



## **Holocaust Studies and Materials**

Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały

**2017**

**ISSN:** 1895-247X

**eISSN:** 2657-3571

**DOI:** 10.32927

**WWW:** [www.zagladazydow.pl](http://www.zagladazydow.pl)

Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów IFiS PAN  
Polish Center for Holocaust Research

### ***POLIN Museum's Core Exhibition: A Response***

**Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett**

[redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl](mailto:redakcja@holocaustresearch.pl)

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.32927/zzsim.741>

**Strony/Pages:** 549-564



*Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett*

## **POLIN Museum's Core Exhibition: A Response**

It is one thing to evaluate POLIN Museum's core exhibition in relation to its donnée as a multimedia narrative exhibition. It is quite another matter to fault it for not being a different kind of exhibition, one based on original objects. What looks like a critique of POLIN Museum's core exhibition is actually a rejection of its donnée, the assumptions on which it is based, but without a critical examination of the assumptions of the critique itself – namely, that in the absence of original objects, a multimedia narrative exhibition is de facto a “simulacrum.” The starting point of POLIN Museum's core exhibition is the story, and the approach is a “theater of history,” a story emplotted in three-dimensional space. The story unfolds as the visitor walks. Our aspiration is the creation of a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art, a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

### **Space**

Most Jewish museums in Europe have to adapt their exhibition to a historic building, often a synagogue, or to a new building, in the case of the Jewish Museum Berlin, whose architect is Daniel Libeskind.<sup>1</sup> POLIN Museum, in contrast, was created from the inside out. Before there was a museum, before there was a building, there was the story and then the master plan for the exhibition, which was included in the brief for the international architectural competition. It was understood from the outset that the museum was to complete the memorial complex. At the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes one honors those who died by remembering how they died. At the museum, one honors them by remembering how they lived. This is how the genius loci of the site works – as a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory) aspiring to become a *milieu de mémoire* (community of memory) that sets the Holocaust within a thousand-year history of Polish Jews.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Jewish Museum Berlin struggles to this day to set its narrative exhibition, a 2000-year history of Jews in what became German lands, within such a strong architectural and symbolic statement. Libeskind's fractured and angular forms, voids, and deliberately disorienting axes communicate Holocaust inside and out. On the architectural program, see <http://www.jmberlin.de/main/EN/04-About-The-Museum/01-Architecture/01-libeskind-Building.php>, access 22 May 2016.

The winning architect, Rainer Mahlamäki, created an area for the exhibition, the entire footprint of the building, which is spacious, flexible, and on one level, with mezzanines in two galleries. This allowed Mahlamäki to create the interior of the building with equal freedom and flexibility. We did not have to adapt the exhibition to his unique architectural form, and he did not have to adapt the architectural form to our exhibition. POLIN Museum is not the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, whose architecture is their single greatest object. Those buildings are designed specifically to showcase their collections in a spectacular architectural space or classic white box.<sup>2</sup> To propose, as Nawojka Cieślińska-Lobkowicz does, that POLIN Museum's core exhibition should somehow be set within the architecture of the building, rather than within its own dedicated space, is to miss the point of the entire architectural program, which is predicated on contrast: between the museum as an institution of public history and the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, between the minimalist geometric and glass exterior of the museum building and its dramatic organic interior, between the pure architectural expression of the main hall and the "black box" space dedicated to the multimedia core exhibition.

### Objects

Most Jewish museums in Europe pride themselves on their collections, in some cases formed even before World War II. They generally build their historical narrative up from the objects, rather than the other way around. As they know all too well, it is very difficult to create a coherent historical narrative in this way. Not surprisingly, many delegates at the Association of European Jewish Museum's annual meeting, which convened at POLIN Museum in November 2014, focused on the relative paucity of original objects in our core exhibition and paid attention to little else. A director of one of the smaller museums, on her return to London, wrote a piece for *The Jewish Chronicle* entitled "The Empty Museum..." which she interpreted through the lens of the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup> Małgorzata Szpakowska's claim to the contrary, the limited number of objects – their "absence" – is not the message of the core exhibition and not the message that most visitors take away. Nor is the Holocaust the only reason for the paucity of original objects in the core exhibition. Perhaps even more important is the history and nature of collections of Jewish art and artifacts, their display, and the museums responsible for them.

Jewish museums, with their focus on collections and object-based exhibitions, represent one strand in the history of museums, namely the transformation of

---

<sup>2</sup> See Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded edition (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Abigail Morris, "An Empty Museum ..." *The Jewish Chronicle Online*, 26 November 2014. <http://www.thejc.com/arts/arts-features/126106/the-empty-museum>, access 22 May 2016.

art collections and cabinets of curiosity into galleries and museums created to care for them. POLIN Museum's core exhibition represents another strand – the history of exhibition, especially as developed in world's fairs and expos, those global laboratories of exhibition innovation.<sup>4</sup> The starting point of exhibitions inspired by this strand in the history of museums is the story, and the goal is a compelling visitor experience using display techniques old and new. One of the most effective is the scale model, contrary to Cieślińska-Lobkowicz's dismissal of the Kraków-Kazimierz model in the Paradisus gallery.<sup>5</sup> A topographical scale model is not a poor replacement for the real city but a way of "modeling" it, a way of seeing it and thinking about it that is not possible in the city itself, neither today nor in the past. Architects, engineers, urban planners, shipbuilders, scientists, educators, and exhibition designers understand this well.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, three ways of visualizing the city are brought together in this display of Kraków-Kazimierz: the topographic scale model, the historical graphic of the city's panoramic skyline, and the flat map, with thematic paths through the city.

These two strands in the history of museums, which have been merging for more than half a century, have in recent years been greatly enriched by developments in contemporary art and performance. However, there is still resistance, especially from collection curators and art historians (and especially in Poland), to a multimedia narrative exhibition and especially one with relatively few original objects. The criticism from Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, Szpakowska, and others that POLIN Museum's core exhibition should be based first and foremost, if not exclusively, on original objects, arises from several assumptions: first, that such objects exist, and second, that they can be bought or loaned and then exhibited for more than a few months, and third, that original objects are the best basis in whole or in large part for presenting the 1,000 year history of Polish Jews.

Even a fleeting glance at collections related to the history of Polish Jews would reveal first, a dearth of relevant and available objects for most of the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998) – Ewa Klekot recently translated into Polish an essay in this volume that deals with these issues: "Przedmioty etnografii," *Zbiór Wiadomości Do Antropologii Muzealnej* 3 (2016): 29–45. On the paradigm shift from object to experience in contemporary museums, see Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), and Hilda S. Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the term "Paradisus Iudaeorum" figures in the core exhibition with all of its ambivalence and not as an uncritical characterization of the Commonwealth as a "golden age." The "Wall of Words" that opens this gallery (1569–1648) provides two versions of the pasquinade from which this phrase comes and juxtaposes it with other voices, positive and negative.

<sup>6</sup> On models, see Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984).

millennium. The explanation is to be found, above all, in the history of collecting. Very little has survived from the medieval and early modern periods other than books. What you will find in collections related to Polish Jews are nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish ceremonial art, paintings and sculpture, books, documents, and photographs. Szpakowska asks, "Where is the material evidence of Jewish life, where is the furniture, clothing, books, workshops, pots, jewelry, luxury items, the ...? Well, where?" The simple answer: with the exception of books, these kinds of objects were not generally collected and are therefore poorly represented in collections related to Polish Jews.<sup>7</sup> Don't expect what you can find at ethnographic museums in Poland, most of which is also nineteenth and twentieth century.

That said, POLIN Museum's core exhibition does feature original examples of clothing, for example, the *brusttukh* (a decorative panel worn on the chest by married women) in the section dealing with transformations of the Jewish wedding during the nineteenth century. This item of clothing supports the presentation of dress reform. There are examples of *shpanier-arbet*, metallic lacework, which was a Jewish specialty in Sasów. This lace appears on the *atarah*, "collar," that is attached to the prayer shawl. Original examples from POLIN Museum's collection appear in the synagogue area in the eighteenth-century gallery and in a section dealing with Jewish workers in the nineteenth century. There are no pots, but there is a wedding dish (on loan from the Maksymilian Goldstein collection at the Museum of Ethnography and Artistic Crafts in Lviv) and other objects (gloves, a hat, a cymbalum) in the large showcase dedicated to transformations of the Jewish wedding in the nineteenth century. As for "luxury items," there is a beautifully bound eighteenth-century woman's prayer book, also in the synagogue area, on loan from the René Braginsky collection in Zurich.

Starting to collect today requires considerable resources, as auction catalogues attest. Moreover, institutions with collections, both in Poland and abroad, have been reluctant to loan objects, and if willing, generally set a limit of a few months and, in exceptional cases, a few years, whereas the core exhibition is intended to last not less than fifteen years. Some institutions would not even give permission to make replicas. Add to these limitations, conservation issues: original textiles and paper artifacts (documents, photographs) cannot be

---

<sup>7</sup> There is no collection of Polish Jewish material to compare with the collection at the Jewish Museum in Prague, whose vast holdings today are actually a consequence of the Holocaust, or in Jewish collections related to German, Dutch, Austrian, and Italian Jews. There are of course important collections of Jewish material culture in Poland, but they consist largely of ceremonial and fine art. Of special importance are the Maksymilian Goldstein collection, today in museums in Lviv, and what remains of Sh. An-ski's collection in St. Petersburg. The Museum of the Russian Jewish History in Moscow has made a valiant effort in the last few years to assemble an important collection of original artifacts. Like most collections of Jewish material, the objects in their collection are largely from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

exhibited for more than a few months, and it is difficult and often impossible to find replacements that would allow us to rotate objects. That said, we did form a collection specifically for the core exhibition, and we continue to develop POLIN Museum's collection and to add original objects to the core exhibition, but we refuse to ransack flea markets and antique shops for objects to create period rooms, a practice common in other museums.

In the case of the medieval gallery, which extends from 965 to 1500, more than five hundred years, there is almost no material trace except for a few tombstones and coins with barely legible Hebrew inscriptions. Tombstones and coins – we do show an original bracteate from POLIN Museum's collection – are important objects, but we cannot build the medieval story around a few surviving Jewish tombstones and tiny coins. We need to tell a story that starts with a few traveling merchants and culminates, by the end of the period, with the shifting of the center of the Ashkenazi Jewish world from Western Europe to this territory. How did that happen? Coins and tombstones alone will not suffice.

We turn to documents – statutes, contracts, tax registers, maps, travel accounts, and the letters that rabbis sent to each other, *shayles un tshuves*, questions and answers, in Hebrew. Such letters and the responses to them were collected together in manuscripts and contain invaluable evidence of Jewish life in this region at this time. What matters here is not whether or not we can show the original document – in many cases the original manuscript no longer exists, and we must rely on later redactions. The issue is not the materiality, the original substance, of the actual physical object, but rather what it contains. Most visitors would not be able to read these documents in any case, and we would only be able to show one open page at a time. These texts are generally not illustrated, and we draw on many more sources than we could possibly exhibit. Moreover, it would be difficult if not impossible to borrow these objects and, even if we could, we could not show them for more than a short time. In the case of the doors of the Gniezno Cathedral, which are immovable, we can debate whether it would have been better if feasible to show a copy of the Gniezno doors at 100 percent scale or to adopt the graphic solution that we chose – we had originally planned an interactive presentation that would have allowed visitors to explore each panel on the doors.

For these and other reasons, we decided to create a hand-painted and hand-gilded medieval gallery that would illustrate stories found in rabbinical correspondence and other documents. Here, as throughout the exhibition, visitors come into direct contact with primary sources from the period and in the original languages (Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Czech, Polish, and Yiddish), which are treated graphically in a special way – we use period fonts for both Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets – and provide Polish and English translations. The gallery itself immerses the visitor in what is experienced as a 360-degree life-size illuminated manuscript, painted by conservators who specialize in preserving the interiors of Polish churches. We have, in essence, materialized the intangible.

Perhaps the best example of our approach is the timber-frame roof and painted ceiling that we created based on the 17th-century wooden synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec. Given that none of the great wooden synagogues from the Commonwealth period have survived, the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the organization responsible for creating the core exhibition for POLIN Museum, partnered with Rick and Laura Brown, founders of Handshouse Studio, an educational non-profit in Massachusetts in the United States, whose mission is to recover lost objects. Although it is not possible to recover the original synagogue as defined by its original material, it is possible to recover the knowledge of how to build it by building it, using traditional tools, materials, and techniques. That is what we did. We formed a team of more than 300 volunteers and experts and engaged local communities in cities and towns across Poland in the process of building this structure and, in the process, encouraged local communities to take an interest in the Jewish past of their towns. That knowledge, the intangible heritage recovered by the way we built this structure, is as much a part of the original synagogue as its original material. What we created is not a copy, facsimile, reproduction, or recreation. It is not a “simulacrum,” nor is it “virtual.” It is actual.<sup>8</sup> It is a new kind of object – an object whose value lies not in the original materials from which it was made, but in the knowledge that was recovered from the way it was made. This approach is reminiscent of the ancient Ise Grand Shrine (Ise Jingū) in Japan, which is dismantled and rebuilt every twenty years in order to keep alive and transmit the embodied knowledge of how to build it. This knowledge, this intangible heritage, is valued more highly than the original material.

In the case of the Volozhin yeshiva, which was established in 1803, there are simply no objects, paintings, drawings, photographs, or graphics of any kind to present this story, nothing but a much later photograph of the outside of the building. However, there are vivid memoirs of the experience of studying or visiting this and other modern yeshivas of the time. We could of course exhibit, for all of three months, a page from a memoir, or we could do what we did, which was to create one of the most memorable experiences in the entire core exhibition: a painted animation, based on a memoir, presenting twenty-four hours in the Volozhin yeshiva.

We wanted to use the original rubble in the postwar gallery, but rejected that idea when we examined the excavated material – bits of broken red brick and grey cement crumbling to dust, a far cry from the iconic ocean of rubble immortalized in black and white photographs from the period. Our solution, here and elsewhere in the core exhibition, was to reject a literal approach to

---

<sup>8</sup> See “Nowe rozumienie autentyczności – o Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich z Barbarą Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rozmawia Tomasz Łysak,” *Obieg*, 5 January 2009, actualised on 3 February 2009, <http://www.obieg.pl/rozmowy/6956>. In English: <http://www.polandjewishheritagetours.com/5.MuseumofPolishJewishHistory.pdf>.

the rubble. Rather, we created an evocative setting by combining large-scale photographs and abstract scenographic elements, within which we set original objects that had been found in the rubble.<sup>9</sup>

As for buying hundreds of original nineteenth-century books by *maskilim* from antiquarian bookshops to fill the shelves of the section on the Jewish Enlightenment, which would then need to be encased in a climate-controlled glass showcase? Such an approach is unfeasible, costly, and impractical, as well as pointless. Visitors would have no access to those original books, and even if they did, few would be able to read these texts, which are in Hebrew and, what's more, in *maskilic* Hebrew. Our approach puts communication and visitor experience first, with no limit on the materials, methods, and media for engaging visitors in the subject at hand. Each part of the exhibition is based on the principle of creating an evocative setting – never a literal recreation – that can communicate the phenomenon (in this case, the Jewish Enlightenment) and provide a platform for exploring its various aspects.

That said, practical constraints that limit the exhibiting of original objects are not the main issue. The repeated criticism of the core exhibition that it lacks original objects belies a much deeper issue, namely, the rejection of the core exhibition's *donnée* – a dismissal, *a priori*, of this *type of exhibition*. Whatever is not “original” is, for these critics, a “simulacrum.”<sup>10</sup> Our starting point was the story, not a collection, and our top priority was bringing that story to life. We are the visitor's advocate, and visitor experience is our priority. Even if we could have drawn from every collection in the world, the objects in them would not suffice, though we would have included many more original objects had we had access to them and are adding original objects to the exhibition as the opportunity arises. We recognize that original objects can add material presence and emotional resonance to a story presented in a multimedia narrative exhibition, and that is how objects appear in the core exhibition. At the same time, what we lack in material heritage, we make up for in intangible heritage. Moreover, without intangible heritage, without the story, without the embodied knowledge that is materialized in original objects, those objects are matter that does not matter.

---

<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, nothing in the exhibition is made of papier maché, contrary to Cieślińska-Lobkowicz criticism. When designers from Event Communication visited the core exhibition, they praised Nizio Design International for the exceptional quality of the materials (wood, glass, clay tile, stone, and among other quality materials) and craftsmanship (carpentry, painting, gilding, and scenographic elements, among others). The exhibition furniture was specially designed for each gallery.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of simulacrum was popularized by Jean Baudrillard, Umberto Eco, and Daniel Boorstin during the early 1990s. Some twenty-five years later, this dystopic poststructuralist concept has become *passée*, and media theory has moved on. See, for example, *Anne Frank Unbound: Media, Imagination, Memory*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jeffrey Shandler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), and Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

## Texts

Some critics see only text, not images, and expect the text to be self-sufficient, as if the exhibition were a book, but our “theater of history” is not a book – it is an experience – and text is but one element. Our approach to text has vexed not only Cieślińska-Lobkowitz, but also the critics she cites and who cite each other in what is a largely internal conversation among the like-minded. A singular strength of the core exhibition is its critical approach to the historiography of Polish Jews and its carefully considered mode of narration and approach to language and typography.<sup>11</sup>

For example, Szpakowska cannot find the word *shtetl* anywhere in the exhibition and is in search of an explanation. In fact, the word appears countless times – in Yiddish. We translate the Yiddish word as “town” in English and as “miasteczko” in Polish. Our intention is to emphasize that *shtetl*, in Yiddish, means town. When the Yiddish word appears in English, it conjures up something akin to *Fiddler on the Roof*, a hermetically sealed Jewish world.<sup>12</sup> Szpakowska, in her comments about the gallery dealing with the 1920s and 1930s, looks for a place where, as a general rule, Jews spoke no Polish and had no contact with Poles. She cannot find such a place because it did not exist. We present Jewish life in more than a dozen towns and small cities in the Second Polish Republic, none of them fitting her description. As we show in the area dedicated to growing up, more than ninety percent of Jewish children attended Polish public schools and were avid readers of books in the Polish language, including world classics in Polish translation. *Nasz Przegląd*, a mass circulation Jewish daily, was in the Polish language – visitors can explore this Zionist-leaning newspaper on the press wall in the culture section of the gallery. The hundreds of Jewish youth who entered YIVO’s autobiography contests in the 1930s wrote in Yiddish, Polish, and Hebrew – their words appear throughout the gallery. The *landkentenish* movement, the Jewish version of *krajoznawstwo*, published its magazine in Yiddish and Polish. Where Szpakowska will find the *shtetl* she is looking for is in the presentation

---

<sup>11</sup> On our historiographic approach and the distinction between a history of Polish Jews and history of Polish-Jewish relations, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Inside the Museum: Curating between Hope and Despair: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, 2/3 (2015): 215–235. On mode of narration, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “A Theatre of History: 12 Principles,” *TDR The Drama Review* 59, 3, Fall 2015 (T227): 49–59.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” in *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl*, eds. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), pp. ix–xlviii. Available at: <https://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/liwp.pdf>, access 19 May 2016). The book first appeared in 1958, with the subtitle “The Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe.” See also *The Shtetl: New Evaluations*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), and Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014).

of Kazimierz Dolny during the 1920s and 1930s. This is where we deconstruct the icon by presenting its representation in paintings, photography, literature, memoirs, theatre, and film – both *The Dybbuk* and *Yidl mitn fidl* were shot on location here.

The Slavic component of Yiddish, the language of everyday life for most Jews for most of the history of Polish Jews, is itself evidence of contact with the Polish language and its speakers, even though not all Jews spoke Polish. Polish servants and wet nurses were in intimate communication with the Jewish families who employed them. The role of towns in the economic life of the region would not have been possible without trade between Jews and Poles speaking to each other in Polish, a theme we develop in the presentation of Kołbuszowa and even earlier. How, during the Commonwealth period, could Jews have served as leaseholders and managers of assets on noble estates (and even of whole villages), if they were not able to communicate with the nobles and peasants? This aspect of economic life is shown in the Paradisus gallery in relation to Jan Zamoyski, his latifundium, and Zamość, its economic hub. With the collapse of the Commonwealth's international grain trade and intensification of local consumption in the form of alcohol, Jews were given a near monopoly on the manufacture, distribution, and sale of alcohol. A very high percentage taverns and inns were run by Jews. In what language did they communicate on a daily basis with their peasant clientele?<sup>13</sup> Visitors can explore this phenomenon in a tavern setting in the eighteenth-century gallery.

Turning now to mode of narration, the entire exhibition follows the principle of a hierarchy of communication, and this applies as well to our treatment of text. The decision to drive the narration through carefully curated quotations from primary sources from the period, in essence a play script in our theater of history, is strategic. Following the Jewish tradition of text and commentary, quotations from primary sources are accompanied by our commentary. The texts are selected, sequenced, juxtaposed, and set in relation to other exhibition elements to form a narrative ensemble. This is our way of creating an open and multi-voiced narrative. Voices from the period speak in ways that we, as scholars and curators, never could. Their style, tone, sensibility, and emotion are not only personal but also historical.

Such an approach keeps our visitors in the historical present of the story and avoids foreshadowing or back shadowing. Visitors are encouraged to bracket what they know about what happened later and to avoid viewing the past through the lens of the Holocaust. This mode of narration narrows the horizon forward, while allowing the past to deepen with every step the visitor takes. This approach is intended to work against the Holocaust as the telos of the thousand-year history of Polish Jews.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Jacob Goldberg, "Żyd a karczma wiejska w XVIII wieku," *Wiek oświecenia* 9 (1993): 205–213.

This strategy is not what many visitors (and critics) expect, but most visitors appreciate the approach. As for those who do not, we have a choice. Either we can adapt the exhibition to their expectations or we can help them adapt their expectations to the exhibition.<sup>14</sup> Will visitors understand our rules of engagement? Consider the following responses to the core exhibition. A woman on the cleaning staff of the museum met me early one morning at the coffee machine shortly before the grand opening of the core exhibition. “*Pani profesor*, she began. “I just saw the exhibition. It is beautiful. It gave me goose bumps. It is even more beautiful than the Warsaw Rising Museum,” the ultimate compliment. The Warsaw Rising Museum is one of the most popular in Poland. The next day, the director of the museum told me about the visit of a new vice-minister of culture: “He liked the exhibition, but he said there was so much information.” I responded, “Well, he thought he had to master it all. The cleaning lady didn’t have a problem.”

There are several different issues here: the kinds of texts; the role of texts; and the visual prominence of text in multiple languages. Many visitors expect texts to offer factual information by a scholar writing now and are surprised that quotations from primary sources from the historical period drive the narrative. Critics have taken us to task for “hiding behind the quotations,” rather than “taking a stand” and clearly stating our position to the visitor. We specifically rejected such an approach for the reasons provided above and in order to provide a more open narrative in multiple voices. As for the role of texts: communication (and communication of more than facts) is primary. Key texts appear in up to three languages – the original language (Hebrew, Arabic, Latin, Yiddish, German, etc.) and in Polish and English translation. The multilingualism of the entire exhibition is a message in its own right. Text is indeed a visually prominent graphic element of the exhibition – by design.

Paradoxically, other critics (and even the same ones) fault the exhibition for taking a visual approach to narration. A senior historian at a conference at POLIN Museum in May 2015 declared that historians don’t go to museums and referred to the core exhibition as a *Biblia pauperum*, a Pauper’s Bible, a story told in images, a comic book, for illiterates.<sup>15</sup> Szpakowska and Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, who attended the conference, are repeating his words. Such elitist statements underestimate the “ordinary” visitor and reveal yet again the dismissal, a priori, of the *donnée* of this type of exhibition.

---

<sup>14</sup> On the principles guiding this approach, see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Historical Space and Critical Museologies: Museum of the History of Polish Jews,” in *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum*, ed. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Piotr Piotrowski (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 147–161.

<sup>15</sup> “From Ibrahim ibn Yakub to 6 Anielewicz Street: International Conference to Mark the Opening of the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 11–14 May 2015” was to assess the state of the field of the history of Polish Jews and set out future directions for research. Participants were invited to visit the core exhibition and to comment on it.

Paradoxically, having dismissed the core exhibition as a picture Bible for illiterates, critics such as Szpakowska ask if the “ordinary” visitor can grasp what the exhibition presents. Arguing that the ordinary visitor expects to see original objects, Szpakowska speculates that “The first reaction may thus be a disappointment.” There is no need to speculate. Visitor surveys, whether conducted internally by POLIN Museum’s staff or by outside experts, offer a detailed picture of how visitors are responding to the exhibition. So too do the comments on Trip Advisor – more than 3,000 comments in English and Polish and a rating of #3 out of 360 things to do in Warsaw, as of 24 September 2017. “Ordinary” visitors – almost two million since April 2013, when POLIN Museum opened its doors – generally embrace the *donnée* of the core exhibition. While some visitors are indeed disappointed not to find more original objects, most are open to experiencing the exhibition in its own terms, and this is the key to their satisfaction. Judging from the feedback, “unprepared visitors” seems better prepared for this exhibition than the experts.

### Judaism

Polish visitors and critics are particularly interested in “Judaism” and have the impression, not generally shared by international visitors and Jewish visitors from abroad, that “Judaism” is missing from the exhibition or not given full enough treatment. This is but one of many topics that visitors and critics would like to see given greater emphasis or fuller treatment or a separate section. After a recent visit to the core exhibition, the directors of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow – Rabbi Alexander Moiseyevich Boroda, President of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, and Rabbi Borukh Gorin – declared that POLIN Museum was “more Jewish” than their museum. This came as a complete surprise to me, considering that their museum, which I have visited many times, is a project of Habad-Lubavitch and devotes so much attention to Jewish religious observance past and present.

Considering how extensively Jewish religious life – to be distinguished from Judaism – is treated in POLIN Museum’s core exhibition, why do critics such as Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, citing Piotr Paziński, find this aspect lacking?<sup>16</sup> Paziński, while offering a more generous assessment of the core exhibition as a whole, finds the painted ceiling of the Gwoździec wooden synagogue “nice, but not striking,” presumably because it is not the original Gwoździec synagogue, which no longer exists and, even if it did, could not be moved to the exhibition.

---

<sup>16</sup> See Piotr Paziński, “Opinie Piotra Pazińskiego zdanie o muzeum,” *Forum Żydów Polskich* <http://www.fzp.net.pl/opinie/piotra-pazinskiego-zdanie-o-muzeum> (6 November 2014), access 17 May 2016. This text is the same as the Facebook post (5 November 2014) cited by Cieślińska-Lobkowicz. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152815444374513&set=a.399845764512.165530.752754512&type=3&theater>, access 17 May 2016.

In contrast, most of our visitors consider it the highlight of the entire core exhibition. They appreciate it even more when they discover how it was made, a story we present on the glass ledge surrounding the timber-frame roof, which extends into the main hall of the museum.

Paziński declares that the museum treats Jewish tradition superficially and that, as an educational institution, should explain what Judaism was and is. It is not enough, for Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, that the exhibition showcases Rabbi Moses Isserles and the *Shulhan Arukh*, disputes between the Frankists, and the rabbis, various Hasidic *tsadikim* and their courts, conflicts between Hasidim and their opponents (*misnagdim*), the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), and the Volozhyn yeshiva. For his part, Paziński wonders if, after his first visit, he might have missed presentations of the Torah, the Talmud, Halakha (Jewish religious law), Haggadah, Sabbath, and Yom Kippur – and indeed, he did.

In fact, visitors can explore religious customs related to the Jewish calendar year and life cycle in the interactive presentation of the *Shulhan Arukh* and elsewhere. Torah, Talmud, and Halakha are featured on the interactive Talmud table at the center of the “library” and interactive lecterns. Visitors can explore not only these topics, but also the Jewish mystical tradition (Zohar), kashruth (laws governing ritual purity), and much else related to Jewish religious thought and life. Visitors have the unique experience of exploring these topics through the earliest and most important books printed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Nonetheless, Paziński writes that he misses what he finds in every Jewish museum he knows, namely a separate room for customs associated with the Jewish calendar year and life cycle. Yest, the single largest showcase of original objects in POLIN Museum’s core exhibition is dedicated to transformations of the Jewish wedding in the nineteenth-century. Customs associated with death are presented in a dedicated display in the eighteenth-century gallery. But for Paziński this does not suffice. His solution? Replace the entrance experience, the Forest, with “Judaism in ten minutes.” This “pill,” as he calls it, would not feature the ceremonial objects (kiddush cups, spice boxes, and seder plates) displayed in every Jewish museum, but rather the basic principles of Jewish civilization that both Paziński and Cieślińska-Lobkowicz identify with Judaism.

There are many reasons why we did not adopt such an approach. In 2006, when we began to develop the core exhibition from the master plan, some colleagues said that the exhibition should answer two questions even before visitors enter the exhibition proper – even before the poetic Forest gallery that begins the thousand-year journey: Who are the Jews? What is Judaism? This is indeed common practice in other Jewish museums. Having visited Jewish Museum London many times, I always read these two panels before entering the gallery dedicated to the Jewish calendar year and life cycle – it is a vault of exquisite ceremonial objects. To this day, I cannot recall what those introductory texts say.

Rather than providing *a priori* definitions of Jews and Judaism, we ask our visitors to look for answers in the history of Polish Jews. There is no separate

section dedicated to Judaism, although in the section dedicated to “Church and Synagogue” in the medieval gallery, visitors can compare Christian and Jewish interpretations of the Pentateuch based on medieval objects – a paten and Hebrew illuminated Bible – and be introduced to the status of Jews and Judaism in the eyes of the Church. Visitors can also explore theological differences between Judaism and Christianity from the perspective of Isaac of Troki (1533–1594), a Karaite, who recorded his debates with Christians of various denominations in *Hizuk emunah* (Faith Strengthened).

There are no normative presentations of Judaism, no Judaism “pill,” and no trans-historical displays of the Jewish life cycle and holiday. Instead, we offer visitors the opportunity to explore religious life and thought as a pervasive and integral part of Jewish life and to discover their transformation and variety across the millennium – not only Rabbi Moses Isserles and the *Shulhan Arukh*; not only the key works of Jewish thought printed in the Commonwealth: not only the Ba'al Shem Tov and Hasidism, the Vilna Gaon and the modern yeshiva, not only the Jewish Enlightenment, but also “Poles of the Mosaic Faith,” the Agudas Yisroel, and the religious school system during the Second Polish Republic, as well as the wedding of the daughter of the Bobover *rebe* in 1931, a spectacular event that attracted world attention. Visitors will encounter religious life and thought in the shadow of death in the Warsaw ghetto, and unique archival footage showing the burial of desecrated Torah scrolls, holy books, and prayer shawls in the Jewish cemetery in Łódź just after the Holocaust, a practice based on the principle of treating holy books as one would a person. We present these aspects of Jewish religious life through original objects, scale models, archival sound, texts and graphics, films, both archival and those we made, and interactive presentations of key works, concepts, and practices.

As for providing basic knowledge about Judaism, as called for by Paziński, our visitors are on a “need-to know basis” – they will build knowledge incrementally as they move through the story. They first encounter the Jewish Sabbath within minutes of entering the medieval gallery, where we present dilemmas sent to rabbis in the Rhineland – they were worried that the wandering Jewish merchants in the “wild east,” far from organized Jewish communities, might not be careful in observing Jewish religious obligations. One of the cases is about Jews on the road whose wheel broke on Friday just before sundown, while the other is about whether or not Jews are allowed to carry unsheathed swords, on the Sabbath. A third case, presented alongside these two, introduces visitors to Jewish laws related to family purity – the question posed to the rabbis by Jews in Poland was whether it was acceptable for the water for a *mikve*, ritual bath, to come from a hot rather than cold spring. These cases introduce visitors to Jewish religious life in ways that are specific to a time and place, as recorded in sources from the period, and in ways that are surprising and memorable – much more so than a Judaism “pill” to be swallowed before entering the thousand-year history of Polish Jews.

## Images

Cieślińska-Lobkowicz asks why we disregard what she characterizes as the prohibition in Jewish tradition against the creation of images before the nineteenth century. But, there is no such prohibition. The Second Commandment, which prohibits “graven images,” is directed primarily against idolatry and did not prevent Jews from developing a rich visual culture, as is abundantly evident throughout the exhibition and throughout Jewish history.<sup>17</sup> Visitors to the medieval gallery can explore thirteenth-century bracteates bearing not only Hebrew inscriptions, but also images of the ruler. Two manuscripts featured in interactive presentations in the medieval gallery reveal images of people, animals, plants, and buildings: the thirteenth-century Worms Mahzor, a festival prayerbook, and the fourteenth-century Regensburg Bible, also known as the Kraków Bible, because it was brought to Kraków, also in the fourteenth century.

Visitors to the Paradisus gallery can print sixteenth-century Jewish printers’ marks, which bear images of animals. Nearby, in the library, they can explore images, including the human form, on a rare kabbalistic scroll (1566) and be introduced to the fundamentals of the Jewish mystical tradition. David Darshan, a student of Rabbi Moses Isserles and aspiring kabbalist, copied this scroll when he was in Modena. Yossi Chajes, an expert on these scrolls, worked with us to interpret this example for our visitors. As Chajes explains: “At the top of the circles we see images of the four chariot beasts of Ezekiel 1; they surround an image of 2nd-century CE sage Rabbi Akiva, who shows an expression celebrating his successful movement to, and retreat from, the divine realm. Above these figures, in keeping with Ezekiel, is the arc of the heavens and the Throne of Glory. Whereas the biblical texts depict God as a man-like figure seated on this Throne, our scroll details the divine realm in a rich array of images and texts that literally tower over the lower realm ... Of particular interest graphically are the dragons of the demonic ‘left side.’”<sup>18</sup> The experience of exploring what Chajes describes as a “cosmological map of the divine realm,” within the library of the Paradisus

---

<sup>17</sup> See Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), which offers an intellectual history of Jewish attitudes toward art and representation and deconstructs the myth of Jewish aniconism. In his investigation of “the social origins, intellectual moorings, and cultural implications of Jewish aniconism,” Bland argues against the idea that Jews were indifferent or hostile to images and against the view that Jews basically imitated the art of their neighbors.

<sup>18</sup> See Yossi Chajes, “Kabbalistic Diagrams in the British Library’s Margoliouth Catalogue,” <http://www.bl.uk/hebrew-manuscripts/articles/kabbalistic-diagrams-in-the-british-librarys-margoliouth-catalogue#sthash.dmXMuf7D.dpuf>, access 18 May 2016. While scholars were aware that this particular scroll existed, they were not able to find it, because it was moved from one location to another and its number was attributed to a different object. The curators for the Paradisus gallery, Maciej Gugąła and Małgorzata Stolarska-Fronia, succeeded in tracking down this scroll and brought it to the attention of Yossi Chajes, who assisted us in interpreting it for the exhibition. POLIN Museum was the first to make this scroll accessible

gallery (and as part of the larger story of the rise of religious thought and learning in the Commonwealth), is a very different experience from examining this scroll on a cellphone, tablet, or computer anywhere else. This example goes to the very heart of how the exhibition conditions the experience of everything in it.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the richness of Jewish visual culture is the painted synagogue ceiling featured in the eighteenth-century gallery; it is covered with zodiac signs, animals, and plants. Nearby is a funeral alms box (1767), which illustrates each stage in the preparation of the body for burial – with human figures.<sup>19</sup>

### Thinking back and forward

During the years that we were working on the exhibition, we presented our plans and progress in many forums and on many occasions in Poland, Israel, the United States, Canada, and Europe, contrary to Cieślińska-Lobkowicz's suggestion that there was no public discussion about the core exhibition. We also invited leading scholars from Poland, Israel, and other countries to come to Warsaw individually and to spend the better part of a week reviewing, evaluating, and discussing the whole exhibition and particular galleries with the team. Innumerable scholars, museum professionals, and stakeholders reviewed each gallery and the exhibition as a whole at each stage in their development.

Like Jacek Leociak and other members of our team, I too regret that there are parts of the exhibition that we planned but were not able to realize or that were not completed to our satisfaction or that still remain to be completed. For example, there was always the intention to expand the geography of the story, especially during the modern period. The master plan had included the story of Jews who left Poland and settled in Israel and other parts of the world as part of the postwar gallery. When we reviewed the master plan, we decided to dedicate the postwar gallery entirely to Poland and to present the wider geography of Polish Jews as an epilogue, but there was neither the time nor the resources to do so before the grand opening of the core exhibition. Now, it is possible.

We are also involved in an ongoing process of making corrections, improvements (lighting, sound, legibility, navigation), and in time also changes to the exhibition itself, especially as we upgrade multimedia components. We are actively collecting original objects for the core exhibition in an effort to replace copies with originals and loans with objects from our collection, as well as to rotate objects that cannot be displayed for longer than three months. We continue to enrich the core exhibition with original objects where relevant and physically possible.

---

to the public. Since then, the British Library has provided a scan of the scroll online, together with Chajes's commentary.

<sup>19</sup> We present a copy of this alms box because the National Museum in Kraków was not willing to loan it. The original alms box has been sitting on a shelf at the back of a glass cabinet filled with many Jewish ritual objects in a dark corridor at the National Museum.

Operational solutions allow us to respond to different kinds of visitors, different ways of visiting, and to visitor feedback. Many visitors prefer to visit museums with a live guide or with an audio guide, and they are the first to take advantage of these opportunities at POLIN Museum. They can choose from more than ten languages, including Polish, English, Hebrew, and now also Yiddish, which is the first and only such audio guide in any museum in the world. There are also a Polish sign language guide and an audio description guide in Polish for the visually impaired (the English version is in preparation). A mobile application, which is in development, will allow us to incorporate elements prepared for the core exhibition but never implemented, whether for technical or other reasons, and to provide tools for easier navigation through the core exhibition.

We have been offering expert tours of single galleries and thematic tours in response to visitor feedback. Most recently we prepared short self-guided thematic tours, together with a glossary of Hebrew and Yiddish words in the exhibition (Torah, Talmud, Halakha, etc.). Visitors can pick up a printed version of these guides at the entrance to the core exhibition, download them to a cellphone or tablet, print them at home, or explore them online. Thus far we have short self-guided tours for "Jewish Religious Life," "Yiddish: Fourteen Highlights," "One Hour, Eight Highlights," and "Jewish Women,"<sup>20</sup> Last but not least, a pocket guide to the exhibition, with maps of each gallery, is in preparation.

In April 2016, POLIN Museum won the two top recognitions in Europe: the 2016 European Museum of the Year Award, the first time in the thirty-nine years of the prize that it has been awarded to a museum in Poland, and the European Museum Academy prize, which is not given every year, but only when a museum meets the highest standard of what Kenneth Hudson called "public quality." In 2017, POLIN Museum won the Europa Nostra Best in Heritage Award. I wrote this essay from Lesbos, the location where the European Museum Academy awards were presented – POLIN Museum was also a finalist for a third prize, the Luigi Micheletti Award, a European prize for innovative museums of contemporary history, industry, and science. The president of the Hellenic Red Cross opened the conference and presented how his organization was providing humanitarian aid for the hundreds of thousands of refugees arriving on the shores of Lesbos. He stressed the role of museums and cultural institutions in times of crisis. It is precisely in such times that POLIN Museum's mission is even more important.<sup>21</sup>

Lesbos, Greece, 22 May 2016

Bled, Slovenia, updated 24 September 2017

<sup>20</sup> "Wirtualny spacer po wystawie stałej," <http://wirtualnyspacer.polin.pl/>; "Virtual Tour of the Exhibition," <http://virtualtour.polin.pl/>, access 19 May 2016.

<sup>21</sup> On the important role of POLIN Museum at this time in Poland, see Nawojka Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, "Muzeum II Wojny, Polin, ECS. Wspierajmy muzea historyczne, nim będzie za późno," *wyborcza.pl* (28 April 2016). <http://wyborcza.pl/17541019988207muzeum-ii-wojny-polin-ecs-wspierajmy-muzea-historyczne-nim.html#ixzz496U15YiO>, access 19 May 2016.