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On the Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Let me ask a simple question: What can an ordinary visitor see in the Museum of the History of Polish Jews? And I do not mean a museologist or a Jew by descent or by choice aware of their own history. I mean an ordinary inhabitant of Warsaw or someone who has decided to visit the museum, encouraged by the publicity of its establishment and the organisation of its permanent historical exhibition. A visitor who most probably already knows that the building itself, designed by Rainer Mahlamäki, is considered to be one of the most interesting architectural pieces of recent years and that the idea behind the main exhibition developed during many years of scientific and personnel disputes. Finally a visitor who has probably already encountered the concept of a narrative exhibition but associates the word “museum” mainly with a collection of exhibits instead of modern exhibition art.

So their first reaction may be that of disappointment. How come? Such a magnificent building, so many ideological and scientific disputes, and yet what one faces is a line of drawings on the walls, trilingual inscriptions and, at best, reproductions. Some *pauperum* of history, a comic strip presenting thousands of years of history, sometimes set in motion with the use of electronics. To hell with the Middle Ages and the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; even the 19th and 20th centuries are presented almost solely in pictures. And where is any material evidence of Jewish life? Where is the furniture, where are the books, workshops, pots, jewellery, signs of luxury and proofs of poverty?

Where are they? Their lack, their absence itself conveys an important message, and a very strong one. The authors of the exhibition emphasise that the museum is supposed to tell the history of the Jews in Poland, and not just that of the Holocaust, which was only an epilogue to the story. But the Holocaust is not only visible in the exhibition rooms devoted to the topic but one is also reminded of it by the emptiness itself. It is achieved by lack of material mementos and the presence of rare and rather random objects. It is as if the memory of the life of the Polish Jews has been erased or buried, just as those *matzevahs* changed into paving.

It thus becomes understandable that, even though seemingly childish, a millennium enclosed in pictures is not only an attempt to regain the lost memory but also a proof of it being lost. But can one actually learn history from those

pictures? It obviously depends; for unprepared visitors, who in fact make up the vast majority of those who come here, the exhibition in a nutshell presents most of all the history of Poland. This is true for both foreigners, who do not know this history at all, and also for Poles, who are chronically undereducated. But it is not only that. There are also various attractions: one can print out a signature of an old Jewish printing house, for example that of the Helicze brothers with the Cracow coat of arms, or see synagogues from the Cracow district of Kazimierz on a computer screen. Right after the opening of the exhibition, it was also possible to buy tickets for the Warsaw–Terespol train. And yet it all conveys a powerful message: the history of Jews and the history of Poles are inextricably interwoven. Ibrahim ibn Yaqub only passed through the Polish lands ruled by Mieszko in the 10th century, but he was still the first one to describe them, even though there must have been many Jewish merchants (including slave dealers) visiting the territories in those times. Settling here began permanently in the 12th century, when Jews were fleeing Germany in fear of persecution. In 1264, Duke of Poland Bolesław the Pious issued the Statute of Kalisz, which addressed the situation of the settlers (its fragments are played out loud in the museum). The exhibition presents subsequent legal acts and shows how – with the passing of time – the Jews were becoming one of the classes of Polish feudal society. This is when the history of the Diaspora became a part of the history of Poland. It does contain some mythical elements, too, because according to the legend about Abraham Prochownik (which, unfortunately, I did not find in the museum), he was the first one to come to Kruszwica after Prince Popiel's death, which meant he would become the ruler, but – after some consideration – he nominated Piast the Wheelwright as his replacement.

The history of the Diaspora is a part of the Polish history also because together with the flourishing of the Polish Republic, *Paradisus Iudaeorum*, the Jewish paradise, was also flourishing. Its development was ended only by the Khmelnytsky Uprising. For the Poles it was the beginning of defeats that would eventually lead to the fall of the country, and for the Jews – a foretaste of their extermination, mass murder in Cossack pogroms described by Nathan Hannover. At the same time, however, the history of the Diaspora follows its own track, whose fragments are displayed in the exhibition: the district of Kazimierz in Cracow, where the royal banker Lewko was resettled in the 14th century (we may see a safe conduct issued for him by the Cracow City Council in 1370), the Jewish settlement in Zamość, the synagogue in Łuck and the one in Żółkiew, co-funded by King John III Sobieski... The wealth of those settlements, in particular the magnificence of their now already non-existent or damaged buildings is proven by the definitely most beautiful piece in the whole exhibition: the reconstruction of the polychrome vault of the wooden synagogue in Gwoździec. It is a kind of handicraft masterpiece that was reconstructed for the museum with the use of the same materials, paints and tools as those used in the 17th century. But the story told by the museum mentions also thriving Jewish printing

houses and Jewish political bodies: the Lithuanian Council and the Council of Four Lands (Greater Poland, Lesser Poland, Red Ruthenia and Volhynia), as well as the beginnings of Hasidism. All of those elements should make contemporary visitors aware of the rich life of a society that after all remained quite hermetic through the centuries. It was probably Singer who wrote somewhere, "We've lived next to each other for a thousand years, but we've never been close."

But isn't this picture too idyllic? A shrewd observer will indeed find some explanation that *Paradisus Iudaeorum* is an ironic expression and a quote from an anonymous writer from the 17th century who, annoyed, wrote, "The Kingdom of Poland is a paradise for Jews, a hell for boys, a purgatory for burghers and the reign of servants". He will learn that the most repulsive scenes and rhymes from those surrounding the central painting of the 17th-century *danse macabre* in the Church of St. Bernardine in Cracow concern Jews (John of Capistrano, the founder of the church, called for anti-Semitic acts even in the 15th century), that anti-Semitic caricatures and lampoons circulated around the whole country and that through all those centuries there was a common belief in the Jewish desire for Christian blood, even though it was questioned already by the Statute of Kalisz. One can see reproductions of Charles de Prevot's paintings from Sandomierz that depict ritual killings; this type of accusation was so persistently repeated that in 1753 the Council of Four Lands asked Rome to confirm the statement the Church had made in the 17th century that it was groundless to accuse Jews of ritual killings. And the appropriate document was issued even in 1760, but it did not change anything.

It seems, however, that the intention of the authors of the exhibition was not to emphasise conflicts but to tone them down. While including the history of Jews in the history of Poland, they assumed, their assumption seeming quite reasonable, that the time for analysing contentious issues would come later. That it would be easier to remember the picture of more or less harmonious coexistence than the sources of conflicts that would eventually still be faced in the future.

The synagogue in Gwoździec is the centre of the whole exhibition and at the same time the culmination of its strictly historical part. The next galleries are concerned with the passage to modernity. This story is quite obviously less clear, as it simply contains too many, often contradictory, threads. The fall of the Polish Republic came when the era of nation states had just began in Europe for good. As a result of the partitions of Poland, the Jews living here became subjects of powers that were completely different from the Poland they knew and that were certainly much more rigorous. In the new circumstances, a part of the Jewish society, which is heavily stressed by the exhibition, remained attached to Poland and took part in the patriotic rebellions to come. The authors remembered about Berek Joselewicz and the Jewish participants in demonstrations organised before the January Uprising. They remembered Izaak Kramsztyk and Leopold Kronenberg, and also Michał Landy, who died during demonstrations in 1861, having taken over a cross from his killed Christian companion. One can also

see an embroidered flag from 1863 presented to the insurgents by a “Polish-Israeli woman from Kalisz”. As a result of the partitioners’ activities, however, the Jewish society lost much of its identity and autonomy. Starting from 1853, it was forbidden in the territory under the Russian rule to wear traditional Jewish costumes, and relocation and restrictions in selecting dwelling places lasted there until the First World War. And under the Prussian rule, the process of making Jews equal in terms of civil rights led to their Germanisation.

At the same time, the Jews living in all the partitioned territories were merging into the European modernity throughout the 19th century: they were co-funding the construction of the railway system, co-creating the developing industry (such as the Poznański family in Łódź, to whom a separate section of the exhibition is devoted) and participating in the organisation of the labour movement. But they also came into conflict with each other, including both religious disagreements (the *Haskalah* versus the Hasidim) and ideological ones (integrationism versus Zionism on the one hand and secular Jewish culture on the other). They fell victim to pogroms organised by the tsarist authorities and to the Polish anti-Semitism (for example Jan Jeleński’s weekly *Rola* and leaflets jeering at the Jews and now exhibited in the museum). And finally they emigrated: until 1914, 2 million Jews left Eastern Europe, going especially to the USA.

The point-based and picture-based method adopted in the exhibition is not enough to fully present those phenomena and processes in their complexity, and the mini lectures that come together with the images hardly grasp anyone’s undivided attention. How much one gains from this part of the exhibition depends greatly on one’s previous knowledge. There is probably one clear conclusion everyone may draw just from looking at the exhibits: in the 19th century, the Polish Jews stopped being exotic. The world of *shtetlech* and Hasidim obviously kept its vividness, which would survive even the interwar period, but the office of Isaac Leib Peretz could have belonged to Bolesław Prus, the drawing room of a Jewish lady was no different than the room of a Polish one, and Bundist slogans were not that different from the ones adopted by Polish socialists. Works published in Yiddish differed from the Polish ones in the alphabet but not graphically, and the furniture and frock coats in the museum photographs look similar as well. Differences went much deeper, into the sphere of world views. Those can no longer be visually presented.

The same, though with much greater intensity, can be said about the interwar period. The exhibition here mainly catalogues various forms of Jewish activity. Thus one faces a kind of a calendar of political events that considers the phenomenon of particularly active Jews, for example an election catchphrase from 1922: “Every Jew in Poland votes for the Polish National Minorities Bloc.” There is also a photograph depicting members of the Jewish Parliamentary Group in the first term of the Polish Parliament. One sees numerous examples of cultural life: Jewish filmmakers (who actually worked on almost all contemporary Polish films too), Jewish theatres and Jewish entertainment groups, including of

course Artur Gold and Jerzy Petersburski's orchestra, as well as an impressive collection of press publications in Hebrew, Yiddish and Polish. There are Jewish sportspeople and Jewish summer camps; and those who reach the mezzanine may learn details about educational associations and travel agencies. In a word, one sees records of various spheres of Jewish social life that prove the more or less harmonious coexistence with the Polish majority. The authors of the exhibition included even the Ziemiańska café and *Wiadomości Literackie* [Literary News] in their story about Jewish Warsaw, which obviously has some justification but is not completely accurate.

The image of the harmonious coexistence is not flawless, though, as one learns about the pogroms occurring in 1918, just after Poland had regained independence. The exhibition mentions also the camp in Jabłonna, where Jewish soldiers previously suspected of pro-Bolshevik sympathies were interned in August 1920 and shows a banner waving in front of the Lviv Polytechnic in the 1930s with the following inscription, "A day without Jews. We demand an official ghetto." But my impression is that the idealisation in this part of the exhibition is excessive. Anti-Semitism in Poland, especially towards the end of the 1930s, became particularly fierce. And among contemporary Jews were not only Julian Tuwim or Antoni Słonimski, but also for example Jakub Appenzlak and Simon Dubnow. There were inhabitants of ethnic enclaves, not only the Vilnius "Yiddishland" but countless towns such as Szczuczyn or Tykocin, where hardly anyone spoke Polish or felt attached to Poland in any way. The gallery about the interwar period definitely promotes enlightened Jews; the *shtetl* (under the name "town", the term *shtetl* does not appear anywhere in the whole exhibition) can be rarely found here, just as the streets of Miła or Nalewki in the Jewish district of Warsaw. They are referred to, but only indirectly. The centre of this part of the exhibition is occupied by a multimedia street with signboards of some shops, the editor's office of the Jewish paper *Nowy Dziennik* [New Daily] and the Fama cinema. The street runs exactly where Zamenhofa Street was located before the war. And there is something amazing in this combination of a real place with multimedia kitsch: we suddenly realise where we really are. The exhibition blends into reality, but the latter is immediately undermined by changing pastel visualisations. The Jewish street does not allow one to forget where the museum is located, and the kitsch encourages one to maintain some distance. I am not sure whether such emotional pressure was intended by the authors of the exhibition or whether it is merely some unplanned effect. In any case, the dissonance would accompany me in the next galleries almost to the end of my visit.

It was particularly present in the part devoted to the Holocaust. Knowing that it partially took place exactly here, where the museum has been erected, immediately makes one think about all those never-ending discussions about the possibility or impossibility of depicting the Holocaust, about the helplessness of art and about poetry being impossible after Auschwitz. It is difficult to push those thoughts out of one's mind because the exhibition is mainly based on the

topic of the Warsaw Ghetto, which is where most of the photographs came from. As a result, the ghetto, at least in my memories, occupies even more space than the Final Solution. In any case, the intense unity of place, of both the events and the exhibition, has a much greater influence on the observer than that of the pictures.

In a synthetic way, they describe the deteriorating situation: the process of separating Jews from non-Jews until the first ones were enclosed in ghettos, the living conditions in the ghetto (one is guided here by Emanuel Ringelblum and Adam Czerniaków) and finally the great liquidation programme. There is also the Umschlagplatz. There is the Uprising, the photographic documentation of which by some gloomy paradox comes almost entirely from Jürgen Stroop's report. In order to make visitors aware of the difference between the Jewish and the non-Jewish perspective, the trail marked out by the authors of the exhibition leads one across a footbridge with a view over the 'Aryan' side of Warsaw, a symbol of the wooden footbridge over Chłodna Street that linked the small and the large ghetto. One descends its stairs with the names of the following streets: Sienna, Śliska, Pańska, Prosta, Twarda, Pawia, Krochmalna... It is dark, narrow and claustrophobic – something completely opposite to what one found in the brighter and more spacious rooms presenting the earlier history.

But the part of the exhibition that is devoted to the Holocaust is not limited to the Warsaw Ghetto only. It reminds one of what was happening in the territories occupied by the USSR: transporting people, also Jews, to Siberia and the Ural Mountains and executing Polish Army officers, including around 500 Jews. It does not skip the next part either and describes the pogroms that took place after the Germans had entered the country. The exhibition contains also a map of disgrace that shows towns where Polish people murdered their Jewish neighbours in the summer of 1941. There is also some information about the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen*, German firing squads murdering Jews, as in Ponary, where the Germans were supported by the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union members. There is a map of death camps and a wall full of images of participants in the Wannsee Conference against the background of the local villa.

And then there is nothing. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, the authors of the exhibition, write in a museum brochure that they tried to show the Holocaust from its victims' perspective, "But one cannot follow the victims unto the very end; one must leave them on the threshold of the gas chambers. They and only they enter them, alone, and one remains outside." This part of the story ends in a dark room, its entire walls covered with a view of endless ruins. And several objects in backlit cabinets in the form of lumps of stone: ceramic plates and a partially burnt plate saying "Dental Surgeon B. Kacenellenbogen, flat no. 7" dug out of the debris with a Hebrew inscription above: "Nothing, absolutely nothing is left of my childhood and my youth, not even my father's grave."

The last part of the exhibition covers the whole post-war period. Difficult returns of survivors with their climax in the Kielce pogrom. The first wave of

emigration, ending in 1948, and the next two decades of fragile stability in the Polish-Jewish relations. And finally the gloomy year of 1968 with Gomułka's speech of 19 March and the banner "Cleanse the party of Zionists". One can see registration cards of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland with basic personal details gathered immediately after the war to establish who had survived and 'travel documents' issued to emigrating Jews after 1968 with a note that their holders were not Polish citizens. But most of all, one feels the absence of both Jews and memory of them in the public discourse, so hard to present visually. This is a particularly unpleasant part of the exhibition, hard to pass without shame, even though its authors clearly tried to diminish the harsh message conveyed by facts using the reproduced cover of Hanna Krall's interview with Marek Edelman, reminding us of Małgorzata Niezabitowska and Tomasz Tomaszewski's album *Ostatni współcześni Żydzi Polscy* [The last contemporary Polish Jews] and a huge photograph of the unofficial commemoration of the 45th anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising in which one can see Edelman accompanied by Jacek Kuroń and Tadeusz Mazowiecki behind them.

Such a set of arguments shows that it is the authorities of the Polish People's Republic that the authors of the exhibition hold responsible for the post-war anti-Semitism. It may be also seen in the last part of the exhibition, which gathers testimonies from the last twenty-five years. It shows signs of revival of the Jewish religious life and photographs from the Jewish culture festival in Cracow and Singer's Warsaw Festival, organised by the Shalom Foundation. It also contains information about the documentation works of the Grodzka Gate Centre in Lublin and even the alteration of the monument in Jedwabne. The authors of the exhibition seem to end their story saying that the main reasons for conflicts were removed after 1989.

I realise my reaction is ambivalent. I am aware of the fact that an end filled with optimism is not completely justified, and the walls of our towns and cities are still smeared with hostile inscriptions. But on the other hand, the history of the Polish Jews cannot be reduced to the history of Polish anti-Semitism, and the authors of the exhibition have done much to avoid that. The objective is to dazzle rather than irritate. Because there is no denying that the exhibition is impressive, and its controversial elements may be discussed elsewhere.

The beauty of the building and the magnificence of the exhibition: all of that attracts visitors and arouses curiosity, admiration and even snobbery. Furthermore, it extorts respect in all those cases where Polish culture has usurped the right to disregard. Which is why I think it is not good that the word 'Polin' starts to replace the full name of the institution. It is true that it is shorter, more convenient to use and easier to remember, but it does not have the same dignity as its full name: the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.