

Maria Piekarska

Faculty of “Artes Liberales”
University of Warsaw
Warsaw

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7015-9012>
m.piekarska@al.uw.edu.pl

“Instead of Tombstones – a Tree, a Garden, a Grove”: Early Israeli Forests as Environmental Memorials

Abstract

The article adds a material-semiotic memory studies perspective to the discussion on the two largest afforestation projects of early Israeli statehood: *Ya’ar HaMeginim* (Defenders’ Forest) and *Ya’ar HaKedoshim* (Martyrs’ Forest). Considering the multiplicity of contexts related to mass tree planting practices conducted by the Jewish National Fund in Israel, the article analyses the two arboreal complexes as environmental memorials. As such, they are attributed with narrative agency that strongly associates the object of commemoration with socially constructed pastoral features of nature. Moreover, due to their organic substance, they hold affective and material capacities that significantly influence the commemorative after-effects. The two Israeli mnemonic assemblages are examined, and conclusions are drawn on the possible outcomes of environmental memorials for collective memory processes.

Keywords: memory studies, environmental memorial, forest, landscape, material-semiotic perspective, Zionism, Israel.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 PL License (creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/pl/), which permits redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, provided that the article is properly cited. © The Author(s), 2020.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

Editor-in-chief: Jolanta Sujecka

Conception and academic editing of this issue: Aleksandra Twardowska, Katarzyna Taczyńska

Memorials reflect both past experiences and the current lives of their communities, producing “shared spaces that lend a common spatial frame to otherwise disparate experiences and understandings” (Young, 1993, p. 6). Still, a memorial’s agency manifests itself not only in its primary social role of a narrative medium, or the ability to invoke certain affects, but also in its materiality and the resulting transformations it undergoes as a space/object. In fact, “humans, objects, and memories are bound up with each other in their material presences, creating assemblages made of persons, things, and traces of the past” (Freeman et al., 2016, p. 5), and those mnemonic assemblages should be analysed not as binaries, but as an interrelated material-semiotic network. Such a combined perspective allows the scope of analyses to be extended beyond the national narrative lens, following the third phase of memory studies that shifts its focus to the present/future oriented aspects of memory (Erll, 2011). In investigations of the textual and extra-textual aspects of memory sites (Ladino, 2019, p. 15), memorials established with organic matter in natural spaces deserve special attention.

Environmental Memorials

Environmental memorials engage organic material as both the building and the symbolically signifying substance. Their physical results are human alterations of the natural landscape for commemorative purposes. Symbolically, they associate the object of remembrance with meanings commonly attributed to nature in its social construction: authenticity, neutrality, peace, tranquillity. Natural objects can also serve as symbolic stabilisers in an unstable situation through the imagined sense of nature’s endurance, infiniteness and place-belonging (Sather-Wagstaff, 2015). Such common sentiments make natural landscapes a powerful mnemonic tool, subtly communicating the stability and authenticity of the representations of the past. Not only the natural landscape is modified, as also happens every time a monument is erected; environmental memorials engage nature in its mnemonic activity through anthropomorphising narratives, attributing human features of remembering to vegetative assemblages. Through these semiotic configurations, the nature-cultures of memory thus produced act as a legitimising medium for the narrative being performed.

Memory sites in nature also guide the visitor to experience the narrative in a particular way. Exploring the symbolism of gardens, Dmitry Likhachev mentions two simultaneous types of their semiotics – one presenting itself

through the medium of adequately expressed words or explanations, most commonly embodied as a monument, sculpture or text marker, and the other through the general atmosphere that the garden or its part exerts. It is no longer about “reading” or “decoding” the garden, but about the emotional reaction to it; the garden’s meaning is found not outside of it, but within (Lichaczow, 1991, pp. 9, 22; Salwa, 2014, p. 16). Rustling leaves, soft wind, colour variety, general quietness – such stimuli add to the materiality of an environmental memorial, together building an affective assemblage that produces certain effects in its visitor.

Environmental memorials should thus be attributed with both narrative agency, in the sense of the possibility of transmitting a narrative (Ryan et al., 2017, pp. 160–164), and affective agency, i.e. the physical environment’s forceful capacity to generate impressions on other bodies (Ladino, 2019, pp. 14–17). Moreover, nature as a building material is “an active organic component in the changing co-constitution of place and place meanings” (Cloke & Pawson, 2008, p. 107). Considering that nature is particularly “vibrant matter” (Bennett, 2009), an environmental memorial acts, matures and transforms in an entirely different manner than a stone-cast monument, adding new challenges as well as possibilities to its mnemonic functions. The role of nature in mnemonic contexts should then be seen not only as a space where commemorative rituals take place, or as a narrative-transmitting medium, but also as an actant in mnemonic practice.

Certain distinctions have to be made regarding the term “environmental memorial”. It has been used in different contexts to identify memorials of the Anthropocene which mourn dying nature and help “future generations remember what once thrived in certain places” (Bauman, 2015, p. 21). It has also been used for non-sites of memory, where it is understood as biological markers at a burial site, retaining an active meaning of knowing, not just passive commemorating (Sendyka, 2017, pp. 133–143). It is also separate from the term “natural monument” (Pol. *pomnik przyrody*), which defines an existing part of nature (not planted or intentionally created for mnemonics’ sake) deemed socially important for combining both natural and cultural values for the collective (Salwa, 2018, pp. 50–55). I would argue that the term “environmental memorial” is most suitable for the material-semiotic perspective, as these complexes not only engage nature’s symbolic functions, but also build their own natural-cultural environments of a commemorative character. The term environmental memorial is also inclusive, covering a wider spectrum of memorials, not limited to purely “vegetal” sites – forests, gardens, etc. It leaves the possibility to analyse less common commemorative devices in nature in a similar framework, e.g. walking paths or viewpoints.

Despite the possible diversity of environmental memorials, the most common type are tree memorials. Already in the 19th century in France and America, garden cemeteries were designed to create “a meaningful link between dying on the one hand and the cosmic rhythms of nature on the other” (Mosse, 1990, p. 114). Trees as memory markers are perhaps most commonly attributed with losses resulting from a violent past. Such “greening of deathscapes” allows painful heritage to be displayed in a mediated way, turning to pastoral aspects of nature as an alternative to conflict and violence, and using the symbols of soil, burial, and flourishing life above ground (Sather-Wagstaff, 2015, p. 237). Nature has been strongly associated with the national cult of fallen soldiers during the First World War, concurrently in Germany and the British Empire. In Germany, *Heldenhaine* – Heroes’ Groves – were created, where planted trees took the place of actual graves, each symbolising an individual soldier who became part of nature’s cycle of death and resurrection (Mosse, 1990, pp. 87–89). This romantic practice invoked nationalist primordialism: the species planted was oak, envisioned as a native Germanic tree, and attention was diverted away from the impersonality of war towards the preindustrial ideals of the noble beginnings of the nation (Mosse, 1990, p. 110). In Australia and New Zealand, First World War commemorations took the more linear form of arboreal avenues of honour. Again, they provided a direct sense of individuality, as each tree was planted for a specific soldier (Dargavel, 2000, p. 190). Regarding civilian victims, the mnemonic function of trees is used in the context of post-genocidal spaces¹ and, more recently, in mourning terrorist attacks (Heath-Kelly, 2018, p. 63). Survivor trees are a separate yet intrinsically connected mnemonic phenomenon. They appear at different sites of violence: e.g. the Bełżec death camp (Małczyński, 2010), Hiroshima (Smykowski, 2018) and the World Trade Center ruins (Heath-Kelly, 2018). Their existence does not stem from the planter’s will to symbolise lost lives, as they existed *in situ* before the subsequent commemorated event. Still, through similar anthropomorphising narratives (they often “speak” about

¹ Two commemorative projects developed in Poland after the Second World War are worth mentioning here, both designed for post-Nazi death camp spaces, namely Birkenau and Majdanek. The famous architectural project *Droga* (The Road), designed by Oskar Hansen and his team in 1958, intended nature to take over the post-camp terrain eventually. The project was ultimately not executed – the “erosive” influence of time embedded in Hansen’s concept aroused concern among the survivors that the importance of the site would be obscured (Salwa, 2018, p. 47). The commemorative project of 80,000 trees in Majdanek, covering the majority of prisoner fields and creating a *gaj pamięci* (“memory grove”), was implemented temporarily. Trees were indeed planted; the first saplings were donated by the State Forestry institution in 1948, only to be cut down in 1961 due to their negative impact on the state of the camp remains (Olesiuk, 2011, pp. 240, 246–249).

their act of survival in the first person through commemorative texts), these trees evoke the idea of nature's resilience that is conveyed onto the surviving, traumatised collective.

The aforementioned cases are examples of more modest arboreal memorials, where a limited number of trees is attributed with a specific number of victims, or a single tree stands as proof of its own, and by proxy the community's, survival. A different mnemonic strategy was adopted among the Yishuv (Jewish settlement) in Palestine and later in the young state of Israel. There, whole forests have been grown in people's honour or memory, forming a distinctive national tradition of commemorative tree planting, deeply embedded in Zionist ideology. The most famous memorial forests were created within mass afforestation after the Israeli state was established, the two largest complexes – *Ya'ar HaMeginim*, the Defenders' Forest and *Ya'ar HaKedoshim*, the Martyrs' Forest – addressing two collective traumas of the newly developing society. Although they will be analysed as environmental memorials, they were created in the unique socio-political context of tree planting in Zionism that needs to be taken into account. The multiplicity of realities being woven into one practice can thus be tracked, which is typical of a material-semiotic approach.

Multiple Meanings of Forests in Zionism and Palestine/Israel

Tree planting and afforestation are among the practices most strongly associated with the Zionist endeavour, both in material and symbolic aspects. The Jewish National Fund, as the "ideological apparatus of mediation between Israelis and their country" (Kadman, 2010, p. 65), was quintessential for this invented Zionist tradition. It is the main body in charge of land acquisition and afforestation in Palestine/Israel since its establishment at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901. They are responsible for planting over 245 million trees (Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael – Jewish National Fund, 2018), and therefore accountable for the vast transformation of the country's natural landscapes. Early JNF plans focused on olive trees as the dominant species, though they quickly shifted to the non-fruit-bearing pine tree. Just like willow, yew and cypress trees became symbols of death in European Christian cemetery landscapes, or the poppy and the rose symbols of British national mourning (Gough, 1996), pines gained local symbolic importance in the "Zionist homelandsapes" (Azaryahu & Golan, 2004), becoming the base of monocultures in many Israeli forests. The ecological results of these processes are "institutionalised landscapes" within

modern Israel, a reflection not of local vegetal conditions² but of a national endeavour favoured by the state establishment (Amir & Rechtman, 2006, p. 39). In most cases, forests acted as instruments aimed at benefitting Jewish settlements. Practical aspects included socio-economic considerations, i.e. providing employment for the new immigrants, as well as those related to “ecosystem services”, i.e. improving the soil for agriculture by preventing slope erosion and harvesting rain for groundwater (Tal, 2013, p. 85). This served one of the main Zionist objectives, *ge’ulat haaretz* – “redemption of the land”.

The symbolism of nature is used in Zionism “to smooth the transition between the two archetypes of Hebrew nationhood: the biblical people and their modern descendants” (Braverman, 2009, p. 82), and therefore acts as a medium of the new Jewish/Israeli identity. The symbolic temporal continuity of *altneuland* was generated, among other things, through the imagined biblical landscapes of lush forests.³ This established a link to the primordial past, implying that other inhabitants of the land had “neglected or mistreated the (beloved) land and trees” (Bardenstein, 1999, p. 158). By putting their roots in the land, “trees constitute fetish objects in the discursive construction of an idealised Israeli subjectivity” (Long, 2005, p. 114). A physical connection with the land through manual labour and the embodied Zionist education of *yedi’at haaretz* (“knowledge of the land”) were part of the new identity, leaving behind the perceived passiveness of the diasporic Jew. As Neumann (2011, pp. 26–27) notes, Zionism developed the classic features of organic nationalisms, a desire for land being an internal driving force of pioneers’ everyday life. This desire was fully satisfied, physically and symbolically, by way of putting down roots in the land – those of the trees, and by proxy those of the *halutzim* themselves. Planting ceremonies genuinely received an exalted character. In fact, the JNF adopted the secular custom of tree planting by children into observance of *Tu Bishvat*, the religious New Year of Trees. Despite their secular character, some planting ceremonies resembled pious celebrations, exploiting religious codes.⁴ Trees

² Amir and Rechtman (2006) go so far as to explain it as the “transition from a local Mediterranean landscape with its typical vegetation, traditional agriculture and villages, to one characterised by European-like forests planted on mountainous areas and valleys” (p. 39). In recent decades, as a result of trial and error in the course of JNF work, monocultures are being replaced with more diverse sylvan cultures.

³ For an ecologically accurate history of forests in Israel, see Tal (2013).

⁴ One example is the ceremony of the “Covenant with the Trees”, a part of 1930s *Tu Bishvat* celebrations. The Master of Ceremony, assisted by a blast of shofar, declared entering into a covenant with the trees growing in the homeland, upon which those gathered responded with a loud “Amen, Amen”. The lead planter, holding a sapling above his head, would turn to the crowd and say “You have heard the words of the covenant. You are all witnesses today” (Mann, 2002,

have also served as an intermediary between the Diaspora and the Land, through donations to the JNF from Jewish individuals and communities from around the world. Schama famously recollects his London childhood experiences in the introduction to *Landscape and Memory*:

I was gumming small green leaves to a paper tree pinned to the wall of my cheder, the Hebrew school. Every sixpence collected for the blue and white box of the Jewish National Fund merited another leaf. When the tree was throttled with foliage the whole box was sent off, and a sapling, we were promised, would be dug into the Galilean soil, the name of our class stapled to one of its green twigs. ... The trees were our proxy immigrants, the forests our implantation. (Schama, 1995, pp. 5–6)

Beyond practical and ideological roles, trees were enlisted as tools of the material and ontological security of the young Jewish state. Upon Israel's independence in 1948, afforestation became a state endeavour, highly promoted by its leaders for security-oriented reasons, among other considerations. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion said himself in the speech opening the second session of the Knesset in 1951:

We must plant many hundreds of thousands of trees on an area of five million dunams, a quarter of the area of the state. We must wrap all the mountains of the country and their slopes in trees, all the hills and stony lands that will not succeed in agriculture, the dunes of the coastal valley, the dry lands of the Negev to the east and south of Beer Sheva, that is to say all of the land of Edom and the Arava to Eilat. We must also plant for security reasons, along all the borders, along all the roads, routes and paths, around public and military buildings and facilities. (Weitz, 1970, p. 295)⁵

Forests, called "the second line of defence", served as boundary demarcations between Arab and Jewish lands, as well as security groves along borderlines and roads (Cohen, 1993, p. 62), especially in strategic locations such as the Jerusalem Corridor, a narrow area between the city and the coastal plain.⁶ Afforestation also provided ontological security. Erasure of the visual remains of Palestinian villages aided the spatial production of the new state's exclusively Jewish character. In the words of a JNF official interviewed by Noga Kadman (2015), a "large portion of JNF parks are on

pp. 42–43). This re-making of a covenant put those entering into it in the position of God, and reflected the para-biblical narrative of forest planting as "work of creation".

⁵ "עלינו לנטוע מאה אלף רבבות עצים על שטח של 5 מיליון דונם, רבע משטח המדינה. עלינו לעטוף בעצים כל הרי הארץ ומדרוניהם, כל הגבעות ואדמות הטרשים שלא יצלו לעיבוד חקלאי, חולות עמק החוף, ערבות הנגב מזרחה ודרומה מבאר-שבע, זאת אומרת כל ארץ אדום והערבה עד אילת. עלינו לנטוע גם מטעמי בטחון, לאורך כל הגבולות, לאורך כל הכבישים והדרכים והשבילים, סביב בנינים ומיתקנים אזרחיים."

All philological translations of Hebrew sources are provided by the article's author.

⁶ It is no coincidence that the Jerusalem Corridor is the location of both the Defenders' and the Martyrs' Forests.

lands where Palestinian villages used to stand, and the forests are intended to camouflage this” (p. 43). This is how “constructed (in)visibilities” (Long, 2005, p. 110) are created, a seemingly non-violent erasure of Palestinian heritage from the Israeli landscape through an asserted biological stamp of the land’s new owners (Tal, 2013, p. 88). Paradoxically, it makes it fairly easy to assume where the ruins of demolished villages might be found.⁷

As “groups share socially constructed assumptions and values that organise memory into roughly similar patterns” (Young, 1993, p. XI), collective codes attributed to tree planting in Zionism promptly made it a dominant practice in the commemorative culture of the Yishuv and, even more so, the early Israeli state. Through the established symbolism of the tree in the interpretive framework of Zionism, “the commemorated ones are represented directly within the Zionist master commemorative narrative, highlighting their contribution to national renewal” (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 62).

Ya’ar HaMeginim and *Ya’ar HaKedoshim* as Environmental Memorials

Tree planting as the Zionist establishment’s tool for solving state-wide problems was engaged into collective commemorative projects, as they provided a utilitarian solution to the urgent need for mass commemoration. Actually, plans for both the Defenders’ Forest (*Ya’ar HaMeginim*), for the fallen soldiers of the 1948 war, and the Martyrs’ Forest (*Ya’ar HaKedoshim*), for Holocaust victims, began even before the state was established in May 1948, responding to two major traumas affecting the newly developing society. The JNF as the originator emphasised the actively commemorative character of the new complexes, proving that they were not mere forests named after victims, but actual memorials. As a matter of fact, the mechanism was similar to the one outlined above: both forests were planted adjacent to sites of former Palestinian villages, served as a source of employment for new immigrants, and improved the soil for nearby agriculture. These aspects became an issue in the case of the Martyrs’ Forest, acting as the first nationwide memorial for Shoah victims.⁸ Voices

⁷ The 1968 novella *Facing the Forest* by A.B. Yehoshua is an example of this tension between the visible and the invisible. The main character, a Jewish Israeli student, takes a job as a JNF forest ranger. The forest he observes for possible fires has been planted over a destroyed Palestinian village. An Arab man, a former inhabitant of the village, aids the young ranger. The forested landscape shows no traces of the previous life except for some subtle signs that the student gradually notices. Eventually he allows the forest to burn down. For an analysis of the novella, see Zerubavel (1996).

⁸ The Defenders’ Forest was also the very first state-supported project honouring soldiers fallen

were raised among Zionist institutions, including the slowly forming Yad Vashem, against tree planting, as being inappropriate for Holocaust commemoration, and the JNF was accused of using this project for further fundraising (Bar, 2011, p. 108). Nevertheless, the idea of tree planting came from the grassroots – the first trees commemorating Shoah victims were planted in the late 1940s on the request of British Jewry (Weiner, 1951). As for the Defenders' Forest, "the suggestion has come from a number of quarters and *Mifkedet HaHasbara* of the Army who informed that soldiers in various units wish themselves to contribute trees in memory of comrades in their units" (Levin, 1949). It was therefore decided that memory of the victims should be immortalised in forests, at least for the time being.

Ceremonial planting of *Ya'ar HaMeginim* started on 14 February 1949, *Tu Bishvat*, directly continuing the pre-state tree rituals in the new state framework. It was also the date of the first ever meeting of the Knesset, which found its reflection in the presence of Prime Minister Ben-Gurion, who planted the first sapling. The most spectacular ceremony for *Ya'ar HaKedoshim* was held on 21 April 1952, on the eve of *Yom HaShoah*. Great crowds gathered in both cases, brought to the barren hills by organised public transportation. Amid almost liturgical elements (e.g. children releasing white doves, monumental torches burning over the surrounding hills, soldiers' units paying military tribute), each participant could plant a tree for a specific person with their own hands. The proper act of mass planting was conducted later, by new immigrants from nearby settlements.

The two complexes should be contemplated together, as they reflect the developing dialectic relationship between Martyrs and Heroes in Israeli collective memory. This is well demonstrated in the words of Cywia Lubetkin, a Warsaw Ghetto Uprising fighter, from the 1952 Martyrs' Forest ceremony:

It is no coincidence that the Martyrs' Forest was planted on the way to Jerusalem. Not only were the eyes of those destroyed turned towards Jerusalem, but this generation, which looked into the abyss of annihilation and gained the happiness of Israel's revival, must remember that the road to independence leads through the Martyrs' Forest. (Man & Sarel, 1952, p. 72)⁹

in the 1948 war, in an official collaboration between the JNF and the Israeli Defence Forces (Rozenson & Spanier, 2017, p. 101).

⁹ "לא מקרה הוא כי יער הקדושים ניטע בדרך לירושלים. לא רק בזה שעניו כל אלה אשר נשמדו היו נשואות ירושלימה, אלא שגם הדור הזה, שהציץ לתהום הכליון וזכה לאושר תקומת ישראל, צריך לזכור, כי הדרך לעצמאות מובילה דרך "יער הקדושים".

Both groups, those who perished in the Shoah and those facing war for an independent Jewish state, are placed here in the same interpretive framework of the state's founding. The suffering of European Jewry is remembered as demonstrating the need of Jewish fighters in Palestine/Israel, who are then remembered for their part in the state's founding (Young, 1993, p. 212). The established practice of tree planting could "help survivors establish themselves in the land of Israel" (Greenbaum, 1951), and allowed a European event to be incorporated into the Israeli natural landscape.¹⁰ It is interesting how *Ya'ar HaKedoshim* disturbed the early Israeli Holocaust narrative that highlighted the role of courageous ghetto fighters following the dominant meta-narrative of *mi-shoah le-geula*, "from the Holocaust to redemption". This narrative continues in the forest's design, as it includes a sector called the Ghetto Fighters' Forest,¹¹ but the overall focus of the memorial is the perished millions. Also unusual, and possibly oriented towards including Holocaust survivor immigrants, is the production of official promotional materials on the Defenders' Forest in Yiddish (*Ya'ar HaMeginim – Der vald fun farteydiker*, 1949). Another example of this dialectic is the use of the Shoah-related number of 6 million in the 1949 plans for the number of trees in the Defenders' Forest. Later, when fundraising efforts abroad failed, which significantly reduced the Defenders' Forest's actual size, the numbers of 6 million trees and 30,000 dunams were readapted for the Martyrs' Forest. This proves that both groups were deemed to deserve equal commemoration, as they were both perceived as sacrifices on the altar of the nation's freedom.

In both cases a claim was made that planting trees as a form of commemoration was actually compatible not only with the Zionist customs of the new state, but also with a long-lasting Jewish tradition that rejected "the conventional monument, which was seen as representing pagan or Christian (as opposed to Jewish) 'spirit' and traditions" (Azaryahu, 1992, p. 64). As a promotional article for the Martyrs' Forest stated, "in the best

¹⁰ This already completed incorporation can be seen in a scene from Lanzmann's *Shoah*, when Motke Zajdel is recollecting the massacres of Ponary Forest while walking in the Ben Shemen Forest in Israel (the first mass forest planted by the JNF), admitting the resemblance between Israeli and Lithuanian forests. It corresponds with very different cultural connotations regarding forest and war in Eastern Europe and Israel; some European survivors might not have perceived a forest as an appropriate form of commemoration, considering the wartime context of forests in Eastern Europe – harsh places of hiding, survival and executions, and also death camps hidden in forests.

¹¹ Separate sections of forest were dedicated to different European countries of the victims' origin; the fighters were then extracted from the national groups, constituting their own distinct collective. It should be noted that one more section was devoted to a non-national group, i.e. the Children Martyrs' Forest.

of Jewish customs, the memory will not be preserved in a monument of marble, but rather in living trees, rooted in the land nearest and dearest to the Jewish heart" (Freedman, n.d.). Trees with their organic as well as imagined features were engaged intensely in the "living memorial" and "evergreen monument" narrative: "trees persist for generations, forests renew themselves, and thus partake of immortality", according to the Defenders' Forest publicity (Epstein, 1949). The "vital force of idealism and faithfulness" of those "green memorial candles" was to be used for avenging wrong in the Martyrs' Forest:

Every branch of every pine will murmur the shame of the Nazi regime – nature itself will stand up to rebuke those guilty of the unnatural crimes of Jewry's persecutors. ... This will be the "revenge" of Jewry – an emphasis not on strife in retaliation but of the greater sanctity of creation – of endowing nature with greater abundance, of evoking the richness of the earth for the enjoyment of man. ... This is the message of the millions of trees now beginning to sprout among the neglected rocks, digging through their tiny roots into the grains of earth which they find beneath the stones. (Zacutta, 1951)

An ongoing theme of rooting into the land is important for the cycle of nature into which the deceased were inscribed: "trees rooted in the land nearest and dearest to the Jewish heart, renewing themselves in the cycle of the seasons, will perpetuate the names of Jewry's victims" (Zacutta, 1951). The victims were also compared to a broken branch from the nation's tree (Man & Sarel, 1952, pp. 71–72), evoking the diasporic tombstone symbol of premature death. The motifs of rooting, growing and blooming are repeated in all speeches given at planting ceremonies. The sensory effects of the memorials, stemming from their organic substance, are especially important. The rustle of leaves is supposed to be a reminder of the victims; smells and colours are recollected as well: "no grave and no obelisk, not even a headstone can mark the resting place of those millions... But pines and casuarina will grow tall and luxurious to retain the fragrance of their memory and keep it green" (Zacutta, 1951).



Fig. 1. View over Jerusalem Hills from the Martyrs' Forest. Photo by the author, May 2017

The “design” of these environmental memorials seems to offer more affective opportunities. The hilltops of the Jerusalem Hills provide views over a larger terrain, creating an encompassing sense of openness, as if the memorial spread further, overlooking the rest of the country and covering more space than it actually does. The organic substance of the memorial does not keep to boundaries: one cannot distinguish which trees belong to the complex and which constitute parts of other forests. The remembered sacrifices thus become an overarching theme of all the visible nature. These forests are not preserved as pristine parks with properly aligned paths, either; wandering along secluded, overgrown roads creates a greater sense of intimacy than a concrete plaza surrounding some central monument. Walking in both forests, visitors encounter multiple markers with names of perished individuals/soldiers and communities/army units. This conveys an impression of massive loss in a more individual way than a traditional “collective” memorial, and affords constant “stumbling upon” inexhaustible memory. Most of the markers in the Martyrs’ Forest are made of irregular stones, many of which are now covered in weeds, adding to the feeling that they are actually a part of nature, native to this place; it is as if the story had been taken from the land and not the other way around – brought there from another, distant land.



Fig. 2. One of the markers in the Defenders' Forest, commemorating the soldiers of the 195th "Adam" Battalion, fallen in the 1982 Lebanon War. Photo by the author, May 2017

The "afterlife" of both mnemonic assemblages is the result of never executed long-term plans as well as nature's agency as the building substance. Regarding the former factor, both sites lost their mnemonic importance quite quickly. The Martyrs' Forest gave up its function as the centre for the main *Yom HaShoah* ceremonies already in the late 1950s, when Yad Vashem became the site of official state commemorations (Bar, 2011, p. 128). This does not mean that the site was not developed further: additional elements such as a monument (the famous Scroll of Fire, changing the focus from the victims to the Zionist success), new markers, and a walking trail have been added to the material configuration. *Ya'ar HaMeginim* never really gained proper mnemonic importance in Israeli public life. The function of a commemorative centre for fallen soldiers was assigned to the military cemetery on Mount Herzl already in the 1950s. Once again, this does not mean that the site has not been developed since the planting. Army units visit it on *Yom HaZikaron*, as proved by a visit to the site in the week that followed the holiday – wilting floral wreaths and sun-faded flags created a rather melancholy impression. The site lacks a central monument, so visitors continue to notice the multitude of individual losses rather than a unified narrative of sacrifice for the state.

Finding both of the forests today is actually not an easy task: you have to look hard for a sign with their names, as they are not properly marked on maps.

If indeed these forests no longer serve as important spaces for memory performances, does that mean that they are failed memorials? First of all, these memorial complexes could be treated as pre-commemorations. Answering an urgent need to commemorate traumas of the collective, they served as a space for expressing mourning and performing remembrance in a communal, embodied way. They continued to serve this purpose till the official state memorial institutions were established – Yad Vashem and Mount Herzl respectively. Their temporary function has therefore been fulfilled. Secondly, the temporality of environmental memorials is strictly connected to their materiality. In the same way that the dynamics of remembrance change over time, so do natural spaces never remain static. A JNF official explained to an American donor in 1952 that “it would be disappointing to send a photographer to the site. The saplings are still very tiny indeed and the mountain still looks bare” (*Letter to Mrs. Weiss*, 1952). Due to their growing building substance, such commemorative projects are not physically “ready” at the moment of their ceremonial inauguration; there can be no “unveiling of the forest” like there is with a monument. Meanwhile, trees grow older and taller with time; sometimes they die, be it due to natural reasons,¹² fires¹³ or utilitarian needs,¹⁴ against the attributed sense of infiniteness. In the case of still standing forests, having completely changed the surrounding landscapes, nature now slowly takes over plaques and markers. As the sites are located away from major habitation centres, they are not frequented on a daily, unplanned basis (like a monument passed every day on the way to work), and through such everyday use, maintained to a certain degree. Therefore, they fall even more out of the collective consciousness as important spaces of remembering.

Nature, introduced into a given space by humans, functions according to rhythms and changes that humans do not (fully) control. Forests return

¹² In the first memorial forest, planted in honour of Theodor Herzl in 1908, the majority of the 12,000 trees did not take root. Replanted, the forest was destroyed again by locusts during the First World War (Mann, 2002, p. 17). Also in the Martyrs’ Forest, some trees did not take root due to harsh conditions (Bar, 2011, p. 128).

¹³ The memorial forest dedicated to Zagłębie Jews was consumed by a series of fires in May 2019 amid arid, windy weather (JTA, 2019).

¹⁴ Examples include a grove planted in 1985 by the JNF in Beit Shemesh in memory of Chiune Sugihara, Japan’s consul-general in Lithuania, who helped save thousands of Jews during the Second World War. In 2019 the press reported the grove having been uprooted a few years before to make way for a residential neighbourhood, without anyone being informed, including the Sugihara family who came to Israel looking for the memorial (Aderet, 2019).

– if they were ever anything more – to their vegetal functions, as if shedding the anthropomorphic semiotic character attributed to them. Without the ongoing narrative, trees are no longer tombstones: they are background landscapes for the roads running past them; they are treescapes, as Cloke and Pawson (2008) call them, and, most of all, they are their own maturing ecosystems. Instead of seeing this as a failure of their mnemonic function, this temporal-material aspect of environmental memorials could actually serve as an inspiring alternative to traditional monuments and their static limitations. As collective memory itself is a dynamic, open-ended process, the preferred mnemonic tools change with time according to social needs. Erecting a monument responds to currently defined needs for commemoration, but its finiteness and inflexibility can soon make it obsolete. Considering their location in ecological time and not simply social time, environmental memorials, with their ability to “dissolve” in time, could be considered an answer to the over-monumentalisation of space in the current culture of compulsive remembering and preserving. In relational performances between the human and non-human components in environmental memorials, once the site no longer serves (and is no longer maintained) as a socially needed space for performing memory, nature’s agency becomes the predominant force, allowing memory “to fade and to be remade as part of the domestic landscape” (Morgan, 2008, p. 192). In such a way, (non-)memorial forests can be mediators of gradual change in the public memory – maybe even a tool of conciliation, trauma healing and intentional forgetting.

The concept of a maturing and reconciling environmental memorial is an ideal model, devoid of the socio-political context in which it is executed. Meanwhile, trees are “products of the relationships in which they are placed” (Cloke & Pawson, 2008, p. 109). Zionist culture offered an immediate interpretive framework for this kind of environmental memorial, weaving together multiple functions of tree planting and “naturalising” the national past. Using this broadly recognised practice for the commemoration of traumas that shaped the foundations of the young Jewish-Israeli identity was a temporary translation of complex cultural, political and symbolic processes into the public imagination (Johnson, 1995). The fading importance of the memorial forests under consideration is not a sign of disengagement from the cultural system they symbolise, but a symptom of the evolving culture of official commemorations in Israel. Holocaust victims and fallen soldiers are invariable constants in the Israeli public memory, yet the texture of this memory has developed, just like the

state itself has produced more institutionalised forms of performing its newly built identity. With that, nature's organic agency has transformed these commemorative complexes into quasi post-memorial forms, not actively replaying the designed narrative, but still offering potential space for memory performances.

The anthropomorphising narrative of nature's immutability and the engagement of pastoral motifs do not exhaust the possibilities of environmental memorials. In the case of forest memorials, their interwoven temporality and materiality act across the intentions of a neatly contained memory site. They are not "an intentional extension of the mind, a preservation device designed to bring the past to life for future generations" (Freeman et al., 2016, p. 5), but vital actants in commemorative processes, influencing the narrative outcomes through their organic substance. Mosse recalls the words of Vera Brittain, a British writer, pacifist and feminist who served as a nurse during the First World War: "nature herself conspires with time to cheat our recollections" (Mosse, 1990, p. 112). Still, this feature of the nature-memory nexus can be seen as a possibility, not a disadvantage. The unstable character of nature's mnemonic agency, resulting in memorials' afterlives more as maturing ecosystems than prominent memory sites, opens up new possibilities for the evolving collective memory.

References

- Aderet, O. (2019, February 14). Israeli memorial to 'Japanese Schindler' razed without family's knowledge. *Haaretz*. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-israel-memorial-to-japanese-schindler-razed-without-family-s-knowledge-1.6936221>
- Amir, S., & Rechtman, O. (2006). The development of forest policy in Israel in the 20th century: Implications for the future. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 8(1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2004.05.003>
- Azaryahu, M. (1992). War memorials and the commemoration of the Israeli war of independence, 1948–1956. *Studies in Zionism: Politics, Society, Culture*, 13(1), 57–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13531049208575996>
- Azaryahu, M., & Golan, A. (2004). Zionist homelands (and their constitution) in Israeli geography. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5(3), 497–513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1464936042000252840>
- Bar, D. (2011). "Le'an nifne beyom hashoah?": Ya'ar hakedoshim ve hahitlabtut beshe'elat hantzahah zaher hashoah ["Where will I turn on the Holocaust Day?": The Martyrs' Forest and the uncertainty on the matter of Holocaust memory]. *Cathedra*, 2011(140), 103–130.
- Bardenstein, C. (1999). Trees, forests, and the shaping of Palestinian and Israeli collective memory. In M. Bal, J. Crewe, & L. Spitzer (Eds.), *Acts of memory: Cultural recall and the present* (pp. 148–168). University Press of New England.

- Bauman, W. A. (2015). Facing the death of nature: Environmental memorials to counter despair. *Tikkun*, 30(2), 20–22. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08879982-2876629>
- Bennett, J. (2009). *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391623>
- Braverman, I. (2009). *Planted flags: Trees, land, and law in Israel/Palestine*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cloke, P., & Pawson, E. (2008). Memorial trees and treescape memories. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26(1), 107–122. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d79j>
- Cohen, S. (1993). *The politics of planting: Israeli-Palestinian competition for control of land in the Jerusalem periphery*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dargavel, J. (2000). More to grief than granite: Arboreal remembrance in Australia. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 24(64), 187–195. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050009387571>
- Epstein, E. M. (1949, February 7). *Re: New Year of Trees – Defenders’ Forests* [Letter to JNF overseas branches]. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/15952), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Erl, A. (2011). Travelling memory. *Parallax*, 17(4), 4–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>
- Freeden, H. (n.d.). *The six million* [Promotional article]. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/19079), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Freeman, L., Nienass, B., & Daniell, R. (2016). Memory | Materiality | Sensuality. *Memory Studies*, 9(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015613969>
- Gough, P. (1996). Conifers and commemoration – the politics and protocol of planting. *Landscape Research*, 21(1), 73–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426399608706476>
- Greenbaum, J. (1951, May 1). *Message from Jitzhak Greenbaum on behalf of Polish Jewry in Israel*. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/17351), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Heath-Kelly, C. (2018). Survivor trees and memorial groves: Vegetal commemoration of victims of terrorism in Europe and the United States. *Political Geography*, 64(3), 63–72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.03.003>
- Johnson, N. (1995). Cast in stone: Monuments, geography and nationalism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13(1), 51–65. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d130051>
- JTA. (2019, May 24). Fires consume iconic memorial forest for Holocaust victims near Jerusalem. *Times of Israel*. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fires-consume-iconic-memorial-forest-for-holocaust-victims-near-jerusalem/>
- Kadman, N. (2010). Roots tourism – whose roots?: The marginalization of Palestinian heritage sites in official Israeli tourism sites. *Téoros*, 29(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1024755ar>
- Kadman, N. (2015). *Erased from space and consciousness: Israel and the depopulated Palestinian villages of 1948*. Indiana University Press.
- Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael – Jewish National Fund. (2018, June 6). *Trees in number*. <http://www.kkl-jnf.org/about-kl-jnf/kkl-jnf-in-public-discourse/in-the-press/press-april-june-2018/trees-number/>

- Ladino, J. K. (2019). *Memorials matter: Emotion, environment, and public memory at American Historical Sites*. University of Nevada Press.
- Letter to Mrs. Weiss. (1952). The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/19080), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Levin, H. (1949, January 28). *Letter to Mr. Zvi Weinberg*. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/15952), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Lichaczow, D. (1991). *Poezja ogrodów: O semantyce stylów ogrodowo-parkowych* (K. N. Sakowicz, Trans.). Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Long, J. C. (2005). *(En)planting Israel: Jewish National Fund forestry and the naturalization of Zionism* [Unpublished master's thesis]. University of Edinburgh.
- Małczyński, J. (2010). Trees as living monuments at the Museum-Memorial Site at Bełżec. In T. Majewski, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, & M. Wójcik (Eds.), *Memory of the Shoah: Cultural representations and commemorative practices* (pp. 35–41). Wydawnictwo Oficyna.
- Man, I., & Sarel, B. (1952). *Yad la'Shoah u'Mered [Monument for the Holocaust and the Revolt]*. Keren Kayemeth le'Israel-Jewish National Fund.
- Mann, I. (2002). *Seed and deed: A century of deed in brown, green and blue: Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund 1901-2001*. Keren Kayemeth le'Israel-Jewish National Fund.
- Morgan, J. (2008). *Arboreal eloquence: Trees and commemoration* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Canterbury.
- Mosse, G. (1990). *Fallen soldiers: Reshaping the memory of the world wars*. Oxford University Press.
- Neumann, B. (2011). *Land and desire in early Zionism*. Brandeis University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv102bhmf>
- Olesiuk, D. (2011). Urządzenie przestrzenne Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku 1944–2010: Plany i realizacja. *Zeszyty Majdanka*, 25, 227–271.
- Rozenon, I., & Spanier, Y. (2017). *Ba-derekh el ha-ir: Sha'ar ha-gai ke-mehoz zikaron [On the way to Jerusalem: Sha'ar HaGai as a site of memory]*. Karmel.
- Ryan, M.-L., Foote, K., & Azaryahu, M. (2017). *Narrating space / spatializing narrative: Where narrative theory and geography meet*. The Ohio University Press.
- Salwa, M. (2014). Ogród jako miejsce pamięci. In B. Frydryczak (Ed.), *Krajobrazy i ogrody: Ujęcie interdyscyplinarne* (pp. 15–27). Poznańskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk.
- Salwa, M. (2018). Pomnik przyrody i przekraczanie antropocentryzmu. *Przegląd Humanistyczny*, 62(1), 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0012.1842>
- Sather-Wagstaff, J. (2015). Trees as reappropriated heritage in popular cultures of memorialization: The rhetoric of resilient (human) nature. In M. Robinson & H. Silvermaine (Eds.), *Encounters with popular past: Cultural heritage and popular culture* (pp. 235–250). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-13183-2_14
- Schama, S. (1995). *Landscape and memory*. HarperCollins.

- Sendyka, R. (2017). Nie-miejsca pamięci i ich nie-ludzkie pomniki. In M. Praczyk (Ed.), *Pomniki w epoce antropocenu* (pp. 121–146). Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.
- Smykowski, M. (2018). Hibakujumoku – drzewa, które przeżyły: Ekologiczne dziedzictwo bombardowań atomowych w Hiroshimie i Nagasaki. *Teksty Drugie*, 2018(3), 368–398. <https://doi.org/10.18318/td.2018.3.27>
- Tal, A. (2013). *All the trees of the forest: Israel's woodlands from the Bible to the present*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300189506.001.0001>
- Weiner, M. (1951, April 25). *Letter to David S. Tschertok, JNF Overseas Director*. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/17352), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Weitz, Y. (1970). *Ha-ya'ar ve-ha-ye'ur be-yisrael* [Forest and afforestation in Israel]. Masada.
- Ya'ar HaMeginim – Der vald fun farteydiker* [Promotional leaflet in Yiddish]. (1949). The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/15952), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Young, J. (1993). *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meanings*. Yale University Press.
- Zacutta, E. (1951, November 19). *We shall not forget* [Typescript of a publicity article]. The Jewish National Fund Collection (CZA KKL5/19079), Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.
- Zerubavel, Y. (1996). The forest as a national icon: Literature, politics, and the archaeology of memory. *Israel Studies*, 1(1), 60–99. <https://doi.org/10.1353/is.2005.0045>

„Zamiast nagrobków – drzewo, ogród, gaj”
 Wczesne izraelskie lasy
 jako środowiskowe upamiętnienia

Poniższy artykuł dodaje perspektywę materialno-semiotycznych badań nad pamięcią zbiorową do dyskusji na temat dwóch największych leśnych kompleksów wczesnego państwa Izrael – *Ya'ar HaMeginim* (Las Obrońców) i *Ya'ar HaKedoshim* (Las Męczenników). Biorąc pod uwagę wielość kontekstów związanych z praktykami masowego zalesiania w Izraelu prowadzonymi przez Żydowski Fundusz Narodowy, artykuł rozważa te lasy jako środowiskowe upamiętnienia. Jako takie posiadają one sprawczość narracyjną, silnie wiążącą obiekt upamiętnienia ze znaczeniami przypisywanymi naturze w ramach jej społecznej konstrukcji. Co więcej, ze względu na swój organiczny budulec, wykazują możliwości afektywne i materialne, które aktywnie wpływają na pamięciowy przekaz tych kompleksów. Na

podstawie analizy obu izraelskich lasów pamięci wyciągane są wnioski na temat możliwego udziału upamiętnień środowiskowych w procesach pamięci zbiorowej.

Słowa kluczowe: badania nad pamięcią, upamiętnienie środowiskowe, las, krajobraz, perspektywa materialno-semiotyczna, syjonizm, Izrael.

Note

Maria Piekarska, Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, Warsaw
m.piekarska@al.uw.edu.pl

The preparation of the article was self-funded by the author.

Editor-in-chief, Prof. Jolanta Sujecka, is author’s current PhD Advisor.

Publication History

Received: 2019-11-06; Accepted: 2020-12-04; Published: 2020-12-31