

Creating the Museum of the History of Polish Jews

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Facing the Natan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto Monument, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will present a thousand years of Jewish history in the very place where it happened. Understandably, this history has been overshadowed by the Shoah and the void that it has left. By presenting the civilization that Jews created in the very place where they created it, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will convey the enormity of *what* was lost. Poland is the ultimate site of the Shoah. This is the place where the Germans built *all* of the death camps. This is the place where most of Europe's Jews perished. Standing on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto facing the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will honor those who died by remembering how they lived.

The history of Polish Jews is an integral part of the history of Poland, a message of special importance during a unique period in Polish history: never before has Poland been as homogeneous as it is today. Central to an understanding of Poland's historical diversity is the story of Polish Jews, the rich civilization they created, and the spectrum of Polish-Jewish relations. The involvement of the lively, though small, Jewish community in Poland, whose story the museum will tell, is of critical importance. Jews from abroad, whose visits to Poland focus almost exclusively on the Shoah and anti-Semitism, will hopefully begin their visit with the museum and broaden their historical perspective.

The museum, the first public-private partnership of its type in Poland and joint effort of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the Government of Poland, and the City of Warsaw, will fulfill its mission through its educational and public programs and multimedia narrative exhibition that provides the long and deep historical context that has been missing from contemporary debates and is essential to creating what I call a "trusted zone," a place where visitors will trust the museum to be accurate and fair so that when a difficult subject is presented, visitors will be more open to exploration and discussion.

The permanent exhibition, which is being developed collaboratively by a team established by Jerzy Halbersztadt, the museum's director, includes distinguished academics from Poland, Israel, and the United States, a world-class design company Event Communications, and professional curators, archivists, scholars, and researchers in Poland and abroad. Think of the Museum as a theater of history, as history in the first person, history told through the sources, rather than synthesized and narrated by an anonymous historian, though of course the selection and presentation of sources will construct a historical narrative. Privileges, contracts,

wills and inventories, rabbinical responsa and Jewish communal record books, letters, travelogues, memoirs, and autobiographies; literature and the press, art and music, theater and film—in addition to artifacts, when we have them and they can support the narrative. Making strategic use of multimedia, we can layer content and encourage visitors to explore the sources and not only to look at them, read a label, or listen to an audio guide. This approach makes for a very different type of visitor experience, a more flexible and exploratory one. Those interested in a particular subject will be able to pursue it in depth, while others can browse and still get the main idea.

We bring a critical approach to the history the museum will present. First, we avoid teleology, the idea that history drives towards an inevitable end. We don't want visitors to make an easy inference from chronology to causality. Historical explanation is considerably more complicated. With the pitfalls of teleology in mind, we avoid foreshadowing what came later. Instead, we try to keep our visitors inside the period and encourage them to see through the eyes of those who lived at the time, while making them aware of larger trends, of macrohistorical phenomena and processes, but without foreshadowing. By following the itineraries of various individuals and histories of various communities, visitors will discover the variety of paths taken and what people at the time knew and thought. Visitors will see and feel how history was actually lived.

Second, a master narrative runs contrary to our commitment to presenting an open-ended past. For this among other reasons, we neither begin nor end the history of Polish Jews with the Holocaust. The postwar period is a very important part of our story. In fact, the museum is itself part of the postwar story and will be included in the exhibition narrative. Nor will the postwar period mark the end of the story. We don't want to close the book in 2011 just before the museum opens. We want to keep the story open, extend it beyond the borders of Poland to all the places where Polish Jews settled, and carry it forward into the future.

Third, we are committed to the principle of many voices, rather than a single voice telling a single story. We will make the sources do the telling. We want to avoid a synthetic third-person historical voice as a main way through this history. We prefer a diversity of first-person accounts from the period, while insuring that collective experience and macrohistorical processes are communicated.

Fourth, we try to avoid an apologetic narrative: we do not want to create a “hall of fame” or rest our case on the “contributions” of Jews to Polish society and the world. Of course we will present incredible people and marvelous accomplishments, but first and foremost as they illuminate the larger history we present. This is a serious history museum and serious history is not celebratory. Serious as this history is, we will present it in a lively way and engage visitors in meaningful dialogue and thoughtful debate.

The idea that a museum that does not depend primarily on “actual” objects is somehow

a “virtual” museum is a misperception. Historically, museums evolved as institutions that preserved material evidence of the past and safeguarded treasures. Today, museums are civic institutions that fulfill their educational mission through exhibitions and programs that draw on a wide variety of sources, display techniques, and media. The key issues for us are *historical integrity* and *what constitutes an “actual” object* or, put another way, “digital simulacrum” is an example of what I would call the materiality fallacy.

First, *historical integrity*. Some of the best museums whose subjects are related to ours—the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem—use facsimiles, copies, castings, and models. The original document or artifact may no longer exist or it may be too fragile to exhibit or it may be impossible to remove it from its current location or it is only through a scale model or reconstruction that a totality can be grasped all at once. The “authenticity” of what is shown rests on the historical integrity of what is shown—like a notarized copy in a court of law—rather than on the literal materiality of the object, and on transparency in the way that original materials are mediated. That said, I find it curious that facsimiles are often exhibited as if they were originals—they are shown in vitrines with labels, as if they were the original document—and they are not even consistently identified as facsimiles. In other words, display practices associated with the installation of original documents intensify the illusion that you are indeed seeing the original and encourage you to respond as if that were the case. The mediation is not transparent. That is not what we will do. Quite the contrary.

The museum begins with the curatorial principle of responsibility to the nature of the source as an historical artifact and to *transparent mediation*. We want to confront our visitors with primary sources, rather than extract information and embed that information in an anonymous third-person historical synthesis. Using interactive media, we are able to bring our visitors into contact with a much greater range of sources than they could ever encounter as original objects, even at museums with the richest collections. We want to sensitize our visitors to the nature of the source as a source, to make what we call the back story transparent, and to treat the story of the source as part of the main story. Whether the back story is about Julia Pirote and the photographs she took in the aftermath of the Kielce pogrom or about Julien Bryan and his photographs of the 1939 siege of Warsaw or about Nathan Rapoport, the creator of the monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, we want our visitors to understand that all sources have been authored and to make the authorship of the source part of the story and not simply a technical detail on a label.

Second, *the materiality fallacy*: what constitutes an “original” or “actual” or “authentic” object. Take, for example, the 18th-century wooden synagogue of Gwoździec that we will feature in the 18th-century gallery. We intend to reconstruct the timber-framed roof and polychrome ceiling of this spectacular synagogue. Now we could go to a theater prop maker,

give him the dimensions and some pictures, and say to him “Make it!” The result would look pretty much like the original, but it would be a theatrical prop. That is not what we want to do. What we want to do goes to the heart of the issue of actual and virtual. We want to work with a studio in Massachusetts, whose motto is “learn by building.” These beautiful 18th-century wooden synagogues no longer exist; the Germans burned to the ground those still standing in 1939. We can however *recover the knowledge of how to build them* by actually building one. What is actual about that artifact resides therefore not in the original 18th-century wood, not in the original painted interior, but in the *knowledge that we recovered for how to build it*. It’s a completely different concept of the object. This approach is related to a completely different tradition of thinking about what constitutes an object.

The best example I can think of is the Jingu Shrine in Ise, Japan. This is a shrine that is 800 years old and never older than 20 years because for 800 years they have been tearing it down every 20 years in order to rebuild it. The only way to maintain the embodied knowledge of how to build it is to build it, and to make it necessary to build it, they tear it down and then must build it again. *The value is in maintaining the knowledge of how to build it, not in preserving the original materials*. The result is not a replica or simulation of the Jingu shrine; it *is* the Jingu shrine. This is a completely different way of defining what is “actual” about such an object.

Finally, when visitors exit from the gallery dealing with the postwar years, they will find themselves in a circulation space in which we will open the narrative up to the story of Polish Jews in the many places around the world where they settled. We want to keep that installation current with what is happening today. We want to create a very participatory space and to collaborate with contemporary artists who engage a wide public in creating content through what is variously known as conversational art, social software, and locative media. Our priority is the ongoing involvement of a wide public not only within the walls of the museum but also far beyond those walls. We want to incorporate their voices.

Together with other Warsaw landmarks, the museum will form part of a cultural precinct and itinerary in the city. The museum expects about 20% of its visitors to be Jews from abroad, a diverse Jewish audience of Israelis, Holocaust survivors, children of Holocaust survivors, European Jews, Jewish youth from Israel, Jewish youth from North America, Jews who can trace their families back to Poland and those who cannot. The majority of organized groups and especially young people come for the Holocaust and only the Holocaust. The museum has a very important role to play in changing their itinerary—we would like them to start their journey with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews—and broadening their historical perspective to a millennium of Jewish history here. More than half our visitors will be people living in Poland, and, the rest will be international visitors.

Understandably, there are many sensitivities. Polish audiences worry that an honest history of Polish Jews will reinforce the perception of Poland as an anti-Semitic country, while Jewish

visitors are afraid that we will present a rosy picture. The museum will do neither. Rather, the museum wants to create a “trusted zone,” a responsible presentation of a rich and complex history. The museum will deal with difficult moments, but in relation to the *spectrum* of Polish-Jewish relationships, the high points and the low ones. Striking the right balance in a historically responsible way is our goal. We would like to think that by creating a trusted zone, the museum could provide a rich and deep historical context for reflection around difficult questions and dialogue among the diverse visitors that will come to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

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