

## Book Review

*Plunder: A Memoir of Family Property and Nazi Treasure*  
by Menachem Kaiser

Reviewed by Kalman Goldstein

In 1935, Menachem Kaiser's great-grandfather, Moshe, had purchased an apartment house in Sosnowiec, Poland. But he did not survive the Shoah. Eighty years later, his grandson, Menachem, was sent by the family to apply for reparations or restitution. What followed was not the typical story of persistence, obstructions overcome, and belated justice. Menachem's time in Poland was laden with ironies, paradoxes and absurdities, making for a fascinating book about his trek and the questionable implications of "plunder."

The application itself spawned a comedy of errors. Since the city had changed its numbering system, he initially investigated the wrong building. He then hired a highly recommended lawyer who took his claim to the wrong court, and had to wade through a Kafkaesque bureaucracy, only to learn that he would need evidence that his great-grandfather was no longer living. A few pages of trial transcript underline his bemusement. Hiring a different lawyer, and applying to the correct court, he achieved recognition that his ancestor indeed had not survived, but the application remained under review. As of the book's publication (2021), there was yet no closure, and Menachem himself wondered about the possible impact on the building's inhabitants: when, after such a time lapse, did restitution become appropriation?

Marking time, Menachem became intrigued by a local tourist attraction, Owl Mountain, which the Nazis had hollowed out under Albert Speer's direction into a labyrinth of caves allegedly containing a train filled with gold. Treasure hunters gathered to search, unsuccessfully, but also to camp out atop the mountain and speculate that some of the installation might have involved research on anti-gravity, flying saucers and time machines. Za Drutami Smierci (*Behind the Wire of Death*) a best seller, was purported to contain secret codes. Offered a copy, Menachem discovered that the writer was Abraham Kajzer, a cousin of his grandfather, who had kept this diary of slave labor atrocities. This made Menachem a local celebrity, as Poles insisted on believing him the writer's grandson, pestered him for autographs, and tried to get him drunk enough to reveal the book's hidden secrets. What it did reveal were the nearby slave labor camps, whose weed-hidden remains Menachem insisted on tracing. This also seemed a classic example of Polish selective amnesia, ignoring the murdered slave labor in favor of legends about a golden train, or futuristic fantasies. One local treasure hunter in particular, Andrzej, while expansive about his hatred of Germans, had meanwhile accumulated a hoard of Nazi paraphernalia "plundered" from the tunnels. This led Menachem to wonder about antisemitism, denial and paranoia in current culture, both here and in Poland. He lost some of his enthusiasm about the family owning a Polish apartment house.

Finally, while waiting for the courts to adjudicate the family claim, he met another American, Steve, whose grandfather had supposedly hidden gold in the walls of an attic in Sosnowiec while hiding from the Gestapo. He and Steve concocted a sentimental tale, talking the owner into allowing them access. Asking to tear down an attic wall, they were not only permitted, the owner nonchalantly remarked that for enough money, they could demolish the whole house. Steve had the last word in this hunt: "Oh, my God!" Menachem never reveals whether this represented exasperation, or 'Eureka!'