

MAGDALENA BIS*

REVIEW OF JACEK KONIK, *GŁOSY ZABITEGO MIASTA. WSTĘPNA PREZENTACJA REZULTATÓW BADAŃ ARCHEOLOGICZNYCH NA TERENIE DAWNEGO GETTA WARSZAWSKIEGO W LATACH 2021-2022* / THE VOICES OF A MURDERED CITY. PRELIMINARY PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE FORMER WARSAW GHETTO IN 2021-2022. WARSZAWA, WROCŁAW 2023, PP. 184, PUBLISHED BY THE WARSAW GHETTO MUSEUM, CHRONICON PUBLISHING HOUSE

Received: 29.09.2025 Accepted: 11.11.2025

Citation: Bis M. 2025. *Review of Jacek Konik, Głosy zabitego miasta. Wstępna prezentacja rezultatów badań archeologicznych na terenie dawnego getta warszawskiego w latach 2021-2022 / The Voices of a Murdered City. Preliminary presentation of the results of archaeological research in the former Warsaw ghetto in 2021-2022. Warszawa, Wrocław 2023, pp. 184, published by the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, Chronicon publishing house. "Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historiae" 38, 125-128, DOI 10.23858/FAH38/2025.010*

All archaeological work carried out within the boundaries of the former Warsaw ghetto arouses considerable public interest due to the tragic history and difficult emotions associated with this part of Poland's capital city. This is true among people of the Jewish faith, but also among present-day residents, researchers and those who feel close to the turbulent, yet not entirely distant past of the town in general and the former ghetto in particular. The dramatic facts known from other sources, such as eyewitness accounts, memoirs, research outcomes and publications, recorded on film and in photographs, are numerous and provide invaluable information about the events of the Second World War and the space in which they took place. The tragedy of these several years (1940-1944) sometimes overshadows memories of the ordinary, bourgeois reality that previously existed in this area (within the Muranów district). The dense urban architecture, as well as the original



local community and its culture, were obliterated as a result of the warfare, and the pre-war quarter was subsequently replaced with a new housing estate built on the ghetto's ruins after 1945.

* Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0108-7625>; m.bis@iaepan.edu.pl; magdabis@wp.pl

KEYWORDS

- Warsaw ghetto
- history of Warsaw
- archaeological investigations
- Jewish archaeology
- Jewish artefacts

Archaeological research is extremely helpful in uncovering this fragment of Warsaw's history and its material remains. Until now, excavations in this zone have not been systematic or planned, but rather rescue-oriented, organised primarily in connection with building renovations and construction projects.¹ Currently, archaeological investigations are mainly conducted using non-invasive methods.

The publication reviewed here, under the evocative title *Voices of a Murdered City*, discusses the results of the recent fieldwork carried out in 2021 and 2022 in two locations: 1) along Świętojerska Street, at the northern border of the Krasiński Garden, in the area of the former workshops known as the Broom-maker's shed, and 2) in the square at the intersection of Miła and Stanisława Dubois Streets, north of the so-called Anielewicz's Mound, where the headquarters of the Jewish Combat Organisation were located. Excavations were conducted in cooperation with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, and the Rabbinical Commission for Cemeteries, since there was a possibility of finding human remains – those of deceased Jews. In such cases, archaeological work must be performed in accordance with the guidelines of the Rabbinical Commission and with respect for the principles of Judaism.²

In both areas, several geophysical techniques were used in the first stage of research, namely electrical resistivity and electromagnetic methods, and ground-penetrating radar (GPR). The anomalies detected underground were the basis for extending the range of fieldwork – site exploration using traditional excavation methods. However, these activities were severely limited in terms of space available for research. Archaeologists were able to open only one trench at the Krasiński Garden/Świętojerska Street site and two on Miła Street.

At the first site, along Świętojerska Street, they uncovered relics of pre-war buildings – cellars of tenement houses that once stood in this area, including a purposefully-built wartime hideout and remains of a boiler room. Meanwhile, on Miła Street, in the cellars of two neighbouring buildings – at the former addresses of Muranowska 39 and 41 – the researchers discovered a passageway connecting the tenements, probably part of the bunker they were searching for. Work at the site of the courtyard of the tenement house at 20 Miła Street

did not yield the expected results; no further part of this corridor or traces of the wall closing it off were found there.

During the fieldwork discussed in the reviewed book, archaeologists were able to identify and record a lot of information concerning the investigated pre-war foundations, such as their current condition, the method of their construction, and evidence of their rebuilding. During the exploration of the backfilled cellars, they also recovered various finds, mainly artefacts from the 2nd half of the 19th and the 1st half of the 20th century. Most of them will be displayed in a permanent exhibition at the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. According to the presented narrative, these were mostly household items, but also, *inter alia*, a few religious objects, burnt books, and pieces of painted plaster.

The book was written shortly after the completion of fieldwork. It is a popular science publication rather than a scholarly monograph. Therefore, it does not contain the data and details necessary in specialist studies concerning excavation work, presentation of stratigraphic layers, descriptions of unearthed structures and features, inventory of artefacts, or their morphological and technological analyses, considerations regarding changes in property ownership, the history of tenement houses, etc., which require meticulous studies, often many years of painstaking research. Instead, this publication includes a vivid story of things used by the former inhabitants of the area under study. This theme occupies most of the content (*Wybrane artefakty* / Selected artefacts, pp. 35-161). As the author points out (on p. 34), he made a subjective selection from among the finds, so the artefacts described in this book do not constitute a representative sample of the whole assemblage but rather 'an attractive version' of it.

However, considering the realities of archaeological excavations carried out on late modern and 20th-century sites, we can assume that most of them belonged to the most numerous and best-preserved categories, i.e., mainly ceramics and glass. They are supplemented by a few items made of other materials – metal, paper, and leather. These are the things that, in the literal interpretation of the publication's title, have been given a voice. They have become the starting point for constructing a narrative about certain aspects of the daily life of local residents in the past two centuries.

Attention was drawn to religious utensils of the former Jewish community: fragments of books in Hebrew, among which there is a siddur (a prayer book containing a set of daily and Shabbat prayers to be recited in the synagogue and at home) and excerpts

¹ One of the large-scale archaeological projects in this part of Warsaw preceded the construction of the Polin Museum. Investigations were carried out in 1998 and 2009, covering the area of the former Military Artillery Barracks built in the 2nd half of the 18th century on the site of the former Dzika Street, e.g., Pola 2013, 221-222.

² See e.g., Bis 2023, 34-37, further literature there.

from the Talmud (described in the subchapter *Spalona biblioteka* / Burnt Library; pp. 146-149). Parts of Jewish candlesticks were also mentioned – for Shabbat (i.e., Shabbat candlesticks, 'sabutnik') and Hanukkah celebrations (Hanukkah menorahs), a vessel for ritual hand washing (a Netilat Yadayim cup), and a fragment of tefillin (phylacteries) – a leather, cubic box, originally containing parchment with biblical quotations, which was tied to the forehead and arm during prayers (included in the subchapter *Rytuały na co dzień i od święta* / Everyday and Holiday Rituals; pp. 152-157). Another interesting object (analysed in the subsection *Przywracanie pamięci* / Restoring Memory; pp. 160-161), is a metal pendant – a plaque with an inscription attached to the Torah shield, commemorating the deceased on the first anniversary of their death. In this case, it was determined that this person was Nachum Morgerstern, who died in 1880 and was buried in the Jewish Cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw.³

The reconstructed fragments of the history of all artefacts identified and presented by Jacek Konik relate, inter alia, to the factories where they were made and the fate of their owners, indicate changes in table manners and consumption, evolution in fashion, architecture and interior design, or constitute paraphernalia of Jewish customs. These are ordinary necessities – furnishings of living spaces and devotional items. At the same time, these articles were usually overlooked in accounts from that time because they were commonplace and unimpressive.

This attention to the often ignored ordinary things is also the undeniable value of the publication – not only does the author restore their meaning, but with these small, seemingly insignificant puzzle pieces, Jacek Konik supplements the image of the destroyed world (known from other sources). He also purposefully intrigues the reader with the titles of the subchapters (18 in total), e.g., *Nie wszystko srebro, co się świeci* / All that glitters is not silver (pp. 85-90; devoted to silver-plated cutlery), *Solq i pieprzem* / Salt and pepper (pp. 98-103; about salt shakers), *Śliwkowy specjał* / A plum speciality (pp. 113-116; about a glass bottle for plum brandy – Passover Slivovitz 'pejsachówka'), *Zamiast tranu?* / Instead of fish oil? (pp. 123-126; about glass containers for medicines), *Przybysz z wielkiego świata* / A visitor from the big world (pp. 127-130; about metal packaging for breath freshening pastilles), *Sukcesy eksportowe Wolnego Miasta Gdańska* / Export successes of the Free City of Gdańsk (pp. 132-133; about the label of the 'Unitas' Society advertising 'Amada' margarine from the local

factory), *Smok w herbie* / The dragon in the coat of arms (pp. 135-140; about 'Drakon' ink bottles with the image of a dragon from the Warsaw-based 'Fabryka Chemiczna M. Leszczyński i S-ka, Spółka Akcyjna' chemical factory), *Powinności elegancji* / The duties of elegance (pp. 141-144; about labels for gloves manufactured by the 'Emeswa' company).

As I mentioned above, the book presents the reality of Jewish Warsaw before 1945, but it does so in a very selective manner. However, its invaluable advantage is that it demonstrates the informational potential of material sources and the possibilities inherent in objects that are usually excavated by archaeologists and with which they work on a daily basis. This is also an important didactic aspect of the reviewed work – proving the great historical value of findings that are damaged, insignificant and cheap, and not considered 'treasures' in the common social perception. Here, they become the main unsung 'heroes' of the daily life interrupted and ultimately claimed by the war, for example, in chapters titled *Kuchenne historie* / Kitchen Stories (pp. 52-60; enamelware) and *W spiżarni, jadalni i salonie* / In the Pantry, Dining Room and Living Room (pp. 61-84; average porcelain, faience and stoneware dishes), as Konik calls them. And because these belongings come from a relatively recent time, many readers may be familiar with them from personal experience, which reinforces the message.

The publication has been carefully edited. Its pages are filled with large-format, high-quality photographs of the fieldwork and finds complemented by archival press illustrations, ephemera, advertisements, postcards, brochures, and company catalogues, which splendidly illustrate the story created by the author around these archaeological finds in a form that is concise and yet engaging.

Given this form of presentation of preliminary results and the small collection of artefacts, we can only hope for an equally interesting and professional, strictly scientific publication, in which all discoveries and finds will be fully compiled, examined and presented. Undoubtedly, this should be an interdisciplinary study, using modern specialist methods. Only such an approach offers a chance to recreate the realities of everyday life in this particular district of Warsaw from around 80-150 years ago. And if Jacek Konik takes on this task, we should wish him luck in this difficult publishing venture.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

³ For more information about this artefact, see Konik 2023.

REFERENCES

- Bis M. 2023. *The State of Archaeological Research on Jewish Cemeteries in Central Europe. A New Approach*. "Fasciculi Archaeologiae Historicae" 36, 29-62, <https://doi.org/10.23858/FAH36.2023.002>
- Konik J. 2023. *Srebrna zawieszka dedykacyjna odkryta w Ogrodzie Krasieńskich w Warszawie w 2021 r. – próba interpretacji znaleziska*. "Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej" 71(4), 483-493. <https://doi.org/10.23858/KHKM71.2023.4.005>
- Pela W. 2013. *Historia badań archeologicznych i architektonicznych dawnej Warszawy. The history of archaeological and architectonic research in Old Warsaw*. Archeologia Dawnej Warszawy 2. Warszawa.