The building of the museum
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The Polish Debate on the Core Exhibition of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

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The Museum of the History of Polish Jews stirred up journalistic emotions long before its doors opened to visitors. This institution, located in a modern and, as some of them stressed, expensive building in central Warsaw, gave rise to hopes and fears, satisfaction and sorrow. Some expected the museum would figuratively and literally become a place for debates, where 'Polish historical consciousness could mature'; others predicted that this investment that ‘cost the Polish taxpayer hundreds of millions’ would serve as anti-Polish propaganda.

"Let’s be honest, we were afraid of this museum. Even before it was built, it was preceded by panic-stricken gossip and fears which could be summarised as: this institution will be a thorn in Poland’s side" – that was the way in which conservative journalist Piotr Skwieciński began his review.[1] In turn, in the Gazeta Wyborcza, Dawid Warszawski was ironic in his exposé of the phobias on the opposite side of the political spectrum: "People are accusing the Poles of building themselves a museum about how good they were to the Jews."[2]

Politicians also joined in the argument over what form the exhibition should take. In autumn 2013, an opposition member of parliament from the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) party wrote that the museum "will be one of the most important places to shape Poland's image worldwide. Therefore, it should be a place where Polish historical policy is embodied directly. […] From the standpoint of Polish state interests, it is vital to highlight elements of the history of Jews in Poland and the Polish state that will create a good image of our nation and our country."[3]

Consequently, the public heard of constant alterations to the exhibition scenario, the museum’s search for a new director, and the postponement of its opening date. At the time, Anna Bikont commented sarcastically in the Gazeta Wyborcza on the political confusion surrounding the planned exhibition: "As we all know, whenever Jewish issues come up, emotions are at fever pitch […] decision-makers are paralysed with fear; some worrying about Polish anti-Semites, others about anti-Polish Jews."[4]

The Public Debate in Poland Changed after the Opening of the Warsaw Uprising Museum

One should bear in mind that public debate about history in Poland transformed after the opening of the Warsaw Uprising Museum in 2004. Its incredible popularity demonstrated the huge potential that lay in narrative exhibitions – ones that do not limit themselves to presenting genuine exhibits, but portray the past using scenes, reconstructions and multimedia. In the years that followed, work was begun on other museums of this type: the Polish Historical Museum, Museum of the Second World War, Museum of the People's Republic of Poland, the Emigration Museum, and the Solidarity Museum (although, to date, only the latter has been completed).

To many journalists and politicians, contemporary narrative museums have become the main tool for shaping historical remembrance. However, in the case of the history of Polish Jews, that remembrance has led to particularly fierce rows over views that correspond to the basic political divisions in society. The major inflammatory issues are anti-Semitism in public life during the inter-war period, Polish

society's attitudes to the Holocaust, and the Jewish survivors' involvement in building the Communist system after the war.

One must recall the fundamental nature of the ideological quarrels which have split the elite and the political scene in Poland since 1989. The right-wing, conservative narrative presents the nation's history as a combination of heroism, tolerance and magnanimity. Any probing into the more shameful chapters of Polish history (e.g. anti-Semitism) is regarded as a manifestation of educating by shaming which does not encourage national unity. In turn, left-wing and liberal journalists highlight that Poles should also be aware of painful truths from their past – particularly, the inter-war period and the occupation.

Therefore, when the core exhibition opened in the POLIN building at the end of October 2014, it was not just a cultural event, but also a political one, as reflected in abundant reviews by almost all the leading printed and online magazines. Positive opinions definitely prevailed, yet right-wing journalists were seemingly the most enthusiastic about the exhibition. Conservative journalists underlined with satisfaction (and evident relief) that the exhibition defended 'the good name of the Polish nation', and its main theme was to show how Poland had once been a safe haven for Jews. The reviewers weighed up the evidence, and were pleased that certain aspects of Polish–Jewish history had merely been mentioned and did not take centre stage in the exhibition scenario.

"There are stories about the ghetto benches [racial segregation introduced in Polish universities before the war, due to pressure from nationalist militias] and antagonism of the late 1930s, but they are handled appropriately, without cheap dramatics", wrote Piotr Semka.[5] Piotr Zychowicz's review was in a similar vein: "This is an extremely delicate matter, i.e. the dark sides of Polish–Jewish relations. […] There is no hint of anti-Polonism in the museum. The issue of szmalcowniki (Poles who betrayed Jews in hiding to the Germans for money) was touched on in an unbiased way, as was the Jedwabne pogrom [of 1941]. A short description states that Poles did perpetrate the crimes, but were encouraged to do so by the Germans in the town. These issues were presented without making accusations."[6]

Showing Jewish and Polish Victims?

The right-wing, conservative narrative regarding POLIN is clearly marked by the theme of Polish–Jewish rivalry over who suffered most. In particular, reviewers scrutinised the gallery covering the Second World War, and praised the exhibition team for showing not only the Holocaust, but also the Polish victims. "The occupation period was well presented", wrote Semka. "The exhibition's developers have chosen to show the microcosm of the ghetto, outside whose walls the Aryan side may have seemed like a sunny, peaceful place. However, one need only climb the stairs to a passage symbolising the famous bridge across Warsaw's Chłodna Street to see that the German terror was raging on the Aryan side, too."[7]

Some critical asides in these favourable reviews concerned the aspects that had been emphasised, especially the lack of detail regarding recent historical episodes which illustrate Jewish guilt towards Poles. Once again, the journalists were mostly looking at the museum from the point of view of its role in promoting Poland on the international arena. Reading between the lines, these articles implied that the exhibition's most important visitors – and thus umpires in the Polish–Jewish dispute over the past – would not be Poles or Jews, but foreign tourists. Skwieciński regretted that the exhibition lacked information on how Poles risked the death penalty for hiding Jews during the occupation: "Poles who know how things were will probably overlook this deficiency, since that information is obvious to them. That is not the case for foreign visitors, however; yet this museum will become a fixture for Western tour

groups."[8]

"They have failed to describe the phenomenon of Jews being over-represented in the Polish Communist Party", chided Semka. "The argument that the party was not Jewish means little. Complications with Polish communists of Jewish origin being identified with Jews in general arose again after the war. Fortunately, they have broached another controversial topic – the attitude of Jews in Poland's Eastern border regions after September 17, 1939 [giving the Red Army an enthusiastic welcome] – but the short film may be rather hard to understand for Western tourists unfamiliar with the complexity of this issue."[9]

A common theme in most of the reviews, and something that both right-wing conservative and liberal left journalists praised in the exhibition, was that the museum shows just how closely the fates of Poles and Jews were intertwined over the centuries. Jewish history has become an integral part of the history of Poland, and it unfolded within the confines of Polish statehood and national tradition. As one Gazeta Wyborcza journalist remarked: "This exhibition is a mirror in which we can look at ourselves. This tale of the history of Polish Jews is simultaneously the first museum of Polish history, and is the best proof of one thousand years of integrated coexistence."[10]

In the same newspaper, Dawid Warszawski wrote: "The histories of both nations finally diverged after the Second World War, and presumably the majority of people on both sides consider that to be a natural and perhaps positive fact. But history cannot be edited retroactively: Poland would have been different without the Jews, and the Jews would have been different without Poland. This is shown in an exhibition prepared and funded by Jews and housed in a building erected by Poland. That in itself demonstrates how it would be absurd to disentangle these two themes."[11]

Some reviewers even felt that POLIN's exhibition had the power to trigger patriotic emotions among its Polish visitors. Skwieciński considered the exhibition's narrative to be: "A series of quotations and artefacts that a Pole would find it hard to pass by unmoved. Credit must go to POLIN's creators for restoring our memories from out of the darkness. […] It is hard not to be touched at the sight of a banner from August 1863, embroidered for Taczanowski's insurgent unit by the 'Polish/Israelite girls of Kalisz'. That banner, bearing the Eagle and White Knight beneath a handshake, symbolises the Polish–Jewish brotherhood that typified those years. Or excerpts from a speech given on behalf of the Jews by an ordinary sheet-metal worker, Baruch Goror, near the French Embassy on September 3, 1939 (the day the Allies joined the war and Varsovians held spontaneous demonstrations outside their embassies). It ends with the words: 'Long live our beloved fatherland, Poland, and its allies! Pojlin hoch! Dajczland nider!'"[12]

Questioning the Vision of a Tolerant and Generous Poland

What some saw as the POLIN museum's most important asset drew some crushing criticism from others. They accused the scenario writers of getting carried away with national myths and aligning the exhibition's narrative with the image of the Jew and loyal Pole. Critics were offended by what they saw as the exhibition's over-idealised message: tolerant, generous Poland had taken in Jewish refugees who returned the favour by boosting Poland's well-being and prosperity, and fighting for its independence whenever necessary.

The theatre scholar Joanna Krakowska wrote a highly indignant piece for the online cultural magazine Dwutygodnik: "What is the first thing we learn? That they were in no way cowards; that they fought for Poland; that they spilled their blood for it; and that they were good Poles. Yes, do tell us that story yet

again, and make sure you do so in that language we know so well – it'll help us to understand why you built this museum. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in whose four-word name, the third word is the most significant."[13]

Most controversial opinions were centred on the issue of whether POLIN should recount the history of Polish Jews or that of Jews in Poland, and on the debates that were raging on social networks. Piotr Paziński, editor-in-chief of the Jewish socio-cultural magazine Midrasz, wrote: "The most blatant fact is that the story is told from the perspective of Polish history. In reality, it is the history of Polin, with Jews in the leading roles. That would imply that Jewish history has somehow been naturally coupled with Polish history throughout the past millennium. Meanwhile, we are aware that this is both true and untrue. Jewish civilisation lay beyond borders, existing concurrently in many countries and a number of languages. To the Jewish world, Polin only really became significant in the 16th century, and many of the key Jewish historical events and processes which make up later Jewish history occurred outside of the area usually referred to as Polin. This perspective, which is patently obvious from a map of the routes travelled by Jewish traders […] disappears completely in later periods. It is as if all aspects of Jewish history were exhausted in Poland as the [Polish–Lithuanian] Commonwealth was growing stronger and expanding. […] I expected [the museum to] show the Jewish diaspora in Europe as an exceptionally complicated organism, of which Polin was merely one organ – a very large one, agreed – but it was not always the most important, dominant one, and it was definitely connected to others."[14]

POLIN's building in Warsaw was constructed in an outstanding location, steeped in significance and symbolism. The building, like the whole district around it, was founded on the ruins of the ghetto, opposite the legendary Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, with which it forms a single composition. However, as some reviewers reproached, the exhibition scenario bears no relation to this location ''the place where Warsaw's Jewish life lies buried'). Although the ruins of Jewish houses and hiding places used by ghetto insurgents in 1943 lay just a few metres beneath the museum's corridors, its visitors would never guess they existed. I believe that this accusation, which seemingly concerns the exhibition's composition, is loaded with unspoken resentment that the museum has too strong a focus on Jewish life in the olden days, but barely commemorates the annihilation of that civilisation.

I feel that the debate surrounding the museum was dominated by disputes over POLIN's political role. The exhibition's format was analysed from the point of view of modern-day ideological conflicts. The reviews rarely mentioned its narrative techniques – the ways in which visitors are told about the past – and did so mostly superficially. At times, their discussion of the way things were expressed was shaped by political accusations. In her negative appraisal of the museum's formula based on historical source-texts, Krakowska, whom I cited above, accused the exhibition developers of 'cowardly quoting': "In this exhibition, the history of Polish Jews is told in quotes. The walls are plastered in excerpts from miscellaneous statements. We advance from quotation to quotation, the way bad students write their essays: Ctrl-C/Ctrl-V – copy/paste. Unsubstantiated sentences torn out of their context. Comments by people the visitors have most probably never heard of. Inconsistent opinions for no reason at all. Fragments of unconsolidated paragraphs just squander their meaning."[15] Out of the blue, Stanisław Staszic says: "There is no other way but to civilise them". Then some lesser-known author considers that Łódź meant a lot to Sholem Aleichem... Who is speaking, about what, to whom, what for, and in what circumstances – it is impossible to tell. In that case, the quotation is worthless. "'Letting the heroes of their time speak' is a classic excuse to avoid formulating thoughts, so as not to tread on anyone's toes, explain oneself, or get involved."[16]

Such harsh (and in my view, deeply unfair) remarks were not to be found in other articles about the

museum. However, many of them, while praising the exhibition, did complain about how the scenario was overburdened with information and objects, leading to chaos and no clear narrative structure to guide visitors from one showcase to the next, like in a conventional museum. While some were distracted by excess content, others pointed out (presumably rightly so) that certain historical issues had been omitted or covered too perfunctorily.

Iwona Kurz wrote in Dwutygodnik: "The customary view [communicating with visitors by means of quotations from the period] also means that, paradoxically, we learn very little about the everyday life of Jews in Poland. In the mediaeval gallery, we see maps of several dozen towns, but not a single plan of a house. Judaism is mainly presented through its rejection of Christ. Although the presence of two languages – Hebrew and Yiddish – is clearly mentioned, the difference between them is not necessarily obvious. It is also difficult to find out just how separate the Polish and Jewish worlds were, and how much, when or how they interacted."[17]

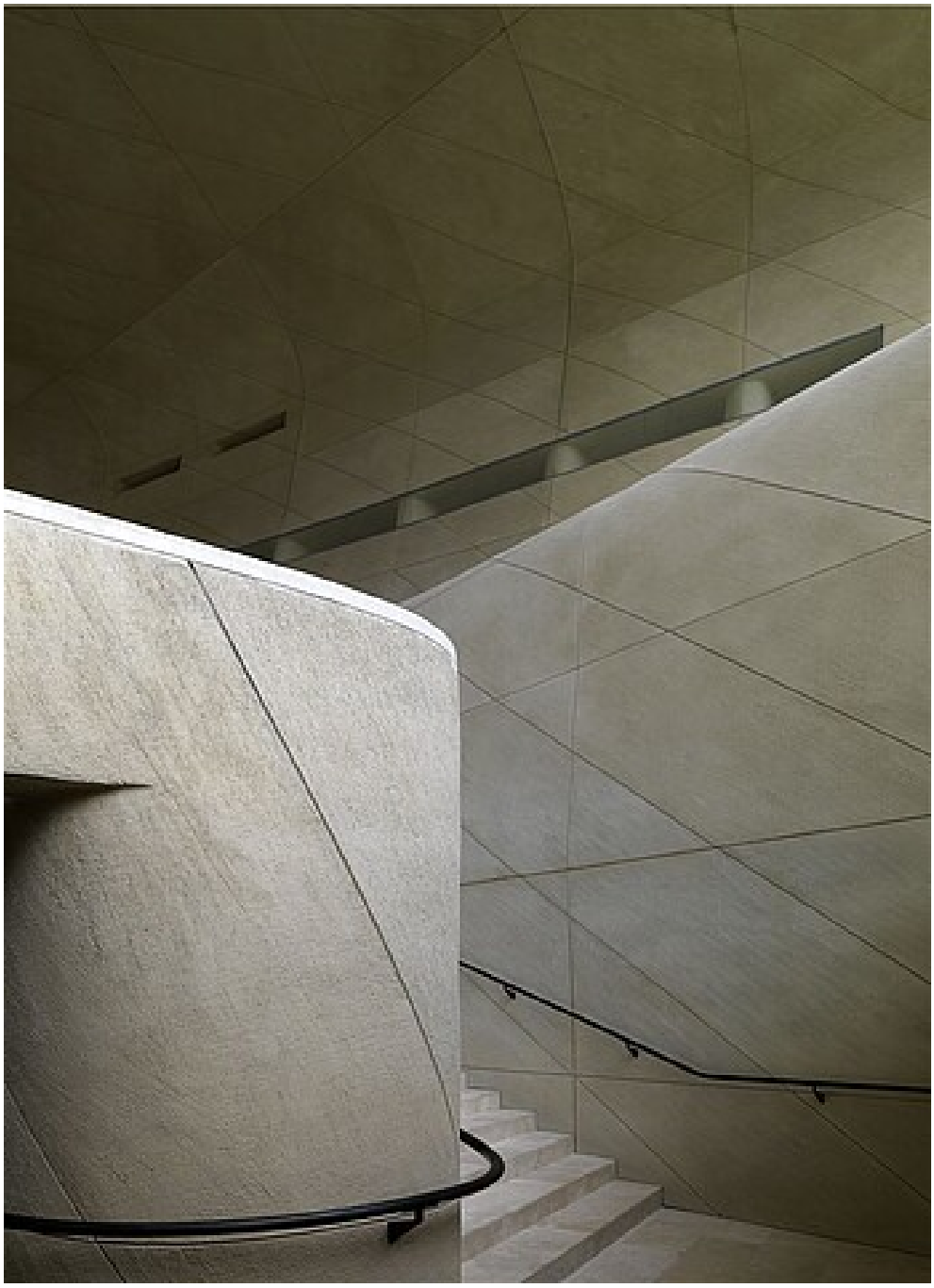
During the widespread discussion of whether POLIN would be of more benefit to Jews or Poles, very few remarked on what is perhaps the exhibition's strongest point – its unusual evocativeness. In that respect, Roman Pawłowski's opinion differed in his piece for Gazeta Wyborcza: "POLIN is generally quite theatrical, like a show which works on a number of levels. Sometimes it is painfully traditional theatre, such as in the section devoted to the Khmelnytsky Uprising, bathed in an obligatory red afterglow with tumultuous sounds of battle. Sometimes it is contemporary theatre, closer to performance and the visual arts, like in the hall devoted to Jews hiding with Polish families. Their stories and photographs are displayed behind low-level slits in the walls – to see them, one must bend down and peer inside, like a hiding-place. The most powerful theatrical trick is the gallery devoted to everyday life in occupied Warsaw. It can be seen from two levels: from a mezzanine symbolising the bridge across Chłodna Street, or from street level. From above, one sees tramlines and a photograph of the carousel Miłosz described in Campo de' Fiori. From below, one looks up at the mezzanine with its enlarged photograph of the famous bridge connecting the small and large ghettos. That bridge has already been the subject of many works of art, yet the effect is exceptional here. Walking through both levels, one makes an impossible journey between two parallel realities: Jewish and Aryan. As I stand down below, I see people walking above; our eyes meet, and for a moment I imagine what Poles might have felt when looking at the ghetto. Those same Poles that Jan Błoński described years earlier in his famous article for Tygodnik Powszechny."[18]

The POLIN exhibition is essentially made up of hundreds of micro-stories about the fate of Polish Jews. They are all presented in inventive, original and fascinating ways which stimulate curiosity and imagination. There are scale models, multimedia screens, films, images, sounds and objects. When I visited the exhibition, I felt the atmosphere of mediaeval towns, the cultural wealth of the inter-war years, and the horror of the Holocaust. The museum is not some educational trail for visitors to follow from start to finish. It is more of an open world that everyone can explore as they wish. In that sense, POLIN is an undeniable success, taking a huge step towards an unattainable ideal – to show the past in all its glory and complexity.

Translated by Mark Bence

Footnotes

1. Piotr Skwieciński, Polin, czyli kartka z nieba, wSieci, No. 45/2014.
2. Dawid Warszawski, Polin. Wielki powrót polskich Żydów, Gazeta Wyborcza, October 25–26, 2014.
3. Jarosław Sellin, Pokazać współistnienie a nie waśnie, wSieci, No. 34/2013.
4. Anna Bikont, Gdy chodzi o Żydów emocje szybują, Gazeta Wyborcza, November 15, 2013.
5. Piotr Semka, Oczekując na wejście do Ziemi Izraela, Rzeczpospolita (25.October 2014).
6. Piotr Zychowicz, Opowieść o polskich Żydach, Do Rzeczy 39 (2014).
7. Semka, 2014.
8. Skwieciński, 2014.
9. Semka, 2014.
10. Roman Pawłowski, Otwiera się interaktywne Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich. Czyli pierwsze muzeum historii Polski, Gazeta Wyborcza (27 October 2014).
11. Warszawski, 2014.
12. Skwieciński, 2014.
13. Joanna Krakowska: Konformy: Cytatchórzostwo, retrieved 2. November 2015, URL: http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5453-konformy-cytatchorzostwo.html
14. Piotr Paziński: Piotra Pazińskiego zdanie o muzeum (4 November 2014), retrieved 2. November 2015, URL: www.fzp.net.pl/opinie/piotra-pazinskiego-zdanie-o-muzeum
15. Krakowska.
16. Krakowska.
17. Iwona Kurz: „Tu spoczniecie". Muzeum Polin, (October 2014), retrieved 2. November 2015, URL: http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5545-tu-spoczniecie-museum-polin.html
18. Jan Błoński, Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto, Tygodnik Powszechny, 2 (1987).



Detail from the architecture of the building
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The first gallery "First Encounters"
Author: M. Starowieyska, D.Golik Copyright: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN

Gallery "Challenges of Modernity"
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Gallery "Challenges of Modernity"
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Gallery "On a Jewish Street"
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Gallery "Post-War"
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