

Secret Infrastructure of Survival: Architectural Anthropology of Jewish Hideouts

Dr Natalia Romik

The following text outlines the preliminary results of my ongoing investigation into the architecture of hideouts, built and used by Jews during Holocaust. One of the main goals of my postdoctoral research project, supported by the Foundation for the Memory of Shoah, is to investigate new artistic and architectural methodologies in the studies of memory of Holocaust. Hence, the main body of text and its visual representation is based on the exhibition 'Hideouts. The Architecture of Survival', which is on view in the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw between March and July 2021. These studies will be then expanded and reedited to form the main axis of the book devoted to the subject, that is going to be written in the second part of my postdoctoral research project.



Exhibition in Zachęta, photo. Jakub Celej



Exhibition in Zachęta, photo. Jakub Celej

The main goal I want to achieve with the research grant is to write a book about the hiding places, consolidating my current and previous research on the subject, featuring archival research, documentation of site surveys, artistic performances and actions. The book will showcase the interdisciplinary, innovative methodology, as I use different research tools such as geodetic measurements, archaeological research, endoscopy measurements, sculptural casts and archival research. In this way I hope to experiment with the interdisciplinary methodology to be further used in the Holocaust studies. My overarching goal is to facilitate the commemoration of the important, yet hidden, histories of Jewish fight for survival. In this book, apart from presenting my research on the cases mentioned above, I will analyze and map numerous cases of hideouts known from archival materials and reports stored in the archives of the Jewish Historical Committee (for example: testimonies of Regina Riegelhanpt-Kempińska, Lila Lachs, Avraham Carmi, Frumka Płotnicka, Herszel Szpringier or Baruch Gaftek).

This text summarizes the ongoing investigation, as all the cases presented in the exhibition have been extensively researched using the multiplicity of methods mentioned above. The investigations have been supported by the postdoctoral research grant awarded by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (2019-2021). The current phase of my project, encapsulated in the exhibition, encompasses a process of artistic experimentation with the gathered materials, that resulted in sculptural casts of material fragments of hideouts architecture, the aim of which is to 'distil' social memory from architectural detail. I have applied non-standard scanning methods to the existing hiding places using geodetic tools designed for exploring the bottom of lakes and seas. The obtained digital data has been used to construct three-dimensional renders of the hideouts' architecture. The images documenting the final result of this phase of the research process, i.e. my solo exhibition at the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, is featured here as a visual layer of the text. This form mirrors the functional concept of the exhibition, which combines the research-based, narrative exhibition on the phenomena of Jewish hideouts, with the sculptural installations, the aim of which is to preserve and popularize memory about the – otherwise concealed and often forgotten – architecture of Jewish survival.

Context

The subject matter of Jews going into hiding and the assistance they had received have appeared in various research contexts of the Holocaust, but we know little about the architecture of the hiding places themselves: for once because of their erosion, but also because the researchers have focused on the fate of those in hiding and their rescuers. The project scrutinizes hideouts that were used by Jewish citizens of Central and Eastern Europe to survive the Second World War. I analyze how did persecuted people create an infrastructure of survival, whilst working under extreme duress, considering hideouts as monuments to their ingenuity.

The Polish case is a representative example of this tragic history. It is estimated that during the Second World War out of 3 million Jewish citizens who lived in pre-war Poland, only 50,000 survived the Holocaust by being hidden among the mainstream 'Aryan' population. Some of them managed to survive in this manner by themselves, while others were helped by their compatriots. Most survivors had to refurbish existing architecture (attics, sewers and cellars) to serve as their hideouts, or build new shelters in dugouts, in the hollows of trees, or even in empty graves. This basic infrastructure of survival not only had to conceal people, but also sustain their basic life functions, provide shelter, food, air, water, dispose waste, etc. – using only a couple of square meters. The geographic focus of my research is in Poland and Ukraine, where traces of uninvestigated hideouts still proliferate.



3D scan of Józef oak tree, Przemysław Kluźniak (ArchiTube)

Historical Sources on Hideouts

My research process starts with meticulous archival research, evolves by conducting site visits and architectural surveys, and concludes with artistic processing of gathered materials. I analyze existing memories and testimonies in search of relevant architectural details. Important role is played by the statements of witnesses presented to the Jewish Historical Committee. Some of them, which are still available only in Polish, contain detailed descriptions of hiding places. Memories of war and persecution are not only expressions of pain, and fear. Very often they contain extremely detailed descriptions of places where people often spent entire years – the written traces of the secret architecture of hideouts. Only very rarely are these written memories accompanied by visual material in the form of photographs or sketches. But more often than not, they are described very illustratively through words, as if their images had been imprinted on human minds. For this reason, a major part of my research consists of the analysis of archival materials and published sources in search of such

descriptions of Jewish war-time hideouts. For example, the testimonies of Regina Riegelhaupt-Kempińska, a Jewish woman who survived the war with her child, hiding outside of the ghetto, is particularly rich in spatial references. Just after the Second World War finished, she testified in front of the Jewish Historical Committee in Kraków. In her testimony she described dozens of hideouts, as she had to often flee from one to another, sometimes spending less than twenty-four hours in any one place. The documents – now publicly available at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews – describe how she hid with her child at a farmer's house, in a stable, in a cellar, in bushes, in a shed, behind an oven. Sometimes, however, these stories are not quite so distressing, being more focused on just one place. For example, the memories of Zofia Lewiarz (Lila Lachs) describe how she hid in the presbytery of an Orthodox church in south-eastern Poland, using camouflage and subterfuge to conceal her identity. In this case, she was hiding in the open, using the entire presbytery as her refuge. Her memories are full of everyday detail, still brimming with life. In search of these almost lost memories, I visit the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, POLIN, Polish Centre for Holocaust Studies, the archive of oral history at the Theatre NN/Brama Grodzka in Lublin, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, and the YIVO/Yiddish Scientific Institute in New York. I survey the materials contained in the Ringelblum Archive, the secret archive of Warsaw Ghetto, as preserved in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Consisting of a total of 1,680 documents, the latter offers one of the most important sources of information on Jewish life under the Nazi occupation.

However, as I focus on still-existing hideouts, I check these accounts in search of some direct reference spatial references, which I later localize, visit, and make artistic casts of. In this way, I have followed the memoirs of Chaika Klinger, that were critically abridged by her son Avihu Ronen, to locate the hideout in Siemianowice Śląskie. Similarly, I have followed the published memories of Klara Kramer, who hid in the cellar of a private house in Zhovkva, which we visited, scanned, documented, and made a cast of. The memories of Krystyna Chiger and Ignacy Chiger, led me to the section sewage system in Lviv, that was investigated by Urban Explorers, a group of amateur investigators, together with a professional historian Anna Tyczka. Following the written memories, they have managed to locate a section where the Chiger families hid, and conduct there archaeological excavations that revealed several objects left there by the survivors. Another, similar example, was the documentary movie *No Place on Earth*, directed by a speleologist Chris Nicola and Janet Tobias, who documented the case of families Stermer, who hid in the caves Vertreba and Ozernaya in Ukraine. That directed me to this unique place, where I conducted my spatial investigations. Other cases (such as the hideout located in a vacant lot on the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw or the case of Denholz brothers hiding in an oak tree in Wiśniowa) were much more obscured, just known from oral histories and urban legends, in these situations a proper archival investigation was required, locating source materials, finding survivors,

conducting interviews, preceded by site visits and spatial investigation, which will be explained in detail in particular cases.

Academic literature on hiding

In spite of their significance, the hideouts in which Jews were hiding during the Second World War are to a large extent left out of the discourses of contemporary anthropology, artistic research and architectural studies. My research (and planned book) aims to fill this gap. By emphasizing the architectural and anthropological dimension of hideouts, my research uniquely contributes to the vast field of Holocaust studies, and particularly studies of its material and social dimension (Engelking and Grabowski 2018, Polonsky 2007, Cobel-Tokarska 2018). The subject matter of Jews going into hiding and the assistance they had received has appeared in various research contexts of the Holocaust, but we know little about the architecture of the hiding places themselves: for once because of their erosion, but also because the researchers have focused on the fate of those in hiding and their rescuers. The topic of Jews in hiding and those helping them has appeared in various Shoah research contexts, and especially in thousands of memoirs and diaries, such as Marian Berland's *Dni długie jak wieki* [Days as long as ages], or the multi-volume *Dzieci Holocaustu Mówią* [Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust Speak], edited by Katarzyna Meloch. The most important publications of the recent years, which have dealt (in a critical way) with the subject of hiding and hiding places, include the following: Marta Cobel-Tokarska, *Desert Island, Burrow, Grave. Wartime Hiding Places of Jews in Occupied Poland.*; Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu.* [Judenjagd: Hunting for Jews 1942–1945. Study of the history of one county]; Anna Bikont, *Sendlerowa. W ukryciu* [Sendler. In Hiding], a substantial tome co-edited by Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski *Dalej jest noc. Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski* [Night without End: The Fate of Jews in Selected Counties of Occupied Poland], Jacek Leociak's *Ratowanie. Opowieści Polaków i Żydów* [Life Saving. Stories of Poles and Jews] and Barbara Engelking's *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945*. Important articles dealing with the topic of hiding places include, among others, Michał Grynberg, *Strategie przetrwania. Bunkry i schrony w warszawskim getcie* [Survival strategies. Bunkers and shelters in the Warsaw Ghetto], Natalia Aleksion, *Daily Survival. Social History of Jews in Family Bunkers in Eastern Galicia* and Gunnar S. Paulsson, *The Demography of Jews in Hiding in Warsaw, 1943–1945*. Articles on hiding places can be also found in the *Yad Vashem Studies* and *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* scholarly journals. Relevant material on hiding places and stories of survivors can also be found on such websites as: www.sprawiedliwi.org.pl and www.teatrnn.pl/sprawiedliwi-lubelszczyzna/.

By researching the architecture of survival built and maintained under extreme circumstances, I will offer new insights into the anthropological dimension of architecture (Buchli 2015), addressing the architectural paradox that hideouts catered to the bare life of people in hiding in spite of or rather due to their unspectacular character. My interests in the radical modesty of hideouts and their 'ability to disappear', counters the ethnographic fascination with star architects and their iconic buildings (Yaneva 2009). My research contributes to the discussion on craftsmanship, art, and human agency by expanding on Alfred Gell's analysis of animal traps as 'networks of complex intentionalities' (Gell 1996). I discuss hideouts as traps-in-reverse, architectural apparatuses designed by people in hiding, who modelled the strategies of their oppressors in order to thwart them. My research will contribute to a more acute understanding of the undercover mode of producing the space (Lefebvre 2008), that informally transforms buildings from the inside out, radically changing their functions whilst keeping the appearances and facades intact. As this change of function did not involve a dramatic makeshift of material form, it might suggest more ephemeral operations specific to the 'architecture of immaterial' (Hill 2006). Even though I appreciate this perspective, my research is going to tackle the material dimension of hideouts, as testimonies to the craftsmanship of their builders (who often had to work at night and use simple materials such as soil, clay and wood). I also apply Jane Rendell's method of 'critical spatial practice,' a synthesis of theoretical spatial research, memory studies, architectural practice, and public art (Rendell 2010). My aim is to further the debate on 'forensic architecture' and the utilisation of artistic and architectural methodology in the context of human rights and their violations (Weizman 2019).

Methodology

I try to reconstruct the spatial dimension of the tensely stretched membrane between the hideout interior and its exterior as I apply the methods of art and architecture to the chosen cases. I combine review of existing literature and documentaries (such as memoirs of survivors), archival research, archaeological excavations, interviews with survivors and witnesses, site visits, investigations of material remnants of still existing hideouts with methods of digital humanities (3D scans of hideouts) and contemporary art. Every hideout is represented at my last exhibition at Zachęta (Warsaw) as a sculptural cast. The process unfolds in a following manner. At first, a team of fabricators takes a silicon mould of an architectural detail of a given hideout, supported by a form made from wood and plaster. This mould is casted in chemical resins, to create an exact copy of the architectural detail. The backside of the sculptural form is filled with soil-based mixture, that adds an earthly layer to the model. The frontside is covered with layers of silver, by a group of conservators, who polish the silvery layer till it is semi-reflective, creating an aesthetically compelling effect.

My interdisciplinary methodology is aimed at documenting and reconstructing hideouts, understanding their anthropological aspects, studying social memory, and working with artistic means of their commemoration. My research contributes to the Holocaust studies by accentuating the material and architectural dimension of living in hiding. By focusing on vernacular, architectural creativity employed under life-threatening conditions, the project widens anthropological understanding of architecture.

The project focuses on the spatial dimension of the tensely stretched membrane between the interior and exterior of the hideouts by utilizing methods of art and architecture to the chosen cases: the cellar in Siemianowice Śląskie where Chajka Klinger, a Hashomer Hatzair organisation activist, stayed in hiding; a bunker built inside a grave at the Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw - the hiding place of Abraham Carmi; a hollow in the inside of a tree trunk of a 650-year-old oak named Józef that grows in the village of Wiśniowa in Polish Sub-Carpathian region, in which the Denholz brothers hid; the monastery in Jarosław, in which nuns were keeping Jewish children in a cellar hidden behind a double fake wardrobe; the municipal sewage system in Lviv; and the bunker where Jewish youth from the ŻOB (The Jewish Combat Organization) died during the Uprising in Będzin. The particular cases are described in detail in the following sections, based on the texts presented in the research-oriented part of the exhibition, co-written and edited with an anthropologist Aleksandra Janus, who supported the investigations as a scientific advisor.

The case studies

A hideout in the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street (Warsaw, Poland)



Natalia Romik during her research in the hideout, photo: Rafał Żwirek, Warsaw, 2021

In quarter no. 41 in the Jewish cemetery on Okopowa Street in Warsaw, a hiding place created during the war by Izaak Posner, then the cemetery's intendant, and Moshe Aroniak, a stonemason, has been preserved. It was made by widening and bricking up a pit prepared for a grave, which resulted in a roughly square room that could accommodate several people standing. The ceiling was formed from *matzevot* (Jewish tombstones) placed on two tram rails.

The hideout provided temporary shelter for members of the Posner and Aroniak families. It was used by several people when necessary. Posner and Aroniak and most of their relatives did not survive the war; some of them died in or near the hideout when it was discovered in 1942. Of those who used this shelter, only two teenage boys survived the war — Abraham Carmi (formerly Abraham Stolbach) and Dawid 'Jurek' Płoński. They both took refuge in many other places after 1942 and settled in Israel after the war.

A hideout in a private house (Zhovkva/Żółkiew, Ukraine)



Contemporary interior of the Melhman's house, photo: Natalia Romik, Zhovkva/Żółkiew, 2021

A hiding place hollowed out in the ground under a private house on Lvivska Street has been preserved where the Schwarz, Patrontasch, Steckl and Mehlman Jewish families hid. The hiding place was established in the house of the latter, which — in agreement with the people in hiding — was taken over by the Volksdeutsche Walenty Beck and his family to provide them with shelter. Originally, the Mehlman house had no cellar, and the hideout was hollowed out in secret from the neighbours under the floor of the ground floor and was accessed through a masked hatch in the parquet of one of the rooms. At its peak, 18 people hid in this space, some of them for 20 months (22 November 1942–23 July 1944). The Becks did not take money for their help, and the costs of keeping those in hiding were covered by money from selling off their pre-war possessions. Some of the shelter's inhabitants moved around the house until three Wehrmacht soldiers and two German railwaymen were housed there. A detailed record of this time is the diary kept by Klara Schwarz (later Kramer), who was hiding there. Despite the denunciations and the fire that engulfed the house in 1943, all the inhabitants of the hiding place survived the war, except for Klara's sister, Mania, who, leaving the hideout in a panic, was recognised in the street and led to the gendarmerie station, and then shot in the local Jewish cemetery.

A hideout in the city sewage system (Lviv/Lwów, Ukraine)



3D scan of the hideout in sewage system Lviv, Przemysław Kluźniak (ArchiTube)

During the Second World War, dozens of Jews hid in the city sewage system in Lviv, including a group gathered around Ignacy Chiger, who were helped by Leopold Socha and two other sewage workers, Stefan Wróblewski and Jerzy Kowalow. Chiger, together with Jakub Berestycki and a man called Weiss, prepared the passage to the sewers by digging a tunnel in the cellar under one of the barracks in the labour camp into which the Lviv ghetto had been transformed at the beginning of 1943. Ignacy and Paulina Chiger, with their two children, Krystyna and Paul, as well as Chiger's brother-in-law, Kuba Leinwand, and Paulina's father, Josef Gold, went down into the sewers with a small group of people on 30 May 1943, at the time of the final liquidation of the ghetto. They were not the only people seeking rescue there. Leopold Socha, who had made an appointment with them earlier, confronted a group of nearly 70 people waiting for help and agreed to help the 21 chosen ones for a fee. The group to which the Chiger family belonged hid in several locations, including under the Church of Our Lady of the Snows, and later also near the Bernardine Church. They stayed there until 27 July 1944, when Socha brought them to the surface. There are material traces of those in hiding in the Lviv sewage system, found in 2021 by Anna Tyczka (Urban Explorers Lviv).

This story became known through the book *The Girl in the Green Sweater* (2008), written by the Chigers' daughter Krystyna, Ignacy Chiger's memoirs *Świat w mroku* [World in darkness] (2011), and the film *In Darkness* (2011), directed by Agnieszka Holland.

A hiding place in the Józef oak tree (Wiśniowa, Poland)



Inspection of the tree interior, photo: District Centre of Culture and Tourism in Wiśniowa, 2021

The more than 650-year-old Józef oak grows in the park on the grounds of the palace and manor complex in Wiśniowa in the Podkarpacie region. The local community retains the memory that it was a wartime hiding place for Jewish brothers, which is also confirmed by a post-war account by a journalist named Julian Pelc. The Józef oak is a chimney tree, hollow in the middle almost the whole height. During the war, there was an entrance to its interior on a level accessible to people. Today, the entrance is overgrown and only a small crack remains, through which you can look inside. Inside the tree are a dozen wooden steps and metal brackets.

For Dawid and Paul Denholz, who came from nearby Frysztak, it was probably one of many hiding places. After escaping in 1942 from the KL Plaszow camp in Kraków, they hid in the surrounding forests, fields and farms. Some former neighbours came to their aid, others posed a mortal threat to them. They were the only members of their family to survive the war, and after it ended, they both settled in the United States.

A hideout in the Verteba cave (Ukraine)



The inscription 'Ha-Shomer' in the Verteba cave, photo: Natalia Romik, 2021

In the Verteba gypsum cave (Ternopil Oblast) the Stermer family from nearby Korolivka hid during the war. Esther and Zaide Stermer had six children and were also accompanied by a son-in-law and two granddaughters. Initially they tried to survive in bunkers built by their sons at the site, but in 1942 they were forced to seek other shelter. Together with Esther's sister-in-law, Ira Wexler and her two children, they hid in the Verteba cave, easily accessible from ground level. A place near the cave entrance was adapted as a hideout, but later the group was forced to move deeper. There were separate spaces for sleeping, cooking and other activities. Initially, three men still worked on the surface, supplying food and water to those in hiding. After the uncovering of the hiding place in 1943, part of the group was captured, and others dispersed. During this time, Ira Wexler and her son Leo were killed by a Ukrainian policeman who had taken a bribe to spare the family's life, while three others were spared.

The family's story was described by Esther Stermer in her book *We Fight to Survive* (2008) and featured in Janet Tobias' film *No Place on Earth* (2012) made in collaboration with cave enthusiast Chris Nicola. Traces of their presence can still be found in both caves.

A hideout in the Ozerna cave (Ukraine)



Research in the Ozerna cave, photo: Natalia Romik, 2021

The Ozerna cave (Ternopil Oblast) was another hideout of the Stermer family, after their previous shelter was discovered. As of 1 May 1943, a total of 38 people lived in the cave. The cave, whose name means 'of the lake' in Polish, branches off into corridors almost 150 km long and there is access to drinking water. Those hiding there, just as in the Verteba cave, developed and equipped the spaces inside the cave, for example with a quern for grinding grain, which is still there today. Ozerna is much harder to reach than Verteba, which saved the lives of those in hiding when they were betrayed by a former acquaintance of the Stermer brothers. Unlike in the previous hiding place, here the men also remained hidden, but they regularly came to the surface (mainly at night) to get food and fuel. The

entire group left the cave on 12 April 1944, some people surviving in both caves for as many as 511 days.

The family's story was described by Esther Stermer in her book *We Fight to Survive* (2008) and featured in Janet Tobias' film *No Place on Earth* (2012) made in collaboration with cave enthusiast Chris Nicola. Traces of their presence can still be found in both caves.

Wardrobe from Huta Zaborowska (Poland)



Exhibition in Zachęta, photo. Jakub Celej

In 2020, the new owners of a house in Huta Zaborowska (Mazowieckie Province) noticed drawings and inscriptions in a wooden wardrobe, indicating that it may have been a wartime hiding place, most likely for a Jewish child or teenager. The wardrobe was made before the war by one of the members of the family of the first owners of the house, the Zapałowskis, and then served the next generations of the family. In 2000, the house was sold, and the new owners moved the wardrobe to a storage room in an outbuilding during renovations, where it was found by subsequent buyers in 2020.

The family of the first owners had preserved the account that two children were sheltered on the farm: a boy named Jakub and a younger girl of unknown name, but nothing is known about their identity and origin. The wardrobe is private property and is currently held by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in collaboration with Luiza Nader and Aleksandra Janus are conducting research into the object and its history.

A hideout in the convent of the Immaculate Conception Sisters (Jarosław, Poland)



A hideout in the convent of the Immaculate Conception Sisters, photo. Natalia Romik

In the convent of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Jarosław, a wooden cupboard has been preserved, masking the entrance to the cellar, where a shelter was located during the war. The back wall of this makeshift cupboard, to which the shelves are attached, is in fact a door leading to a secret room from which you enter the cellar. The hiding place was prepared in September 1939 by Sister Tymomea and a monastery mechanic named Podpierko. At that time, the basement windows were also blacked out — using paper, duvets and blankets. Today the wardrobe and the room behind it are used as storage.

During the war, the hideout was used by various people, including Jewish children hiding in the monastery. The exact number of Jewish girls who survived the war there and their post-war fate is not known.

A hiding place in the basement of a tenement house (Lviv/Lwów, Ukraine)



3D scan of the hideout in Lviv (Ormiańska Street), Przemysław Kluźniak (ArchiTube)

In 2020, during renovation and maintenance work carried out in the basement of a 15th-century historic tenement building in Lviv, a space was discovered that was most likely a wartime hiding place. Oleh Rybchynskyi of the Department of Architecture at Lviv Polytechnic University, who made the discovery, stresses that the site looks hastily bricked up and must have been prepared by someone who knew the building and its construction well, and that some of the objects found there date back to the Second World War.

The building itself was the home of many Jewish families before the war, including Julius Backfein, his wife Anna and son Zygmunt. During the war, Anna, together with her daughter-in-law Pola and her grandson Sewer, born in 1941, hid in various places: in the flat, in the attic, possibly also in the cellar. Anna, Pola and Sewer survived the war and returned to Lviv in the 1990s. Sewer (Shabtai) still lives in Israel today in the city of Herzliya.

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