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**DEATH AND LIFE VALLEY. ENVIRONMENTAL
MEMORY OF THE POMERANIAN CRIME OF 1939
IN CHOJNICE****Dolina Śmierci i życia. Środowiskowa pamięć o zbrodni
pomorskiej 1939 w Chojnicach**

Abstract: The article concerns the environmental histories of Death Valley, Chojnice, Poland, the execution site from the Second World War. The authors discuss the historical and archaeological evidence related to German mass crimes committed near the town during the war, especially in the environmental context of the killing sites. The main assumption is to show – based on an ethnographic field study – that Death Valley despite its designation, appears in local memory as a lively place. Through the lens of environmental anthropology, it is possible to identify those natural features of mass killing sites that not only have not yet been included in the mainstream of historical and archaeological research but

also are essential to the present vernacular recognition of environmental specificity of Death Valley's post-war landscape.

Keywords: Second World War, Death Valley, execution site, mass graves, archaeology, environmental anthropology, environmental memory

Streszczenie: Artykuł dotyczy środowiskowych historii związanych z chojnicką Doliną Śmierci – miejscem kaźni z czasów II wojny światowej. Autorzy omawiają dotychczasowe historyczne oraz archeologiczne opracowania dotyczące dowodów niemieckich, masowych zbrodni dokonanych pod miastem, skupiając się na ich środowiskowym kontekście. Głównym założeniem jest pokazanie – w oparciu o wyniki etnograficznych badań terenowych – że Dolina Śmierci na przekór swej nazwie funkcjonuje w lokalnej pamięci jako miejsce pełne życia. Perspektywa antropologii środowiskowej umożliwia zidentyfikowanie naturalnych charakterystyk miejsc masowych mordów, które nie zostały ujęte w dotychczasowych badaniach historycznych i archeologicznych, a które są także istotne dla współczesnego oddolnego odczytania środowiskowej specyfiki powojennego krajobrazu Doliny Śmierci.

Słowa kluczowe: II wojna światowa, Dolina Śmierci, miejsce kaźni, groby masowe, archeologia, antropologia środowiskowa, pamięć środowiskowa

This valley is still alive
It speaks to us years later
A word torn out of pain of
Father, mother or brother
(Żelazny 1998: 69)

Introduction – “An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939”

“An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939” is the title of a new, multidisciplinary, international research project which, in short, deals with the material traces of German crimes committed in the first

months of the Second World War in Pomerania province, Poland, and the contemporary memory of them, as well as widely understood legacy of those crimes (Kobiąka 2022). The acts of extermination under the so-called *Intelligenzaktion* (Wardzyńska 2009), the murder of people with mental problems (*Aktion T4*) (Evans 2004; Nasierowski 2008) and the liquidation of the Pomeranian Jewish community (Sziling 1992) are now more and more often referred to in the (Polish) historical discourse under one term – “The Pomeranian Crime of 1939” (see more in Ceran 2014; Mazanowska, Ceran 2016; Mazanowska 2017; Ceran et al. 2018).

The mass exterminations of (mainly) Polish citizens by *Wehrmacht* soldiers, officers of the German security services (*Einsatzgruppen SS*), the Security Police (*Sicherheitspolizei*) and local German minorities organised by *Selbstschutz Westpreussen* has been studied by historians (e.g. Madajczyk 1970). The situation was similar in the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodship, where terror and the number of crimes and Polish victims were the highest in the whole country (e.g. Bojarska 1972; Jastrzębski, Sziling 1979). In the post-war period, crimes committed, as well as attempts of covering up the traces were the subject of official investigations conducted by the competent authorities and institutions established for the prosecution of war criminals (e.g. Buchholz 1947; Ceran et al. 2018).

The extermination of Polish citizens during the Second World War has been the subject of historical research for many years (Bojarska 1972; Wardzyńska 2009). This research has helped to establish many important facts about the executions that took place between 1939 and 1945. In addition, mass crimes and their broadly understood legacy have for some time been the subject of important initiatives in the fields of archaeology and cultural anthropology (e.g. Ławrynowicz, Żelazko 2015). Multidisciplinary research on the Spanish Civil War is one of the most obvious examples of this observation (e.g. González-Ruibal 2020; Muñoz-Encinar 2020). In fact, it was the research of Spanish colleagues that was one of the main points of reference during the preparation of “An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939”.

The strictly historical aspect of our work is still a crucial element of the research methodology adopted. However, it was assumed that the

methods and tools of archaeological and ethnographic research could significantly enrich the contemporary knowledge about the mass crimes committed by the Germans in the early years of the Second World War in the Pomeranian province, as well as look at the contemporary legacy of these events in a new way – and these are perspectives that are essentially absent in Polish studies of German crimes during the Second World War. In doing so, we followed the advice of many researchers for whom archaeology and ethnography (cultural/social anthropology) are essentially part of a larger research field (Ingold 2018). Important works in the field of ethnography and archaeology of the recent past can also be found in the Polish context (e.g. Krupa-Ławrynowicz, Ławrynowicz 2019).

One of the execution sites, which are our case study of historical, archaeological and ethnographic works as a part of “An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939” is Pola Igielskie (in English Igielskie Fields) – the northern outskirts of Chojnice in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, where the Nazi Germans carried out mass executions of the Polish population during the Second World War (Kobiałka 2022). In the following parts of this article, we discuss the historical and archaeological contexts of the execution sites near Chojnice, named after them as Death Valley. Next, we outline the theoretical framework of our argument. The key chapters of this text are a case study showing Death Valley as also a place full of life. Thanks to environmental anthropology (e.g. Smykowski 2018), it is also possible to notice those elements of execution sites that have not yet been included in the mainstream of historical (as well as archaeological and ethnographic) research of this type of landscape.

Chojnice’s Death Valley – historical context

The historical context of the mass executions near Chojnice has already been presented in more detail in several other articles, published in both Polish and English (e.g. Kobiałka et al. 2020, 2021, 2022). There are also more general syntheses of German crimes in Gdańsk Pomerania during

the first months of the Second World War, which include shootings carried out outside the town (e.g. Bojarska 1972).

For further discussion, it should be noted that Death Valley is one of approximately 400 currently known sites where individual, collective or mass executions were carried out as part of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 within the borders of the pre-war Pomeranian Voivodeship (Ceran et al. 2018). It is also one of the few, which is crucial for our further discussion, where the Third Reich officers murdered several hundred Poles in the second half of January 1945 – their bodies were then burned to cover up the traces of the crime (Buchholz 1947; Kobiółka 2022). The first executions on the outskirts of Chojnice (the so-called Town Forest) began in September 1939. However, they reached a collective and mass dimension in the second half of October, when – according to archival materials – the Germans carried out executions on the local community in several locations (e.g. the so-called Dalecki’s field, Doks’ field and the forest) (Buchholz 1947). The largest of them, however, was Pola Igielskie – a post-glacial area near the hamlet called Dolina (in English Valley) (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Igielskie Fields – the crime scene from the autumn of 1939. These areas were initially called “Death Valley” by the inhabitants of the town and the surrounding area (author D. Frymark).

The crimes committed against the inhabitants of Chojnice and the county are a textbook example of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939. Post-war searches, research and official investigations show that the Germans murdered the intelligentsia in the broadest sense in the vicinity of the town: teachers, clergymen, state officials, etc. (see more in Kobiałka 2022). Part of the extermination in the autumn of 1939 was the so-called “elimination of life unworthy of life”, which literally meant executions of people with mental problems who, according to Nazi ideology, did not deserve to live. Thousands of such people were murdered, and their bodies were then thrown into the death pits of the largest execution sites of the period: Piaśnica Forests (Bojarska 2009), Szpegawski Forest (Kubicki 2019) or Mniszek-Grupa (Kozłowski 1992).

In Chojnice there was a ward of the hospital in Kocborowo – the so-called National Social Welfare Institutions. The surviving eyewitness accounts confirm that at the end of October 1939, at least 218 residents were transported to the surrounding fields – none of the patients escaped the execution alive, except for some nurses who later testified about this event (Kobiałka et al. 2022). The last group of people taken to Death Valley, and many similar execution sites in the autumn of 1939, were representatives of the local Jewish community. In the case of Chojnice, there were about 15 people – sometimes entire Jewish families with children were led to the execution sites (Borzyszkowska-Szewczyk, Pletzing 2010). Merchants, farmers, peasants and manual workers also lost their lives outside the town – personal pre-war conflicts with the local German minority were very often the basis for a vendetta that ended with execution over the death pits and taking over of the murdered person’s property.

After the war, at the turn of November and December 1945, exhumations were carried out near Chojnice. 168 bodies or their fragments (skulls) were found in Igielskie Fields – 53 of them were recognised by the families and relatives. From one of the military trenches used as a mass grave for the mentally ill people, only the skulls of 61 residents were excavated. The rest of their bodies of the remaining over 150 people were not exhumed for unknown reasons. Fieldworkers also found material evidence of the burning of the bodies of several hundred people in Death Valley

in the second half of January 1945. This evidence along with the human remains were not exhumed either – as the historical record shows.

German crimes committed outside the town during the Second World War have been the subject of interest of local history enthusiasts (so-called regionalists) (Lorbiecki 2017) and professional researchers (e.g. Bojarska 1972) over the last decades. However, it was the use of methods and tools of archaeological and ethnographic research that made it possible to make new, ground-breaking findings regarding the mass crimes committed in Chojnice's Death Valley (e.g. Kobińska et al. 2020, 2021, 2022).

Chojnice's Death Valley – archaeological context

Despite numerous indications that there might be material traces of German crimes from 1939-1945 near Chojnice (Buchholz 1947), no further field activities have been carried out since the exhumations from the autumn of 1945. The research thesis that there might be material traces of crimes from the Second World War on the northern outskirts of the town and that memories and family heirlooms related to the extermination of the autumn of 1939 might have survived among the town's inhabitants was positively verified in 2020 as part of the scientific project entitled "An Archaeology of Death Valley" (e.g. Kobińska et al. 2021, 2022).

The works consisted of three pillars. The first of them was tentatively called the history of Death Valley. As part of it, a collection and critical analysis of selected historical sources related to German crimes committed near the town during the Second World War were carried out. The post-war stories' relations were an important background for the reconstruction of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 in Chojnice and the county. The documents related to the activities of the District Committee for Commemorating the Victims of Nazi Crimes in Chojnice – an institution established, among others, in order to find the graves of victims murdered in the region in the years 1939-1945 – were valuable. Importantly, it was clear from these historical sources that not all graves were found and exhumed after the war (Kobińska et al. 2022). The second component of

the project focused on ethnography – its idea was to use anthropological research methods and tools to analyse the contemporary role and significance of the execution sites for the inhabitants of Chojnice and the county. The research allowed to document and record many important, unknown memories, documents related to people murdered in the autumn of 1939 on the northern outskirts of the town and family heirlooms passed down from generation to generation (Kobiałka et al. 2020). However, the fundamental aspect of the 2020's activities was archaeological – the idea behind it was to use archaeological methods and tools to find material traces of the crimes. As a result, more than 300 artefacts from the Second World War were found. The key, even ground-breaking result of “An Archaeology of Death Valley” was the discovery of burnt human remains – the material traces of the crime committed by the officers of the Third Reich near the town in the second half of January 1945 (Kobiałka et al. 2022).

As a result of this discovery, Tomasz Jankowski, head of the Investigation Division of the Institute of National Remembrance in Gdańsk, initiated an official investigation into the mass crime committed near Chojnice. In 2021, funds were obtained to carry out archaeological and exhumation works at the recently found execution site near Chojnice. This was the main goal of the work carried out under the project entitled “The Terrible Smell of Burning – Archaeological Research of the Place of Execution in Chojnice’s Death Valley” (Kobiałka et al. 2022). Nearly a ton of burnt human remains, over four thousand artefacts and their fragments being material traces of the crime, and numerous samples of wood used to build the pyre on which the bodies of the victims were burned were discovered during the field research in 2021. The archival query conducted for the purposes of the investigation allowed for the selection of over 120 Poles who were most likely murdered in Death Valley in the second half of January 1945 (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Corroded German pistol shell –material evidence of the mass crime committed in the second half of January 1945 in Death Valley (the area previously called Ostrówek). As a result of archaeological research, almost a ton of burnt human remains were found belonging to several hundred people (author D. Frymark).

The field experience gained in 2020-2021 and the effectiveness of the methodology adopted based on the integration of historical, ethnographic and archaeological research methods were the main arguments for continuing and expanding the existing activities. The result is “An Archaeology of the Pomeranian Crime 1939”, in which Chojnice’s Death Valley is a case study along with three other execution sites from the autumn of 1939 in Gdańsk Pomerania. Environmental anthropology is one of the theoretical frameworks adopted to extend the existing research and understanding of the execution site near Chojnice.

Chojnice's Death Valley – environmental context

In August 2022, preliminary ethnographic research was carried out on the dynamics of the landscape of Death Valley in Chojnice. It lasted 14 days and its aim was to identify the main themes related to: 1) the environmental memory of executions and mass graves in Death Valley, 2) the perception and practice of the landscape of Death Valley, 3) changes in the topography and anthropogenic transformations of the local ecosystem, 4) vegetation management at the site of memory. In order to implement the above assumptions, a wide range of existing sources was used (e.g. scientific studies, literature on the subject, archives, maps, Internet articles, poetry) as well as ethnographic data (e.g. visual material, ethnographic interviews, local visions, substantive consultations, informal conversations, in-depth field observations).

The inspiration to consider nature as an important factor shaping the past and present of Death Valley's landscape comes from research approaches and theoretical perspectives within the contemporary humanities such as: the environmental history of wartime (see: Laakkonen, Tucker, Vourisalo 2017) and environmental history of the Holocaust (Małczyński 2018; Małczyński, Domańska, Smykowski, Kłos 2020), environmental anthropology, especially of forested areas (Kończal 2018), multi-species ethnography (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010) and environmental history of mass graves (Domańska 2017, 2018, 2020). Fieldwork was conducted from the perspective of mass grave ethnography (Bennett 2015; Wosińska 2017), ethnography of exhumations (Ferrandiz, Robben 2015) and landscape anthropology (Hirsch, O'Hanlon 1995; Tilley, Daum 2017; Ingold 2018). The idea behind the research was the postulate of environmental historians that the stories of people – including the tragic ones – that have been described in a more traditional (anthropocentric) way, should be extended to include topics and contexts that have not been represented in mainstream studies so far. For this reason, the micro-history of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 committed in the northern part of Chojnice was supplemented with environmental themes. This was made possible both by the eco-critical analysis of existing historical sources (Buell 2005),

the analysis of narratives regarding environmental memory (Buell 2017; Praczyk 2018), as well as the development of ethnographic empirical materials that show the ecological dynamics of sites of violence, executions and mass killings.

Expanding the spectrum of sources of knowledge about the environmental specificity of Death Valley was crucial to the project. The research approaches that have inspired the search are bioarchaeology and forensic botany (MacKay 2009; Bajerlein et al. 2015), based on the assumption that non-human witnesses of crime scenes may not only be key evidence in the search for unidentified graves (Caccianiga, Bottacin, Cattaneo 2012), but also be treated as ecological testimonies (Domańska 2017, Smykowski 2017) and environmental commemorations (Sendyka 2017). The environmental stories of the crime scene in Death Valley thus fit into the broader current of research on (non-)sites of memory from a topographical (Sendyka 2020; Sendyka, Kobińska, Muchowski, Szczepan 2020; Sendyka, Janus, Jarzyńska, Siewior 2020), necro-ecological (Domańska 2017) and forensic perspective (Cyr 2014; Dziuban 2017; Smykowski 2018).

The final aim of the conducted research was to document the temporal nature of the landscape (Ingold 2018). First of all, it was important to identify how the place, affected by the history of mass murders during the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 and the shootings of 1945, looks like today; secondly, how this place functions in local memory and vernacular knowledge. The research questions posed to the landscape, and above all, to the ethnographic interviews, focused on how the people who have lived in the area for over 80 years have positioned themselves in the face of a difficult history and its material remnants as part of everyday socio-cultural practices. Interesting research problems were: 1) the overlapping of historical time and vegetation cycles; 2) anthropogenic landscape changes dictated by diverse human activities in Death Valley and on its outskirts (Igielskie Fields); 3) the dynamics of the vegetation transformations accompanying the commemoration of those murdered on the northern part of the town.

Death (and life) Valley – topography of the crime scene

The toponym “valley” appears on pre-war maps from around 1937 as a description of a depression in the area between the City Forest and the terrains bordering on Chojniczki (village), and Igielskie Fields, stretching towards Czartołomie and Jarcewo (villages). Literally, it refers to the valley of the local stream known as Jarcewska Struga, which flows through Chojnice in a south-north direction. The river, mostly canalised in urban areas, flows into Death Valley on the northern outskirts of Chojnice as a canal with a regulated bed resembling a drainage ditch. Until recently, it was known colloquially as the *Modejka* by the local residents (from the German *Modergraben*, meaning rot) due to its state of pollution and the stench it spread (Ostrowski 2009). Today, Jarcewska Struga is also said to smell of illegal septic tanks and water from the local dairy (I_13).

Smell, stench, stink – these words have a strong connotation in the stories of the inhabitants of Chojnice about Death Valley and its local landscape, not only because of the contemporary context but above all because of the process of covering up the traces of the mass killings of the Second World War. It should be noted that it is primarily the memories of the war and occupation, years that are associated with the smell of burning that spread through the area and reached the nearest residential buildings in the valley on cremation pyres in the second half of January 1945 (Buchholz 1947: 70; Kobiałka 2021). As already highlighted by Buchholz (1947: 27): “There is a valley not far from Chojnice, in the fields near Igły, which the people rightly called Death Valley”. This macabre image would cast a long shadow over the next decades of thinking about (and experiencing the very landscape of the seemingly charming corner of Chojnice’s Death Valley.

Józef Borzyszkowski (2010: 544-545), in one of the chapters of “Dzieje Chojnic” (in English *The History of Chojnice*), notes that the inhabitants used the name from around November/December 1939. Although, as one of the interviewees points out, it was widely adopted only after the war:

It seems to me that this name was created after the war and it seems to me that these names were already used somewhere in Poland [...]. And it also seems to have been transferred here to our area too, this “Death Valley” [...]. And “Death Valley” is probably because it is a basin after a post-glacial valley and actually the whole stretch from Chojnice to Igły is in such a pit, in such a gutter, right? And maybe that’s why this gorge, and because these executions took place there, death (I_12).

The area to which the name applies is heterogeneous and comprises a topographically diverse landscape formation, derived from the moraine proglacial valley, which today consists of: 1) the area of agricultural land referred to as Igły/Pola Igielskie from the name of the local hamlet; 2) the area of the present dairy, formerly known as Witki (according to local knowledge, the name comes from the wicker harvested in the area); 3) and the so-called Ostrówek, i.e. uplifted thickets on the banks of the Jarcewska Struga (more precisely, this term generally refers to the place of the exhumations carried out in 2021) (fig. 3). The interviewee mentions this distinction:

If we talk about Death Valley in Chojnice, we have to consider three places. So Witki, this is the area of today’s dairy, approximately behind the garage building, somewhere there should have been a mass grave, where the skulls were dug up, while the bones were left and a grave was heaped up, which was later levelled, it is not known when and how. Probably during the construction of the dairy. Nobody really cared at that time. The second place is Ostrówek, where there is a monument and a cross, which Dawid is researching at the moment. The third place is Igły, where Dawid is also conducting research, there were test excavations to find these trenches, to determine whether they will still find some bodies, there was a place that was indicated by the escapees from that place, they were exhumed, right? But in other places, we don’t even know where, do we (I_12)?



Figure 3. View of the area currently called Death Valley – in the post-war documentation the terrain is mentioned as “Ostrówek” or “Ostrówko” (author D. Frymark).

The areas of Death Valley are intersected by remains of military trenches dating from September 1939, now overgrown with ruderal vegetation. However, some of them are still visible today. This issue was pointed out by Andrzej Lorbiecki – a historian and regionalist dealing with the history of Chojnice, co-author (together with Marcin Wałdoch) of *Chojnice 1939* (2014) – during a site visit with a team of ethnographers. They became one of the pretexts for archaeological research in the “An Archaeology of Death Valley” project in 2020. Although the bones of the victims murdered during the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 were not found within them, they became an important prelude to later discoveries. They also determine the specificity of the site and emphasise its military characteristics. They show that it was not only a place of execution, but also – due to favourable topographical conditions – a place of planned resistance against the troops of the Third Reich in the autumn of 1939. These trenches were

later used to shoot captured Poles (Kobińska 2021: 132-133). One of the witnesses easily recognised this part of the Death Valley landscape, which directly shows that despite the distance in time from the events of the Second World War significant parts of the Death Valley area – as Stanisław Żelazny (1998) poetically puts it – “speak to us after years”.

The toponym Death Valley is still in use today, despite the generational distance of the contemporary inhabitants of Chojnice, it still connotes the tragic events of the war. According to the ethnographic pilot studies, the term Death Valley: 1) still evokes associations with death inflicted under the cover of local vegetation, although much less affectively, 2) refers collectively to the resting places of the murdered bodies; 3) is used as a *totum pro parte* for all, both identified and unidentified, mass graves.

As early as 1947, Wojciech Buchholz described the local fields on the northern outskirts of the town where executions took place in the autumn of 1939 the following way (compare fig. 1):

Even those who are unaware of the events that once took place here will instinctively sense that something terrible happened here. Some horror is emanating from these gloomy fields [...]. You cannot stay here alone for long. One is seized by a mysterious fear and anxiety (Buchholz 1947: 27).

Nearly 80 years later Death Valley no longer evokes direct associations with the horror of shootings, the smell of decay, or the pervasive stench of burning bodies spreading around the area (Buchholz 1947: 69-70). The mode of landscape contamination understood in this way (Pollack 2014) was intercepted and transformed by narratives depicting Death Valley as a wild space, overgrown with lush vegetation, thus reversing the characteristics of the place and shifting the focus from its deadness to its vitality.

Death and life Valley – practicing the landscape

Chojnice's Death Valley can be perceived today as "life valley" (Kobiałka 2022: 370, 372), both in the biological (free vegetation of flora, habitat of local species) and the social sense (space for everyday life practices). The site, as indicated by the interviewees, has repeatedly been a place where people in the crisis of homelessness have set up improvised shelters (I_16) (see also Kobiałka 2021: 138; Kobiałka 2022: 373), it has become a place of alcohol consumption, as evidenced by the bottle caps and bottles (I_03, I_04, I_14). The practice of collecting endemic plant species, such as dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*) or elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*) and psilocybin mushrooms, such as liberty caps (*Psilocybe semilanceata*), have also been documented in ethnographic studies (Kobiałka 2021: 138-39; Kobiałka 2022: 373) as well as other edible fungi, such as giant puffball (*Calvatia gigantea*) and parasol mushroom (*Macrolepiota procera*) (I_14). In short, Death Valley is recognised by the inhabitants of Chojnice as the outskirts of the town, where one can collect wild plants and mushrooms. Therefore, it is considered a valuable place for its biodiversity, which provides "natural goods".

Nowadays, Death Valley is a part of the everyday life of the inhabitants of Chojnice. The shortest way from the newly built housing estate in the northern part of Chojnice to the Town Forest, and further to Chojniczki, runs across the place:

As far as I know, [...] it is a place for walks, but sometimes people come there, sometimes it is someone who walks through the forest, it passes and then returns to a housing estate, for example, or vice versa. It is a place that people pass through (I_09).

Although – as usual – opinions are divided, Death Valley is also identified as a place for walks by the inhabitants of Chojnice. The observation is confirmed by the ethnographic interviews conducted in the 2022 research season (I_01-04, I_08, I_10, I_12). The valley is not always a deliberately chosen destination, but it is often used for occasional walks e.g. by extending the walking route around the Town Forest; residents of Chojnice

who enjoy outdoor recreation occasionally visit the Valley (I_08, I_14). Visitors to the site have different motivations: they walk in the vicinity of memorials, along unmarked shooting sites in Igły, or along the outline of a dairy and nearby sewage treatment plant:

[...] people usually go for walks there, walk their dogs, that's where the area of Witki was, where the residents [of National Welfare State Institutions in Chojnice – authors] were executed, it's a closed facility, no one will go there [...]. Well, I say, they go for walks there with their dogs, without dogs, for different purposes. They visit this place, they come on bicycles, even on tours. On the other hand, in Igły hardly anyone knows where it was, so there are rather bare fields and no one there [...] well, individual people come who know that executions took place there [...] (I_12).

Some of the interviewees mention that Death Valley is considered as a peripheral place due to its distance from the town centre (I_02, I_04, I_11). In these cases, the trip there is made on purpose, usually to update the state of preservation of this place that is important for the local community (I_03, I_05), often regularly to keep up with how it is changing (I_10, I_12). One of the interviewees states directly that the attractiveness of Death Valley for walking has increased with the return of the topic of the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 to the local public discourse (and thus the lively policy of memory and commemoration of this event) as a consequence of the research projects carried out in recent years:

It also made people, let's say, start to get emotional and interested in the subject somewhere. That's why I say, from this anonymous place where they actually met, I don't know some people who preferred to avoid, let's say, meeting others. I don't know, sit down somewhere, make a bonfire or drink beer or wine. [...]. It was the Valley that became such a place that suddenly came into the limelight because it suddenly turned out that people were walking there. People became interested in it, someone even went out with a dog to see what it more or less looked like, what they were doing there, what traces archaeologists had left or how archaeologists worked (I_03).

Death Valley is alive in grassroots social practices, not only those related to commemorations, celebrations, and anniversaries, but also at the level of the spontaneous enactment of the taskscape (Tilley, Daum 2017) in a way that significantly transcends the taboos of its tragic past. It is – as the ethnographic reconnaissance shows – a tame place, incorporated into the practices of everyday life, which removes the odium of the trauma of mass shootings and the mass graves that had been left behind for over 80 years. Certainly, the topographical specificity of the site, its terrain, its vicinity to the City Forest and the controlled growth of vegetation contribute to this. Such evaluative descriptions permeate the stories of interviewees. It can even be said that it is an inseparable and positively valorised element of the narrative about the contemporary functioning of Death Valley. As the interviewee notes: “Well, it’s nice here, I must admit. Nice, you could spend all day here” (I_14).

Death and life Valley – environmental memory

One of the interviewees, born in 1978, recalls that when he was 12 or 13 years old, because his uncle, a teacher from Chojnice, was murdered in Death Valley, he used to go there often enough to consciously remember the condition of the area around in the execution site in the 1990s. He emphasises that the lush vegetation of the valley became an important element of his memories (fig. 4). Vegetation, which – as in the case of similar places, is noted by researchers in the field of the environmental history of war and the Holocaust – obscured places associated with wartime violence in a perversely idyllic way (Małczyński 2017, 2018; Smykowski 2017; Sendyka 2017, 2020). On the other hand, he also points to the fact that he was well aware from his first visit that the place must have been deliberately and consciously chosen by the Germans:

[...] we were there at the time when the vegetation was growing lush and I perceived this place as definitely secluded, just like that. Isolated because a crime had been committed there. And already with the eyes

and the mind of a child, I was telling myself that if I were a torturer, I would definitely choose such a place. Far away, quiet, overgrown. We don't really know if the vegetation is lush in September and if it is still growing in October. So, we don't know if this place was that overgrown. However, I suspect that it was, and that was the feeling I had as a child, that this place was chosen on purpose and I know why. [...] it seemed to me that there were just some reeds, that's how I would describe it, and bushes! Rushes and bushes, that's how I would remember it [...] but there were also tall trees growing there! [...] I don't remember the monument as a child, I don't know if we were there, it's possible that it was only a walk somewhere along the outskirts of this valley. I mean, the only image I remember perfectly is thickets, bushes, reeds and nothing else. [...] I would add that I was slightly disappointed that I didn't notice a specific place of remembrance, as you say, or a lighted candle, or something... I don't remember any signpost, I don't remember any plaque from those years. Later, as an adult, I must have been there several times, and the image was a bit different, I noticed these fields first of all, but as a child, the first association was just this huge thicket, no. [...] Thickness, semi-darkness for me, I could call it that. I certainly took it very negatively, no. It was such a sight for me [...] very frightening, I was aware of what had happened there and it also affected my family, so... it was a place of, well... horror for me (I_11).



Figure 4. Contemporary commemoration in Death Valley – the overgrown area behind the monument is, according to ethnographic interviews, one of the crime scenes from the autumn of 1939 (author D. Frymark).

Another interviewee, born in 1974, shares a similar observation. He also points out the degree of overgrowth of the areas adjacent to the memorial:

I have known this place for a long time, let's say the first memory I have of Death Valley, we were there with a group of scouts, at the moment I can't say exactly, but if with scouts, it was as part of a fundraiser. And I remember we found a picture there that was lying near the monument, an old picture I remember but like ... like it was the first one quite like ... then I was about 12 years old then, that is my first experience with Death Valley, which is stuck in my memory. But also, like every inhabitant of the town, I was aware that, in terms of... let's say the essence of this place, right? (...) I certainly remember that it was quite bushy. As if it were a monument, I remember that there was a monument and I remember that this

place was quite overgrown with some random vegetation, I would not like to add or invent the rest (I_09).

Death Valley – as it is described in the children’s memories of the interviewees – attracted people after the war for natural reasons. Of course, the war events were their background, but they did not evoke emotions strong enough to avoid the place. The aura of mystery aroused curiosity laced with excitement, but also – as in the case of the Interviewee 09 – dejection, resulting from the exploration of a disorderly wild area close to the town, which was widely known to hide human bones:

Interviewee: We used to go there with friends [...].

Researcher: For what purpose?

Interviewee: I suspect that they were some kind of child tramps, but if I remember the few times I went there with my friends, the place made a depressing impression on me. I remember it as if there were other areas next to it where I also went for, let’s say, nature purposes, and later I found out that these graves are basically not the same, that the place of the monument is not the same as the burial place of these people, that this area on where these remains rest is very extensive and these areas are quite well known there (I_09).

Another interviewee speaks in a similar tone, pointing out that when children appeared in Death Valley, they watched with curiosity as the bones came to the surface of the ground:

[...] we, as boys, often ran around there, searching. I remember the place that I showed Dawid, we had sticks there and we picked at them and bones... bones were coming out of the ground [...]. Anyway, at that age, it didn’t reach the mind, it couldn’t comprehend that it was a place of such a crime. It’s more like something happened there, someone was shot there, there will be a skeleton or a skull there (I_12).

Similar relations appear in relation to areas on the so-called Witki, which is currently leased by the Spolmlek Dairy Cooperative, bordering

Death Valley. In the accounts of the inhabitants, there is a similar narrative mode to that described above, centred on stories about human bones that can be found when walking around the local area. This time, however, we are talking about the so-called French cemetery which existed in the dairy before the war. The interviewee says about it:

Witki, this is the area of today's dairy, approximately behind the garage building, somewhere there should be a mass grave where these skulls were dug up, while the bones were left and a grave was heaped up, which was later levelled, it is not known when and how. Probably during the construction of the dairy. Nobody took care of it at that time (I_12).

Another Interviewee, going back to his childhood, mentions his explorations of Death Valley undertaken on his own. It is worth noting here that the interlocutor includes the former Witki, and at that time the dairy, within the territorial and conceptual scope of the toponym Death Valley:

[...] in front of the dairy there was a cemetery of French soldiers [from the 19th century – authors] and my friend said let's go there, there is this Death Valley and from there you can also go to the Town Forest [...]. And so I arrived, an ordinary clearing with a monument, but then I didn't have what they call an awareness of what actually happened there, did I? (I_08).

The diverse necrotopographies (Sendyka 2020; Sendyka, Kobielska, Muchowski, Szczepan 2020) also include – as was mentioned at the beginning of the article – the third geographical component, the Igielskie Fields, where according to some stories, human remains, were scattered in the past. According to the interviewees, this is an important place on the map of Death Valley, although it is often not associated with it by people who have only superficial knowledge of the local history. The interviewee learned from her father that most executions of Poles took place in Igielskie Fields:

[...] there is Death Valley, there is this monument. It's a wood, so the executions actually took place behind the wood, in the fields. Where the monument is, and actually there were executions. But most of what my father told me about those executions took place in these fields. So they are practically in this valley all the time. I said to Dawid: "You are digging in this Death Valley all the time, but who knows how much more there is in these fields". Well, we don't know [...] (I_15).

Most of these sites have yet to be identified. This is difficult for many reasons. One of them is that these areas were agricultural fields, and the work of heavy machinery could have damaged the site of bone deposition considerably. Their presence on the surface of the ground has not gone unnoticed in the past: in the narratives of the inhabitants, the theme of agricultural work recurs, which, by disturbing the stratigraphy of the soil in the place where the grain was sown, led to the incidental appearance of human remains. As another interviewee recalled:

I read that there were testimonies of people who said that a few years after the war, whether it was kids playing and suddenly finding human remains, or these farmers were ploughing the field and finding human remains, they also buried them back. It seems to me that they were simply afraid (I_10).

Death Valley – as a complex of interconnected components of the local landscape, together with the surrounding Igielskie Fields – has become an important and lively chronotope, embedded in the narratives of human remains, bones and body fragments scattered throughout the valley and on its outskirts. Human bones, deliberately or accidentally dug up from the places where they were deposited, have returned to the local discourse on various occasions, entailing cheapening of the posthumous status of the local landscape. To return to the metaphors of Żelazny's poem – it can be said that human remains continue to make themselves known, "speaking to us after years" and demanding a decent burial. In the moments of an accidental violation of the ground, and thus a violation of the memory buried and seemingly invisible in the landscape, we see the need, perhaps

not yet clearly articulated by the inhabitants, to exhume and identify the remains of the victims, to commemorate and describe in detail the crimes committed in Death Valley.

Ongoing archaeological work is bringing to light the material evidence of the past, while ethnographic research is anchoring the materiality of the crimes in social memory and recovering environmental stories related to the Pomeranian Crime of 1939 (and later exterminations, as in the case of Death Valley in the second half of January 1945). Such an integrated perspective not only complements the previous historical studies but also proposes their extension to natural aspects (fig. 5).



Figure 5. Archaeological work behind the contemporary commemoration in Death Valley (author D. Frymark).

Conclusion – the environmental ethnography of mass graves

It is impossible to talk about the past or present functioning of Death Valley without referring to its topographical and natural components. The environmental stories told by the interviewees reveal the intertwined

chronologies of historical time and vegetation cycles, whose trajectories are determined by tragic events of the past (in particular, the murders committed between 1939 and 1945). The nature of Death Valley and its surroundings perceived and experienced in different ways, plays an important role in most of the memories recalled. An important rule that organises thinking about the local vegetation is the visible clash of opposing discursive motifs from a bottom-up perspective that refers to the current state of development of the site, using the binary oppositions well known to environmental anthropologists: neglected/well-groomed, overgrown/mowed, muddy/drained, lush/controlled, wild/nurtured.

The vegetation of Death Valley is an integral part of the narrative of the Chojnice inhabitants who took part in the ethnographic reconnaissance in the research season of 2022 (fig. 6). It is a vital theme of the story, which is usually captured in four main cases: 1) to give the reported events a spatial context – natural landscape, 2) in order to explain the past and present state of land development – valorisation of nature, 3) to determine the impact of topography and natural surroundings on the specificity of mass murders – nature as the causative element of the crime, 4) to indicate the interdependence between the post-war history of the crime scenes and the vegetation reborn in their place – nature as a camouflage, as a cover, 5) and to counterpoint the horror of the site associated with death with the beauty of the flora full of life – nature as testimony.



Figure 6. Nature of the crime scene from the second half of January 1945 in Death Valley (author D. Frymark).

On the basis of the ethnographic interviews, more detailed terms attributed to the natural formation of Death Valley can be indicated. Therefore, the local vegetation is said to be: lush (I_11), natural (I_14), diverse (I_14), swampy (I_04), wild (I_02, I_05, I_14), native (I_14), protected by law (I_03, I_14), contains endangered species (I_03), and even that it is included in the area covered by the Natura 2000 program (I_12). The dominant figures defining its formations are: thickets (I_10, I_11), bushes (I_02, I_09, I_11, I_12), bulrushes (I_11), but also a forest (I_05, I_08, I_14). The perception of these areas therefore refers to the spontaneous growth of mainly low-growing flora, the vegetation of which is only slightly controlled by humans. The interviewees indicated that this is both a positive feature (the aesthetic qualities of nature that affect the possibility of walking and the green background of the memorials) and a negative one (implying behaviours considered inappropriate, and therefore favoured by plant camouflage). However, the prevailing opinion, is that Death Valley is an overgrown area (I_10, I_11, I_13, I_14), which is cleaned up only

for important celebrations and anniversaries. Individual species are rarely recognised by the interviewees, except for people professionally involved in gardening, plant cultivation and greenery maintenance (I_13, I_14).

There is, however, a social need recognised by the interviewees to take care of the natural values of Death Valley, which for them are not only the background of historical events and the aesthetic context of commemorations but also have a recreational value. As indicated by the people participating in the conversations conducted during the ethnographic research, the functions that sacralise the space of the site (commemorations, ceremonies, places of contemplation, prayers, honouring the dead in tragic circumstances) do not exclude its simultaneous use for profane practices (walks with dogs, trips, recreation, a shortcut to a place on the other side of the valley; occasional consumption of alcohol, ethnobotanical practices: collecting plants and picking mushrooms) as long as they do not interfere with or prevent the practice of the former. The need to include the space of Death Valley, not so much in practices of an occasional nature, but in those that are carried out according to the logic of everyday life, permeates the stories. Nature appears in them as significant and even causative, i.e. as something that directly affects the ways in which Death Valley is ‘used’, as well as initiating socio-cultural reactions towards it.

It is an important point in the topography of sites of national remembrance, which thanks to the archaeological research has come to life in its social dimension. It is at the same time a place of great natural value. Ethnographic observations definitely confirm what Żelazny (1998: 69) notes with a poetic sensitivity – “this valley is still alive”.

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