also perseverance. It had the power of providing protection against evil spirits. Ivies (*Hedera helix*) and dwarf periwinkles (*Vinca minor*) commonly appeared at cemeteries, forming dense green carpets covering the entire area. Anemones (*Anemone nemorosa*), poppies (*Papaver rhoeas*) and marigolds (*Tagetes sp.*) were regarded as the flowers of death.<sup>9</sup>

The above plants were present not only at cemeteries, but also in other garden compositions. Nevertheless, certain species were for many years associated exclusively with cemeteries, so strong was the impact of their symbolism. Among those plants were thujas and marigolds. Nowadays they have lost their former significance and can be found in gardens everywhere, their old, dark symbolic meaning long forgotten.

### **Parks adjacent to country residences as places of commemoration**

The middle of the eighteenth century marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of garden design. In contrast to the trends of geometric arrangements prevailing in the previous centuries, gardens were now modelled on the beauty of untamed nature. The new aesthetics brought previously unknown solutions. Garden programmes came to be filled with references to literature and with symbols of philosophical and poetic ideas, thus expanding the scale of emotions as well as enriching and diversifying the moods they were to evoke.<sup>10</sup> The theme of transience and death was popular at that time, and the introduction into the gardens of any forms related to it answered the demand of the epoch. In landscape gardens of the sentimental kind, numerous monuments with inscriptions were erected, as well as urns and tombs that were not dedicated to commemorating any particular persons. They were often places whose very presence, in accordance with the spirit of the period, was to evoke reflection on life and its trials and transience.

The Romantic style in the Polish art of garden design in the early nineteenth century perpetuated interest in the past, but now it was focused primarily on Polish history. Memories and the sense of transience were presented in the form of obelisks, tombstones, sarcophagi and memorial stones, which were located in the peripheral parts of the gardens and surrounded by specially formed vegetation. To emphasize the effect of melancholy, tree species with intertwining twigs were chosen as well as plants with dark foliage. The mood of solemnity and sadness in the face of portrayals of death was achieved through suitably composed scenery. It was a much appreciated item in a park's programme. To enhance the picturesqueness of those places, architectural additions in the neo-Gothic style were favoured.

In parks adjacent to country residences, causes and events directly linked with the life of the residence owners, as well as people dear to them, were also commemorated. In Mała Wieś near Grójec, a monument was erected that was dedicated to the residence owners' son who had died young (Fig. 2). A chapel was built near the edge of the park, with a viewing platform offering a vista of the church in the village of Belsk, founded by the Walicki family.

An interesting example of a memorial spot in a country residence park is the sculpture of a sleeping lion in the park in Pokój near Opole. It commemorates the former owner of the residence, Prince Eugen von Württemberg. The cast-bronze lion has been in the park since 1863, located in the middle of a small open space surrounded by magnificent rhododendrons (Fig. 3).

Creating places that evoke emotions was discussed by various authors, who also offered guidelines in their publications. Izabela Czartoryska<sup>11</sup> shared her reflections on commemorative sites in landscape gardens, as did M. Boitard<sup>12</sup>, who stressed the importance of site selection, selection of plants (he deemed cypresses particularly appropriate as well as weeping willows with long, sadly drooping branches) and the right choice of architectural elements suitable for the intended effect. He also

<sup>9</sup> G. Richter, *Zieleń na cmentarzach*, [in:] *Cemetery art – sztuka cmentarna – l'art. de cimenterie*. Sympozjum naukowe. Dokumenty, Wydawnictwo Werk, Wrocław 1995.

<sup>10</sup> L. Majdecki, *Historia ogrodów*, PWN, Warszawa 2008, vol. 2, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> I. Czartoryska, *Myśli różne o sposobie zakładania ogrodów*, 1805.

<sup>12</sup> M. Boitard, *L'art. de composer et decorer les jardins*, Paris 1834.

indicated literary heroes worthy of being commemorated in a garden. In his book, Boitard does not limit himself to descriptions but offers practical tips by including 14 sample mausoleums and 6 sample tombstones (Figs. 4, 5).

Following Poland's loss of independence, patriotic themes manifested themselves in Polish country-residence gardens of the nineteenth century. The owners used to commemorate in them outstanding leaders and heroes who had fought for the national cause (Fig. 6). The intention was to acknowledge their merits and at the same time to keep alive the memory of their actions and encourage others to follow their example.<sup>13</sup> In a country which had disappeared from the map of Europe, only in the private space of one's own residence was it possible to express one's commitment and devotion to the motherland. It was a kind of patriotic manifesto. In numerous parks accompanying manor houses and country residences, monuments, plaques with inscriptions, and other symbols appeared whose presence was clearly associated with Polishness.

### Family graveyards

On the estates owned by Protestants, small graveyards were set up in the nineteenth century for the burial of family members. This trend continued until the early twentieth century. Those graveyards were located in parks or in their close proximity on the grounds of the estate. Such family graveyards can be found in the historical regions of Mazuria, Warmia, Pomerania and Silesia. It should be pointed out that landowners would establish a family graveyard regardless of whether or not there existed a local cemetery for members of their faith. They became a characteristic element of the historic landscape of these lands. Unfortunately, most of those graveyards have not survived till modern times, destroyed by the passage of time, lack of maintenance, or acts of vandalism.

Family graveyards were located either in the parks or elsewhere on the property. There are several recurring locations.<sup>14</sup>

1. In the parks adjacent to the residence:

- closely linked with the main building by means of composition and vistas emphasised with rows of trees,
- on the peripheries of the park, without a tree-lined lane leading to it.

2. Elsewhere on the estate:

- outside the park, often on a hill with an extensive vista,
- outside the park, in a secluded spot with no vista links.

The shape of the family graveyards depended on the terrain. Their boundaries were determined by the natural features of the land (such as the backwaters of a river, embankments, or ravines) and natural hills.<sup>15</sup> Their layouts were based on simple geometric figures. They were usually located in elevated places, often on top of hills or on their slopes, which afforded vast vistas and favoured contemplation of the beauty of the surrounding nature.

The family graveyards were surrounded by a fence or a wall. A common solution was to raise earth embankments along their borders, reinforced with stonework and designed to give the illusion of elevation of the whole area. Other solutions included wrought or cast iron fences, or stone and brick columns with see-through wooden or metal spans connecting them, with wickets allowing entry into the graveyard. As a rule, the enclosure was to have a simple unsophisticated form. The shape of the graveyard and its boundaries were highlighted by the planting of trees. Frequently encountered were deciduous species such as oaks, lindens, and hornbeams, less often chestnuts or birches, and conifers such as spruces and thujas.

Apart from the fence, burial chapels were the dominant architectural elements in the graveyards. They were little brick buildings, often echoing the neo-Gothic style. They were positioned in the central part of a usually small graveyard. Such a construction stood alone or was surrounded by graves marked with crosses and tombstones with inscriptions. Whatever its location, a family graveyard was a relatively small enclosed garden space, often shady and isolated from its surroundings, which facilitated peaceful reflection and contemplation. In the case of family graveyards located on hills, they

<sup>13</sup> L. Majdecki, *Historia...*, op. cit., p. 233.

<sup>14</sup> K. Ostrowska, *Cmentarze rodowe w zespołach rezydencjonalnych województwa olsztyńskiego*, SGGW, Warszawa 1997, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> K. Mazurkiewicz-Palacz, *Dawne cmentarze w powiecie słupskim*, Starostwo Powiatowe w Słupsku, Słupsk 2012, p. 9.

offered broad scenic vistas, which inspired contemplation of the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Thus the family graveyards were not only places of commemoration but also attractive scenic overlooks. Of particular interest in this respect is the family graveyard in the palace-and-park complex in Sorkwity near Mrągowo. The complex is located on the Sorkwity Lake and an island close to its shore. The family graveyard is situated high on the island on the edge of its park and commands an impressive view of the huge manor house over the lake. All that remains of the graveyard today is a marble figure of a kneeling angel (Fig. 7) and remnants of the fence. It is worth mentioning that a vineyard was founded by the owners on the island's southern terraces.

An interesting example of a well-preserved family graveyard can be seen in the park in Moszna in Opole region. The graveyard of the Thiele-Winckler family was arranged in the central part of a large clearing in the park. Surrounded by deciduous trees, it is perceived from a distance as an attractive sizeable group of trees. Only when you come near can you notice that it is a graveyard. Based on a circular plan, it is located on a small elevation and surrounded with an openwork fence. Under the canopy of the branches of the trees growing along the fence there are rhododendrons, and in the central part of the graveyard are the family tombstones. (Fig 8).

Family graveyards established outside parks, on forested areas or among fields, were mostly based on a regular plan, and were surrounded by a fence with trees planted along it. Inside there were earth graves with cast-iron crosses or tombstones in the form of boulders or stone slabs. Occasionally, there would be a burial chapel in the centre. Family graveyards compositionally linked with the residence had tree-lined lanes leading to them. Graveyards founded in forests or fields without a compositional link with the family residence (e.g. in Jelmuń) were located close to a road or a dirt track. Such graveyards never had a specially designed lane leading to them. They appeared to be lost in the surrounding space (Figs. 9, 10, 11).

It is worth noting that the type of trees which appeared in the family graveyards was connected primarily with the local habitat in the given area. The species introduced for symbolic reasons was thuja, but it accompanied individual graves and was not part a group of trees highlighting the fence. The tradition of setting up private graveyards on family

estates lasted till the beginning of the twentieth century, although starting from the mid-nineteenth century this trend was on the decline. Proper care for the graves located on family estates became more and more difficult due to changes in land ownership. Public cemeteries, perceived as sacred and inviolable, offered greater prospects for good protection of the graves and preservation of the memory about those buried in them.

### War cemeteries

A special type of memorial gardens are war cemeteries. On the Polish soil they are numerous, and they perpetuate the memory of the wars that swept through Poland and Europe. This is the type of cemetery that appeared after World War I, and then again after World War II. War cemeteries occur as monuments designed to commemorate places and events, as individual graves, and as cemeteries dedicated to the soldiers who fell on the battlefields. They differ from many other cemeteries by their rows of identical crosses on regularly shaped fields of grass. The trees here serve only to mark off the area of the cemetery. Properly selected tree species are part of the natural greenery of the surrounding landscape. The minimalist composition of the necropolis stands in contrast to the enormity of the soldiers' suffering. The war cemetery as a new type of burial ground arrangement is easily distinguishable in the landscape, and its frequent presence on the Polish territories brings about reflection on the cruelty of war.

### Summing up

The inevitability of the end of human life is marked in the landscape with memorial garden complexes. They are an integral component of man-shaped space. The cultural landscape is history recorded in the land, and its shape is affected by both a set of environmental conditions and the effects of human activity. Among the many kinds of cultural monuments, cemeteries occupy a special place. Shaped in the form of gardens and surviving until today, they reflect the social and artistic landscape of different regions of the country. The diversity of memorial gardens is a testimony to the changing conditions of life and changing trends in shaping the surrounding space and mutual relations between people.

Historic cemeteries, if they are to survive as the key, and often identifying, components of the cultural landscape, must be protected. Without it, their further existence will not be possible. Historic cemeteries, those unique memorial gardens, give testimony to the past and are symbols of the old days. Their presence gives us a sense of being part of a community, makes us aware of our roots, and brings stability so much needed in the face of change.

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