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### ***The Jewish Biblia Pauperum***

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POLIN  
Museum  
of the History  
of Polish Jews



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## **The Jewish *Biblia Pauperum***

The core exhibition of the Museum of Polish Jews in Warsaw (called Polin, in Hebrew Poland) was opened in October 2014. The reviews both in Poland and abroad were unanimous in deeming it “enormous, staggering, and built on a spectacular scale.” The commentators were impressed with the monumental panorama of the over 700 years of the Jews’ presence in Polish lands, and so were most visitors. The Museum celebrated it with a self-referential temporary exhibition.

Certainly the impressive historical material base of the eight chronological galleries, which make up the exhibition space covering over 4,500 square metres deserves a deep respect. However I do not refer to the content and interpretation of the individual galleries, that would be far beyond my competences and knowledge. My subject is the exhibition’s curatorial formula and the manner in which it was realised. I admit that I have essential reservations concerning these two aspects., I’m aware that my doubts might seem exaggerated in the light of the common awe accompanying the exhibition’s opening, I take the risk all the more so because my main objective is to invite the reader to thoroughly examine the exhibition on the spot for him or herself.

Already in 1995, when all that was known was the location of the future museum in the Muranów quarter of Warsaw – during the Nazi occupation the ghetto territory – koproposite the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, it was decided that the planned exhibition would be huge, have the character of a multimedia historical narration, and would not end with the Holocaust but will be continued to present day. Soon the programmatic motto was phrased: Museum of Life.

In 2001, after the opening of the Jewish Museum Berlin in the spectacular building designed by Daniel Libeskind, Jerzy Halbersztadt, the Director of POLIN Museum during its creation, stressed that unlike in the German capital the building in Warsaw would be designed to match the ready exhibition’s concept. founded on the idea of a ‘narrative museum’. That idea was imposed by Jeshajahu Weinberg (1918–2000), the creator of the Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv and of the exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Upon an invitation from the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland (*Stowarzyszenie Żydowski Instytut Historyczny*), Weinberg initiated vision of the Warsaw institution. On its basis the ŻIH

Association commissioned Event Communications, a British company, to design the exhibition. Prepared in a close cooperation with the large team of esteemed Polish, Israeli, and American scholars, its basic draft was ready in 2003.<sup>1</sup> The 2005 winner of the architectural competition announced at that time was Rainer Mahlamäki from Finland.

The Museum's building is multifunctional, aesthetically superb. It is based on a contrast between the modernist, minimalist exterior cube made of glass panels and the interior carved in light stone, monumental and with a gorge of light cutting through it. Beautiful though empty, the building was opened on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, 19 April 2013.

The core exhibition was opened to the public a year and a half later. It is situated in the underground part of the building. Though essential to the Museum's activity, the exhibition is absent from the open space available to people coming in. One could get the impression that it is a separate part of the museum complex instead of an integral element of this friendly architecture.

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine more disparate aesthetics than those of Mahlamäki's edifice and the exhibition for which it was designed. The clarity, elegance, and equivocal imagery of this architecture are in opposition to the thicket of visual effects, multimedia syncretism, and heavy, sometimes kitschy, design (commissioned in 2011 to a Polish company, Nizio Design International) that fill the Museum's underground.

The core exhibition can be characterised, in my view, as a gigantic simulacrum: colourful, enticing through variety, stunning in scale, and achingly artificial. It seems to be a contemporary version of gigantic painted panoramas fashionable and popular at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even the limited original artefacts, juxtaposed with copies, reproductions, replicas, mockups, and miniature models, lose their authenticity. There are all too many examples of this, extreme in the rooms devoted to the partitions of Poland and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Especially sad is the neighborhood of the original paintings and reproductions displayed

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<sup>1</sup> It was the master plan, prepared by the Museum management, Event Communications, and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute. It set the direction for research and work on the individual galleries. By the way, it would be interesting to compare the conceptions formulated at that time with the finished exhibition opened in 2014. For it should be emphasised that in none of the production stages did the core exhibition's concept become an object of an open discussion among international specialists, exhibition experts and museum employees. The authors of the texts of the individual galleries, historians and academic scholars from various fields, had no experience in this regard. Neither the presentations popularising the idea of the Museum, nor fundraising, nor the final discussion in various circles about the content of certain galleries, which often had the character of censorship, can be considered as such a discussion. More about the final programmatic discussions resulting in censoring interventions see "Jankiel, chasydzi i Tuwim. O Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich z Heleną Datner rozmawia Piotr Paziński," *Midrasz* 1 (January–February 2015): 4–10.

in the gallery devoted to the Second Republic of Poland 1918–1939. It proves not only a disregard for the basic museum standards, but also contempt for the originals and as a consequence inevitable depreciation of their authors: Jankel Adler, Mojżesz Kisling, Marek Włodarski, Natan Szpigiel, and others.

The organisers' argument that there are no original artefacts in the country or that they are unavailable sounds unconvincing to anybody familiar with the content of Polish museum storerooms, libraries, and archives. Besides, the work on the exhibition began years ago with a search query for Judaica and iconographic materials regarding the Jewish subject matter conducted in public collections, already with an intention to use their images instead of the authentic objects.<sup>2</sup>

This presumed equal status of the original items and their ersatzes makes one realise that the objects used, the vast majority of which are two-dimensional, were reduced to illustrations or decorations.

Certainly are, substitutes much handier in this respect than originals for practically anything can be done with the former; they can be zoomed out and pasted onto a wall like the romanesque bronze Gniezno Doors or enlarged and schematised like the medieval miniatures or royal portraits. They can be used to fill a section of a wall like the title pages of Hebrew old prints enlarged to architectural dimensions or the fake spines of absent volumes posing as a library. Cut out, they turn into a silhouette reaching beyond the wall like the life-size full-body photograph of the painter Maurycy Gottlieb, or even two-sided (like the writer Brunon Schulz's portrait) or displayed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century gallery photographic busts made of two Plexiglas sheets glued together.

I do not know what is more saddening: the lifeless dummies of Jewish books, newspapers, and other prints whose originals are stored in many Polish public libraries despite the Holocaust cataclysm or can even still be occasionally purchased in antiquarian bookstores. Or the mockup of ghetto ruins looking as if it has been made from papier-mâché in the place, from which several years ago, before the foundations of the building were laid, quite a lot of authentic ghetto debris was removed during the archeological works commissioned by the Museum.

I am certain though that the freely outlined large panoramas of medieval Płock, Poznań, and Warsaw, not based on historical or at least archeological/topographic sources, sadly abuse the trust in the exhibition's factual adherence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Not to mention certain technical parameters of the exhibition rooms, which do not comply with the museum standards of exhibit safety, thus precluding exhibiting original works of art. Again, it remains unknown whether that was intentional or resulted from the commissioning party's lack of professionalism. In the case of a building erected specially to house a museum such a decision remains unjustified.

<sup>3</sup> Milena Orłowska, "Płock w muzeum Polin. Fajnie, ale jakiś niepodobny," *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Płock, 1 February 2015.

Moreover, the gigantic 'interactive' model of Cracow with the Jewish quarter of Kazimierz is problematic because both Cracow and Kazimierz have survived (which is rare in Poland) and attracts crowds of tourists from Poland and abroad. It is also a perfect example of how a cacophony of visual and technological effects successfully jeopardizes the cognitive aspect of the exhibition.

Quite a few reviewers from Poland and abroad have commented on the exhibitions' small architecture most of which is made in a quasi-imitative Disneyland manner.<sup>4</sup> Together with multimedia models of various scale and massively stylised displays with multiple touch screens it is to give the exhibition the coveted three-dimensionality.

The text falls victim to the thus processed iconographic material and its spatial framework. This would be totally unsurprising in the visual pop culture, which the Polin exhibition undoubtedly adheres to. But in the exhibition' concept the vital role was supposed to be played by the text that in total is nearly a thousand pages long. To be more precise,, there are few different groups of texts ordered according to their function. The historical quotations were divided into the core and the complimentary ones. The former were to serve as every gallery's porte parole, while the remaining ones are tasked with the "polyphony of stances" during the presented historical periods to encourage in-depth perception. The next category of texts is the contemporary commentary based on the current state of research, available on various levels of generality: from synthetic explanation to reporting on particular issues. To this must be added the captions for the illustrative material, map legends, charts, and models written in two language versions: in Polish and English, and also the Polish and English translations of Hebrew, Yiddish, and Latin quotations.

Such conceptions threatened an influx of text, but it was not avoided despite using fonts of different size and colour, writing the quotations on spatial projections, or even placing them on the floor; not to mention the dozens of electronic devices. The postulated innovative polyphony of voices from the depths of history proved to be a fiasco, and so did the postulated clear distribution of verbal messages. The profusion of texts inevitably makes the visitors disoriented, bored, or indifferent.

This does not change the fact that the textual approach remains crucial. The exhibition appears distinctly as a richly illustrated peripatetic course book, a Jewish *Biblia Papuerum*. Such an approach, today viewed as anachronistic, "does not make a narration by itself."<sup>5</sup> This makes all the more worrying the programmatic exclusion of two elements with an irreplaceable symbolic and affective potential: the context of the place and the original object.

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<sup>4</sup> Even the plafond of the 17<sup>th</sup> century synagogue in Gwoździec, which is the central object of the exhibition, is not a faithful reproduction as its size was decreased by 20 per cent in comparison to the original, unlike the bima standing beneath it.

<sup>5</sup> Iwona Kurz, "„Tu spoczniecie", Muzeum Polin," *dwutygodnik.com* 145 (October 2014).

Although the Museum is located on the territory of the former ghetto, that did not influence the concept of the exhibition, which is the ideological core of the Museum. As if it had nothing to do with the discussion about representation and language, continuing for decades and born from the civilisational and cultural caesura of the Shoah.

I am talking neither about the topic itself, as the Holocaust gallery is the largest one in the Museum's basement, nor about seeing the Warsaw museum as a museum of the Holocaust.

But even though today the 'innocent eye' is an illusion it prevails over the exhibition, in a way ignoring the material and symbolic truth of this unique *lieu de memoire*, which it appropriated. As if, though it could not have been intentional, this uniqueness was meant to be downplayed, suppressed, and substituted with an ersatz replica.

One did not need to wait long for the first consequences of that reckless decision. The historically unique solely Jewish area has become the territory of the Polish political correctness. Jan Karski's bench, Irena Sendler's lane beside the Museum, and plans to erect there the Monument of Polish Righteous among The Nations are all an effect of this decision regardless of the intentions or political priorities.

Unfortunately, the exhibition also ignores the original artefacts from before the Holocaust and the intimate stories connected with them, which often signal the void remaining after their owners. As if the Museum of Life could (or was supposed to?) fill this void.

These programme assumptions are difficult to accept.

But even within their framework many issues remain unclear. Why did the curators of the exhibition ignore iconoclasm, deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and persisting at least until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century? Instead, they made abundant use of the Christian pictorial tradition with the typical for Polish iconosphere inclination for the 'baroque', bombastic effect.

All the more striking is the absence of Judaism. Some would point out that the exhibition includes, after all, a synagogue, a Yeshiva, and a wedding ceremony under a chuppah, not to mention a number of rabbis and various types of Orthodox Judaism connected with their personas. Others would reply with indigence that Jews cannot be defined through religion. But Judaism is not only a religion, but is the same as Christianity or Islam; a civilization, founded on the Torah and Talmud. Faithfulness to these Holy Books and studying them constituted the identity of the Jewish Diaspora and conditioned its historical continuity and development. With the advent of the modern period, their position and role changed, substituted or enriched to various degrees with other content and factors. But that did not lessen the importance of Judaism for the history and identity of Jews. Apart from that it is an essential, though insufficient, condition for understanding this Jewish history by non-Jews. Particularly that the special nature of Judaism and its dissimilarity from Christian dogmas, culture, and



customs have for centuries determined the character of the mutual relations between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority, including the Polish and Catholic environments.

By the way, these two communities' apparent spiritual and cultural dissimilarity (beginning with the language, alphabet, and calendar) and its dynamics in the light of the historical process, which the exhibition presents, could have been a perfect carrier for the Museum's narration. But then the authors and curators of the exhibition would have been obliged to cease their suggested objectivity and an attempt to please everybody. Instead, to risk controversy and inconvenient questions. They would primarily need to move beyond the strictly Polonocentric perspective that they adopted.<sup>6</sup> It resulted in an exhibition that illustrates the history of the Jewish minority in the strict relation to the Polish history, concentrated on showing the rich specificity of this community against the background of the former.<sup>7</sup>

This clear Polonocentrism is to a large extent a polemic with traditional Jewish historiography, which concentrated mostly on the community factors that over the centuries have enabled the dispersed Jewish Diaspora to retain its identity and resist the assimilation processes.<sup>8</sup> At the same time this Polish Jewishness or Jewish Polishness of the exhibition is a kind of manifest. At least for Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, from the NYU Department of Performance and Jewish Studies, who has been connected with the Warsaw Jewish Museum project almost from its beginning. She was the Museum's Programme Director, coordinator, and the head of the curating team. She was the person who had the most influence on the exhibition's programme profile and its presentation.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's family originates from the former territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the same as the families of many Jews now living in the United States and Israel. The Museum: a monument on the River Vistula commemorating the Jewish community, which settled here many centuries ago and which had flourished until the outbreak of the war in 1939, was to restore memory about that community among its descendants dispersed around the world. It was also to become, as she intended, the fourth building block of the identity of today's Jewry, along with Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> More about this topic see Konrad Matyjaszek, "Polonizacja historii. O wystawie stałej Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich," *Kultura Liberalna* 12 (2015), <http://kulturaliberalna.pl/2015/03/24/konrad-matyjaszek-mhzp-wystawa-stala-recenzja/>, access 30 March 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Moshe Rosman, "Categorically Jewish Distinctly Polish: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the New Polish-Jewish Metahistory," *Judicial Studies Institute Journal* (2012): 361–387, [www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/10-2012/Rosman.pdf](http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/10-2012/Rosman.pdf), access 1 February 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Rosman, *Jak pisać historię żydowską?*, trans. and ed. Agnieszka Jagodzińska (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Paweł Smoleński, "Opowiadamy o życiu. Wywiad z Barbarą Kirshenblatt-Gimblett," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 25–26 January 2014.

This might be why the exhibition also omits, as is obvious to Jewish historians, the Polin inhabitants' continuous and multi-faceted relations with the Diaspora, mainly Ashkenazi Jews, wherever they settled. But this cannot justify the exclusion of this extremely important aspect of the life of the Jewish community on Polish territory, which had a profound influence on the character of Jewish occupations and social position and which has no equivalent among the Catholic majority. As does the absence of Judaism, the absence of the relations with the Diaspora illuminates the picture of Jewish life in Poland from only one perspective, thus distorting it, even though the exhibition presents it as complete.

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Finally, some remarks on two galleries, which in my opinion have been relatively successful in achieving their objective. I shall write a little more about the latter, devoted to the Holocaust, as this topic is of the most interest to the readers of the yearbook.

The first of the two successful galleries is the introductory Forest gallery, though thematically in my opinion problematic and infantile. Luckily, Rainer Mahlamäki did not agree for the design of this gallery, the only one visible from other stories. He opposed to the proposed quasi-realist manner, that is, for it to be a 'real' forest. The realized solution, designed by Jung v. Matt Bad Design, is light, vague, and unpretentious. At the same time it remains unknown whether it discretely links or separates the two aesthetically disparate Museum spaces: the space of architecture and the space of the exhibition. By the way, the difference between the initial and the realised project demonstrates how much the final effect depends on the designers' style and culture..

My appreciation of the Holocaust gallery might seem shocking in the light of my earlier reservations concerning the general concept of the core exhibition that in its artificiality ignores the unique historical location of the Museum building, even though the Warsaw ghetto is the centre of the Holocaust section.

Indeed, the discrepancy between the truth of the place and the simulacrum that substitutes it is nowhere more evident as in this gallery. The most painful example is a copy of a chessboard used by the Warsaw ghetto escapees hiding on the 'Aryan' side displayed in a glazed case in the floor, even though in the Museum collection there is a lot of 'orphaned' ghetto items excavated on the spot. Though absent at the Holocaust gallery, they were included in the selfreferential temporary exhibition as evidence (sic!) of the meticulousness of the works preceding the construction of the Museum building.

Nevertheless that, what clearly distinguishes the content of the gallery prepared by Professors Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak; from the other ones is its authors' awareness of the language of presentation. This is

accompanied to a large extent by the visual discipline, which this language determines<sup>10</sup>.

Engelking and Leociak were probably aided, but also somewhat limited, by the fact that the Holocaust representation is an object of not only extensive reflection, but has been practised in memorial places and museums, at exhibitions, in films, and even in pop culture.

The clearest indication of these two authors' methodological position is the way in which they treat the surviving photographic Shoah documentation, produced almost entirely by the German perpetrators, and which during the past decades has been exploited and depreciated by the media.

First of all, it is important which photographs were excluded. They were those depicting humiliation, torture, executions, people walking to gas chambers, and also heaps of dehumanised corpses. It seems that this decision was motivated not only by the two scholars' objection to the banalisation of the Holocaust iconography, but also by their respect for the victims, an attempt to protect the dignity of the individuals.

Secondly, the photographs used (obviously reproductions of the originals) essentially retain the status of unique objects and historical sources, which is expressed, *inter alia*, in the decision to abide by their original small format and to include information about their source. One of the examples could be the display of Jürgen Stroop's report on the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto or the actually monumental treatment of the small "pieces of film snatched from hell" (as Georges Didi-Huberman calls them), that is, four photographs from the inside of an Auschwitz gas chamber taken in secret by the Jewish *Sonderkommando*.

Moreover, with a few exceptions, the role of text in the Holocaust gallery of the Polin's exhibition is not depreciated by bizarre formal devices. Ordered and graphically clear, the text's presence is apparent, it 'wants' to be read. Quotations from the 'times of contempt' are not mixed with commentary, though the juxtaposition of two ghetto perspectives: the Chairman of Judenrat Adam Czerniaków's, and that of the founder and leader of the Underground *Oneg Shabbat* Archive, Emanuel Ringelblum's, will perhaps be understood and reflected on by only a handful of visitors.

The authors of the Holocaust gallery do not intend to attract the visitor. On the contrary, they seem to signal that entering it one abandons the earlier absorbing variety of sensations and threads.. This is encouraged by the colour spectrum limited to black and grey, the significant homogeneity and effectiveness of the

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<sup>10</sup> The reader might accuse me of bias not only because I mention the authors of only this gallery, but in the remaining galleries of the Polin Museum's exhibition the form dominates the content to such an extent and in such a way that my reservations about, let me stress, the manner and style of the exhibition would turn against the historians: the authors of the script and content of every gallery who due to lack of curating experience subordinated to the formula and expectations of the exhibition's designers and chief curators.

means used (mainly text and photographs), together with relatively modest art design (compared to the lavishness of the remaining galleries). But even this gallery is not free of designers' exaggerations and distortions.

Many reviewers have praised the Holocaust gallery's claustrophobic ambience and the allusion to the ghetto bridge over Chłodna Street from which one can see – as at that time – the 'Aryan' side of Warsaw, with its completely different atmosphere of the almost normal life. Personally I regard these effects as secondary, though perhaps useful in building the ambience of oppression. What really counts in this spatial arrangement is the clear route, which emphasizes the escalation of the extermination process. The focus of the narrative lies in the history of Warsaw ghetto, what rises justified reservations, particularly when one considers the close proximity of the Jewish Historical Institute located in the preserved building of the pre-war Main Judaic Library [*Główna Biblioteka Judaistyczna*] and preserving in its collection the *Oneg Shabbat* Archive.

It is time to point out another fundamental issue connected with the whole exhibition: how far its authors, curators and organizers took into account the visitors' varied perceptive, cognitive, and often purely physical capabilities and needs.<sup>11</sup> They seem to have assumed that the visitor would move through the exhibition independently, devote a lot of time to his or her visit (how much?), and would repeat it more than once. Meanwhile, those who enter the exhibition without a guide or an audio guide are bound to become lost in its labyrinth and tired of its excess of sensations and informations and leave once regardless of which gallery they reached. Somebody who has little time, just an hour or an hour and a half (this is the customary duration of the museum's visit), shall not find an easy to follow route, not to mention the architectural narrow sections of the exhibition and the jam caused by guided tours. How many people will see the exhibition again? Particularly that many visitors come from other Polish regions or abroad. The Museum is training a large group of guides, educators, and advisors to circulate at the exhibition to facilitate the reception of the exhibition and increase its cognitive value. This is a step in the right direction, but not necessarily a compliment to the exhibition creators.<sup>12</sup>

To sum up: the core exhibition of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw is extremely important and impressive in terms of its scale and its historical research. Its opening proved an unprecedented political and media success in and outside Poland. It was welcomed with joy and pride by a number

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<sup>11</sup> One example of the Museum scandalously ignoring its visitors' needs is the very small number of toilets in the underground and on the first floor. It is completely inadequate for the expected large number of visitors (including numerous tourist groups) and to the recommended several hours' visiting time.

<sup>12</sup> The lighting and sound architecture also require adjustment, as many texts are illegible and sound from some sections reaches the ones it has nothing to do with. Mistakes in the texts and their English translations should also be corrected. With time the exhibition could be discretely 'slimmed down' according to the famous maxim that 'less is more'.

of Poles and foreigners for whom the restoration of the memory of the Polish Jews and their history had long been a personal dream.

Now the exhibition is bound to attract numerous visitors, at least during the next several years. I wish that their visits will not be limited to consumption of visual sensations and multimedia interactions.

The exhibition thanks to the new interpretations of history based on many years of research conducted by the authors of the individual galleries shall definitely become a basis and inspiration for discussions, polemics, and further research.

It made the Museum of the History of Polish Jews face a very difficult challenge. The test it has to pass shall be its programme and the quality of its temporary exhibitions, the level of the accompanying publications, and the Museum's collection strategy.

Starnberg, February 2015

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska*