

Zofia Wóycicka

## 1,000 Years in a Museum

### The History of Polish Jews

In 2011, Warsaw's Museum of the History of Polish Jews will open. A millennium of Jewish history in Poland is to be told on 4,000 square metres of exhibition space. The museum will also serve as a national culture and education centre. The building itself – which involved the collaboration of an international team of historians, architects, and exhibition designers – will be one of the most modern museum facilities in Europe.

With over 3 million Jews – about 10 per cent of the overall population – Poland was the largest centre of Jewish life in Europe before the Second World War. Over 300,000 members of the Jewish faith lived in Warsaw alone. The Polish capital was one of the most important centres of Jewish spiritual and cultural life. Most of Warsaw's Jews lived in what was known as the Northern Quarter, now called Muranów. The Germans erected a ghetto there in the autumn of 1940. Over 400,000 people were confined to just a few square kilometres. This was the largest ghetto in occupied Europe. In summer 1942, around 300,000 inhabitants of the ghetto were deported to the killing centre Treblinka. The ghetto's remaining inmates incited an uprising in April 1943. Roughly one month later, after the uprising had been suppressed, the Germans razed the entire ghetto to the ground. Following the war, a new residential area made up of buildings in the Stalinist “wedding cake” style was built over the rubble.

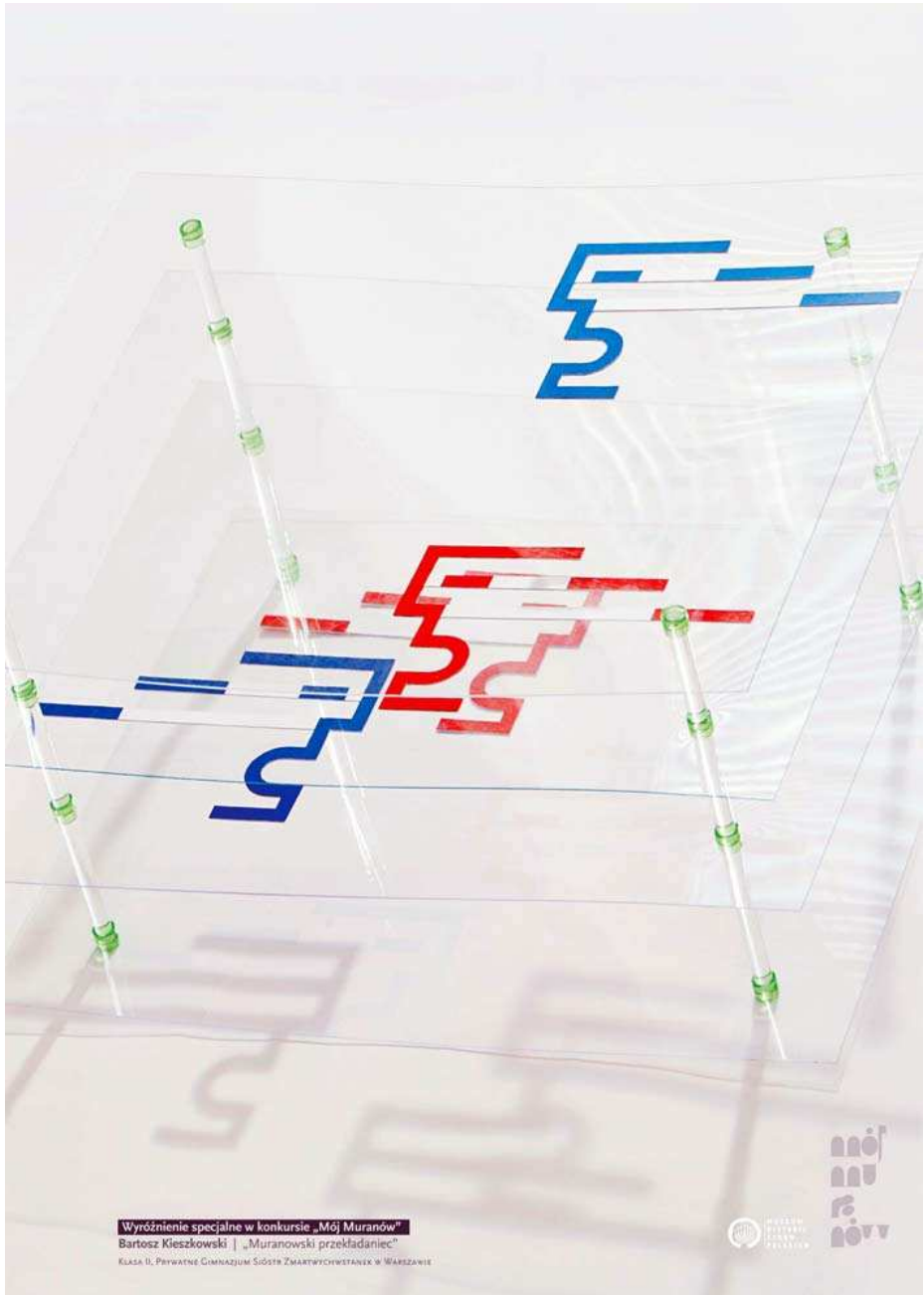
Today, there are only a handful of relics to serve as a reminder of this area's Jewish heritage. A few streets may still have their old names, but today, most follow a much different route. Just a few centimetres beneath the soil, however, lay the ruins and foundations of a “lost city”, and the current residents of Muranów, most of whom moved to Warsaw after the war, have but a vague notion of what existed there before 1939.<sup>1</sup>

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will open in 2011 across from the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and at the corner of what used to be the intersection of Zamenhof Street and Gęsia Street. In an exhibition space of 4,000 square metres, the museum will present the history of Polish Jews from the Middle Ages to the present.

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<sup>1</sup> *Muranów i Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich: tożsamość, pamięć miejsca, postrzeganie dzielnicy i jej żydowskiej historii. Raport z badań jakościowych dla Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich.* Centrum Badań nad Uprzedzeniami i Pracownia Badań Środowiskowych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Maria Lewicka, Katarzyna Kuzko, Agata Maksimowska, et al., eds., (Warsaw 2007), pp. 7, 14–23.



*Installation “Muranów Layer Cake” by Bartosz Kieszkowski (2nd year pupil at gymnasium).*

While the Second World War will occupy an important place in the exhibition, the institution will not be a Holocaust museum. The founders' main mission is to present the richness and variety of Jewish culture and tradition in Poland. This approach is to make visible what Poland and Europe lost in the Shoah. It also aims to show that Jewish life in Poland was not completely extinguished in the Holocaust. It is the institute's mission to fill these gaps in memory and so contribute to create a better understanding of the history shared by Poles and Jews with roots in Poland.

## Project History, Structure, and Financing

The idea to found the museum was first broached in the mid-1990s by Jeshajahu Weinberg, one of the founders and the first director of both the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Born in Warsaw, Weinberg immigrated to Palestine with his family in 1933. Work on the museum concept was initiated by Grażyna Pawlak, who was at the time the director of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute (*Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*) in Poland. The role of project manager was given to Jerzy Halberstadt, now the museum's director and a former employee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. To support the project, a committee was formed. It was soon joined by many notable people in public life, such as two previous foreign ministers, Władysław Bartoszewski and the recently deceased Bronisław Geremek, and the world famous film director Andrzej Wajda.<sup>2</sup>

Then Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski assumed patronage of the project and Israeli President Shimon Peres – at the time Israeli prime minister – was made chairman of the international honorary committee established to support museum construction. In 1997, the City of Warsaw settled on the plot of land that was to become the site of the future museum. It is located across from the Monument to the Ghetto Uprising. Only in 2003, however, did the museum receive approval from the state for long-term financial support. Poland's 2004 budget for the first time allotted funding to support work on the museum: 1.5 million złoty (then about €320,000). The means were approved in a special session of Poland's parliament, the Sejm, after a representative from Catholic National Movement (*Ruch Katolicko-Narodowy*), a small party, filed a motion to eliminate the funding. In the end, 299 representatives voted in favour of the funding, 94 against it.<sup>3</sup> Financial support for the project was also promised by Lech Kaczyński, Warsaw's mayor at the time. In 2005, the museum was officially registered as a joint cultural institute (*instytucja kultury*) of the City of Warsaw and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute.

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<sup>2</sup> For information on the members see

<[www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=154&lang=en](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=154&lang=en)>.

<sup>3</sup> Most of the votes against the project were from members of the right-wing nationalist party League of Polish Families (*Liga Polskich Rodzin*) and the agrarian, populist Self-Defence (*Samoobrona*). Both of these parties voted against funding the museum. Representatives of the Union of the Democratic Left (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*), Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*) and Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) voted with the majority in favour of funding the museum; <<http://orka2.sejm.gov.pl/Debata4.nsf>>; <<http://orka.sejm.gov.pl/SQL.nsf/glosowania?OpenAgent&4&65&120>>.

The museum is the only public-private initiative of its kind in Poland. The City of Warsaw, the Polish Ministry of Culture, and the Association for the Jewish Historical Institute are the museum's supporting organisations.<sup>4</sup> This means that the mayor of Warsaw and minister of culture are obliged to bear the costs of funding the museum as an institution, its ongoing activities, salaries, and administration. The city owns and oversees the land where the museum will be constructed. The association will finance work on the plan for the permanent exhibition and its furnishing, the furnishing of other facilities within the museum complex, and most of the public events and educational projects. The association solicits funding from other public and private foundations in Poland and abroad. It is supported by national committees for the museum's construction. Such committees have already been formed in the United States, Israel, Great Britain, Germany, France, and other European countries. The museum received a donation of €5 million from the German government in November 2007. The Polish Ministry of Culture and the City of Warsaw have promised approximately €61 million for construction. To date, the association has raised about €12 million for the project and museum facilities as well as for the permanent exhibition. Another €24 million is still needed. The museum director will be named by the administration of the City of Warsaw in consultation with the Ministry of Culture and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute. The same procedure will be used to select the 15 members of museum's board of directors, which has not yet been formed. In the selection of board members, consideration will be given to candidates from institutions that have donated more than €1 million. However, the share of board members representing patrons is not to exceed one-third of the board.

## The Building

An international competition was conducted in summer 2005 for the museum building. Well-known architects such as Daniel Libeskind, Zvi Hecker, Kengo Kuma, Peter Eisenman and David Chipperfield were among the entrants.<sup>5</sup> First prize was awarded to a project submitted by the Finish architect Rainer Mahlamäki.<sup>6</sup> The call for submissions stressed that the building should be modern and should possess great artistic value; yet at the same time, it should open up to the adjacent park and blend into the rather bleak surroundings of the 1960s apartment blocks.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> Statute of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews [www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=205&lang=en](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=205&lang=en).

<sup>5</sup> The eleven architects invited to the second round of the competition included Andrzej Bulenda (Poland), Marek Dunikowski (Poland), Josep Luis Mateo (Spain), Jesus Hernandez Mayor (the Netherlands), and Gesine Weinmiller (Germany).

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the 12 entries in the second round see "Międzynarodowy Konkurs Architektoniczny na budynek Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich w Warszawie", in *Komunikat SARP*, 7–8 (July–August 2005), pp. 32–57; Międzynarodowy Konkurs Architektoniczny na budynek Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich w Warszawie, Końcowy komunikat z posiedzenia Sądu Konkursowego w dniach 28–30 czerwca 2005 r.

<sup>7</sup> Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich. Program funkcjonalno-użytkowy budynku, April 2005; Międzynarodowy Konkurs Architektoniczny. Końcowy komunikat; Rozdarte wnętrze. Komentarz Bohdana Paczowskiego, przewodniczącego jury międzynarodowego konkursu na

building should not appear to the Muranów residents as a foreign body intended only for foreign visitors. It should look inviting and serve as a cultural centre for the neighbourhood and the entire city of Warsaw.

It was important to founders of the museum and the jury that the building not overshadow the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The monument by Nathan Rapaport, which was unveiled in 1948 to honour the uprising's fifth anniversary, had to remain a central point of reference for the surrounding area after the museum's completion.<sup>8</sup> In Mahlamäkis's design, the monument will even be an important component of the museum through an opening in the museum's entry hall. The interesting symbolism and history behind the monument's construction will be discussed in the museum's permanent exhibition. Other parts of the exhibition will refer to the history of Muranów and thus underscore the authenticity of this "place of memory without relics".

In Mahlamäkis's interpretation, the large chasm in the building should recall the Jews crossing of the Red Sea, the miraculous rescue of the people of Israel from the clutches of the Pharaoh, and the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt.<sup>9</sup> The chasm should not represent the Shoah as a gap in the history of Polish Jews; to the contrary, it should represent a "symbolic gateway to the history of Jews in Poland".<sup>10</sup>

The simple exterior shape of the building stands in contrast with the curved, limestone-coloured walls of the interior, which are intended to call to mind Palestine's landscape and its limestone caves.

The museum was conceived not only as a place for historical exhibitions, but as a "modern, multimedia cultural and educational centre".<sup>11</sup> The permanent exhibition will be located below the ground floor. The ground floor and the three upper floors will house temporary exhibitions (with 670 m<sup>2</sup> of available space), the media centre, an information centre with access to databanks and secondary literature, the education centre, a playroom for children, the museum shop, a restaurant, a large auditorium with stage and projection screen, two additional smaller cinemas, and office space.

## The Exhibition

In 2006, the museum director appointed a team of historians to prepare exhibition concept. This team includes many recognised specialists from Poland, Israel, and the United States: Professor Hanna Zaremska (Polish Academy of Sciences), Dr. Adam Teller (Haifa University), Professor Marcin Wodziński (University of Breslau), Professor Samuel Kassow (Trinity College Hartford), Dr. Barbara Enkelgling-Boni (Polish Academy of Sciences), Dr. Jacek Leociak (Polish Academy of Sciences),

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budynek Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich, Biuletyn Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich (Summer 2005), pp. 3–9.

<sup>8</sup> Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich. Program funkcjonalno-użytkowy, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Międzynarodowy Konkurs Architektoniczny. Końcowy komunikat.

<sup>10</sup> According to Bohdan Paczowski, chairman of the jury. "Muzeum żydowskie z 'magicznym wnętrzem'", *Gazeta Wyborcza* (12 October 2005); <[www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/press\\_news.php?miId=119&lang=pl&nId=1006](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/press_news.php?miId=119&lang=pl&nId=1006)>.

<sup>11</sup> Misja Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich; <[www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=127&lang=pl](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=127&lang=pl)>.

Dr. Helena Datner (Jewish Historical Institute Warsaw), and Professor Stanisław Krajewski (Warsaw University).<sup>12</sup>

The exhibition concept is being developed in collaboration with British exhibition designers Event Communications. The team has already participated in several larger museum projects, such as the design for the permanent exhibition at In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres and – in collaboration with Daniel Libeskind – the Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. Under the direction of Dr. Renata Piątkowska, the museum's exhibition department is responsible for co-ordinating work on the core concept as well as for overseeing archival research, the search for historical objects, and the collection of interviews with witnesses.

The exhibition team, which includes 13 historians, the exhibition department, and the designers from Event Communication, is led by Professor Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (Tisch School of the Arts, New York University), an ethnographer and specialist in museum studies. The exhibition is arranged as a narrative. The point of departure is not the collection, but the history to be told. The exhibition should be accessible and engaging for visitor groups with various interests and varying levels of background knowledge. To this end, the exhibition designers have integrated many elements from stage set design. For example, the section that covers the interwar era is conceived as an abstract Jewish street in a large Polish city. With its use of various media and interactive elements, the museum aims to encourage active learning and inspire visitors to discover history on their own. The exhibition consists of nine chapters:

1. The forest (entrance)
2. First encounters – first settlers (11th–15th century)
3. Paradisus Judeorum (16th-17th century)
4. The shtetl (mid. 17th–18th century)
5. The encounter with modernity (19th century)
6. The street (interwar era)
7. The holocaust
8. The postwar years
9. The heritage (probably an art exhibition)<sup>13</sup>

The basic partitioning of the exhibition is chronological, and within the individual time periods, the exhibition will be arranged chronologically and thematically. The individual sections will be assigned various topics. For the exhibition on the 18th century, the social structure and topography of a shtetl inhabited by Jews will be reconstructed. The rooms dedicated to the 19th century are to be seen as a history of the various facets of modernisation. Topics to be discussed here include migration from the shtetl to the big cities, the formation of the Jewish working class, the founding of the General Jewish

<sup>12</sup> Participants in the first phases of the project also included Professor Michael Steinlauf (Gratz College Philadelphia), Dr. Havi Ben Sasson (Hebrew University Jerusalem), and Professor David Assaf (University of Tel Aviv). Project consultants include Dr. Igor Kąkolewski (German Historical Institute Warsaw), Dr. Magdalena Micińska (Polish Academy of Sciences), and Professor Elchanan Reiner (University of Tel Aviv).

<sup>13</sup> More information is available at [www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=95&lang=en](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/articles.php?miId=95&lang=en).

Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia (best known as the Bund), the emergence of Zionism, assimilation and the emancipation of Jewish women.

Poland and its shifting historical borders will be considered throughout the exhibition. For example, with regard to the 15th-18th centuries (and the 19th century as well) the entire expanse of the dual-monarchy Poland-Lithuania will be addressed, in other words, areas that are today part of Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. The chapters on the Middle Ages and postwar years will also devote attention to the history of the Jews of Breslau-Wrocław. It would have made little sense to separate these histories because the Jews of Vilnius (Wilno, ווילנע), Hrodna (Grodno, ענדֶאָרג), Warsaw (Warszawa, עשֶׂר־אָוו), Cracow (Kraków, Krakau, עקֶאָרק), Lublin (לובלין), L'viv (Lwów, Lemberg, לעמבערג), or Luts'k (Łuck, לוצק) were all members of a shared cultural and linguistic space.

It is also a premise of the exhibition that the history of Polish Jewry be presented not as an isolated phenomenon, but as an integral part of the history of Poland and in a broader Polish context. To name one example, this means that the position of Jewish settlers in medieval cities founded on German law is to be explained against the backdrop of the general structure of such cities. A visitor unfamiliar with Polish history will thus be able to learn something about the Polish past as well.

The historians at work on the exhibition concept do not claim to present a comprehensive history with a binding interpretation. In a few places at least, it should be made clear to visitors that history is only an attempt to reconstruct the past with the help of preserved records, and that its interpretation is often the subject of intense debate.

## Educational Programme

An educational centre for the future museum has existed since spring 2007. The staff's mandate is, first of all, to develop an educational programme and to provide support to the exhibition team so that the exhibition meets didactic requirements. Second, the centre is to start realising various educational projects now. These also serve as test projects for later work.

The museum's most important target groups are adolescents and young adults. They should develop an awareness of Jewish history and culture not as something foreign – as it is often taught in Polish schools – but as an important component of Polish history and Polish cultural heritage. In the future, continuing education seminars for teachers will also be organised.

Young Israelis and Jewish school groups from other countries, which come to Poland every year in order to visit memorials for concentration camps, are to be convinced that it is worth including the museum on their itinerary. They are to learn that Poland was not only the site of the Holocaust, but also home to many of their ancestors and a country that was for centuries one of the largest and most important centres of Jewish life. The museum is directed at adult visitors as well. As one of the most modern museums in Warsaw and all of Poland, the museum is already destined to become one of the most important tourist attractions in the capital. Public events, lectures, book presentations, and film screenings will also be targeted at families and older members of the public. The educational programme is to reach not only museum goers but the broader public as well. Materials for school children and teachers and on-line databanks will help

achieve this goal. Two on-line portals connected with the museum will be launched soon. At the first of these, viewers can find information about history, memorials, and other remnants of Poland's Jewish communities. This information will be supplemented by audio and visual materials as well as excerpts from interviews with witnesses. The second portal will be dedicated to Poles who rescued Jews during the Second World War. In addition, the exhibition team is working on another databank with testimony from witnesses. The "Records on the Jewish World in Poland" will also be partially available on-line.

Although it was once a multicultural country, Poland today is a nearly homogenous nation-state with very few ethnic and religious minorities. In comparison to Germany, France, and other West European countries, there are also very few immigrants, which could very well change in the coming decades. The museum's main objective is to convey knowledge about the history and culture of Polish Jews and Polish-Jewish relations. By working through this past experience with multiculturalism, the museum seeks to make a contribution to overcoming xenophobia. The aim is to promote tolerance and to stir curiosity about other cultures and religions.

The museum is already at work on a number of educational projects. For the past three years, the educational centre has run an exchange programme for Polish and Israeli school children and university students. A further programme is to begin in 2008: The museum is organising joint day projects for young Poles and Israelis visiting Poland on school trips. Other museum programmes are aimed at Muranów and the residents of Warsaw at large. In the spring of 2008, an art competition entitled "My Muranów" was announced. Children and youth from all over Warsaw were encouraged to harness art to depict the former Jewish quarter and the ghetto area as it was then and as it is now. Almost 250 entries were submitted. Another project – "School Children Discover Muranów" – is targeted at 19 schools close to the future museum. During the 2008-2009 academic year, students will get a chance to learn more about the area's history and Jewish culture in general through a cycle of three workshops.

## Conclusion

To date, there have been no major public debates about the future museum. This may be due in part to the fact that the Polish media are mainly interested in current events. It seems that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews has already found acceptance. None of the parties represented in the Sejm call the museum into question. Representatives from various parties seem to have merely differing views of the museum's mission. General agreement prevails, however, on the need for a museum of this kind. The museum has already achieved a strong position internationally. That does not mean that the museum does not face a certain amount of pressure, especially from the various patrons in Poland or abroad. Thanks to the museum's three-tiered patronage and the international team of historians, the museum can truly maintain its sovereignty vis-à-vis the various interest groups involved in the politics of memory.

*Translated by Amy Pradell, Berlin*