

BARBARA KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT  
POLIN Museum

## **Exhibiting Violence: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews**

It could be said that all histories are violent, some more than others, and genocide the most violent of all. Poland was the epicenter of the genocide of the Jews of Poland and Europe. Understandably, this cataclysmic event, so short and so recent, has come to overshadow, if not define, the thousand-year history of Polish Jews. Auschwitz–Birkenau is among the top ten tourist attractions in Poland, along with the Wawel Castle, the Wieliczka Salt Mine, and the Malbork Castle. With more than 1,5 million visitors in 2015, about 70% of them under the age of 18, Auschwitz is said to be the most visited memorial site in Europe. For the groups of Jewish youth from Israel and the Diaspora visiting Poland, Auschwitz is the climax of an itinerary that generally includes other death camps, usually Treblinka and Majdanek, and Holocaust memorial sites. They and millions of others will come to know more about how Jews died than how they lived and to view the history of Polish Jews in particular as a history of violence culminating in genocide — utter the words ‘Jews’ and ‘Poland’ and the words ‘antisemitism’ and ‘Holocaust’ will almost inevitably follow.<sup>1</sup>

The question for POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, as for other museums of Jewish history in Europe, is whether than they can ever be anything but Holocaust museums by another name. In other words, can the history of Polish Jews and of Jews in Europe more generally ever be defined in terms other than a history of violence leading to genocide. This is the first challenge that we faced in constructing the thousand-year historical narrative of Polish Jews, but first a brief history of the institution.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Feldman, *Above the Death Pits Beneath the Flag: Youth Voyages to Poland and the Performance of Israeli National Identity*, New York 2008.

<sup>2</sup> On the principles guiding the historical narration, see B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *A Theatre of History: Twelve Principles*, “The Drama Review”, t. LIX, 2015, vol. 3, p. 49–59. On the metahistorical principles guiding the narration see M. Rosman, *Categorically Jewish, Distinctly Polish: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the New Polish–Jewish Metahistory*,

## CREATING POLIN MUSEUM

Facing the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, POLIN Museum stands on the site of the Warsaw ghetto and prewar Jewish neighborhood. The museum completes the memorial complex. One goes to the monument to honor those who died by remembering how they died. One comes to the museum to honor them and those who came before and after by remembering how they lived. The museum opened its doors to the public on April 19, 2013, the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. On October 28, 2014, the museum opened the core exhibition, a journey of a thousand years.

It took twenty years from the first idea for such a museum in 1993, just four years after the fall of communism, to the realization of this ambitious project. The initiator of the project was the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, a Jewish NGO established in Poland shortly after the war. It was only in 2005 that the museum itself was founded. The Association, the City of Warsaw, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage signed the agreement and formed a unique public-private partnership for a cultural institution in Poland. The public partners agreed to pay for the building from Polish tax payer money (more than \$70 million USD) and oversee its construction, while the private partner was given responsibility for creating the core exhibition and raising the funds for it (more than \$40 million USD). Between 1993 and 2005, the Association had dedicated itself to rallying support and funds for the project and succeeded in completing the master plan for the core exhibition.

In 2005, once the museum was formally established, the Association organized an international architectural competition for the building. The winner, Rainer Mahlamäki, provided a building that stands in a respectful relationship to the monument, echoing its geometry. Its glass surfaces shimmer with light and emanate a message of transparency and openness. All the architectural drama is on the inside. To set a glass building on a site of genocide is to communicate a message of hope in the face of tragedy — and to do so in a way that is abstract and radically understated. This is my starting point for considering how violence is presented at POLIN Museum.

## A RELATIONAL HISTORY

We addressed the challenge of creating a historical narrative that does not drive teleologically to genocide — and in which violence, while present, is not its defining feature — in several ways, starting with the distinction between a history

of Polish–Jewish relations and a history of Polish Jews. A history of Polish–Jewish relations, the dominant historiographic paradigm in Poland, is a history of Polish attitudes to Jews and the actions arising from them, and this is generally understood as a history of antisemitism and violence. POLIN Museum’s core exhibition offers something different, namely a history of Polish Jews in which Jews are agents in their own history and not simply objects on which others project their fantasies and fears and inflict violence. This approach offers what might be called a relational history, which is not the same as a history of Polish–Jewish relations.

A relational history starts from the premise of a spectrum of relations — coexistence and conflict, cooperation and conflict, separation and isolation — such that one or another pole is dominant at a particular moment or place. The terms for violence are historically precise. Visitors first encounter ‘pogrom’ and ‘antisemitism’ (spelled in this way to avoid reifying ‘Semitism’) when they get to the second half of the nineteenth century. Before then, in the medieval and early modern periods, they will have encountered hostility to Jews, ‘anti–Judaism’, and the ensuing ‘tumults’, ‘riots’, ‘attacks’, and ‘massacres’.

Violence is an integral part of the historical narrative, but it is neither its defining feature, nor the dominant thread, and it does not form a separate transhistorical chapter. Holocaust museums and exhibitions, understandably, set the Holocaust within a thousand–year history of hatred against Jews, culminating in genocide. We set the Holocaust within a thousand–year history of continuous Jewish presence in Polish lands, a place that became home to the largest Jewish community in the world and a center of the Jewish world. This is not to diminish the importance of violence and the Holocaust, but rather to avoid making them the determining factors in this history. Whatever the lessons of the Holocaust, the thousand–year history of Polish Jews offers more than a case study in intolerance. It would be a disservice to previous generations to reduce their lives to a prefiguration of genocide. Moreover, while a historical narrative that starts with hate and ends with genocide might make intuitive sense (genocide never makes sense), a historical narrative that does not start with hate but during which genocide takes place does not make intuitive sense, and that conundrum presents an opportunity to rethink the history of Polish Jews — and also the Holocaust.

#### MODE OF NARRATION

These principles — a history of Polish Jews, a relational history, violence as an integral part of the narrative but not its defining feature, and history without telos — informed not only how we constructed the historical narrative but also our mode of narration. Most important, we wanted to keep our visitors in the present moment of the story rather than have them view the thousand–year history of Polish Jews through the lens of the Holocaust. Our narration neither foreshadowed what was

to come nor backshadowed from the perspective of what happened later. Visitors are encouraged to bracket what they know about what happened next such that the horizon to the future is always short, even as the past gets longer with each step the visitor takes.

Several principles guide our mode of narration. First, we drive the narrative almost exclusively with sources from the period, which is one of the reasons why there is no postwar video testimony from survivors in the Holocaust gallery. Tens of thousands of survivor testimonies are accessible in POLIN Museum's Resource Center.

Second, quotations from period sources, supported by our commentary, are the way into the narrative. Key quotations are given graphic prominence — they appear in their original language, are presented in a period typeface, and are translated into Polish and English. These quotations have been carefully curated and arranged to create a multi-voiced narrative. Thus, the gallery dedicated to the first half of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth period, which opens with a presentation of religious dialogue and debate, brings many voices — those of nobles, rabbis, Catholics, Jews, and Karaites — into dialogue and debate on a 'Wall of Words'. Those critical of the Commonwealth called it a 'Paradisus Iudaeorum', meaning that Jews had it too good, while others, like the quotation from the nobleman Jan Szcześny Herburt, in his 1612 privilege for the Jews of Dobromil, assert that 'In the canon law of the holy fathers I was never told that we were to despise Jews'. As for the Jews, Rabbi Moses Isserles wrote, 'Their hatred of us in this country has not overwhelmed us as in the German lands. May it remain so until the coming of our Messiah'. Our goal in bringing together multiple perspectives, all of them from within the period, is to provide an open rather than master narrative.

The coherence of this approach, what makes it authoritative without being authoritarian, is the curation of these texts and the way they are set in relation to objects, images, supporting commentary, and the exhibition scenography. Thus, the Wall of Words announces the dual focus of the opening section of this part of the early modern gallery: religious toleration and religious conflict and violence. This dualism is supported on two sides of a freestanding panel. On one side, the 1573 Act of the Warsaw Confederation states that 'Although we are *dissidentes de religione*, we shall keep the peace between us and not shed blood because of differences of faith or Church'. On the reverse side of this panel, visitors can explore religious dialogue and debate through a text of Isaac of Troki, a Karaite, in which he records questions he was asked by Christians of various denominations and the answers he gave. On the wall *vis-à-vis* the Troki interactive is a presentation of the Dance Macabre, a seventeenth-century painting in the Church of St. Bernadine of Siena in Kraków, whose message in this context is that although all are equal before death, it is the Jew whom death treats most harshly, grabbing him by the throat and hurling insults at him. Next to this painting is an interactive presentation of

Tomasz Treter's 'Three Blessed Hosts', an 11-page illustrated pamphlet, printed in 1609, which falsely accuses Jews of desecrating the host. The reaction to such false accusations in this period is evidence of the rising importance of the Eucharist and emergence of judicial violence. Whereas in the medieval period, such accusations might lead to a riot, Jews falsely accused in this period could be put on trial and executed if found 'guilty'.

It is in the medieval period that visitors were introduced to the relationship of Jews to the state and the Church. The first message is the legal basis for Jewish settlement, which visitors can explore in an interactive presentation of the 1264 Statute of Kalisz, which confirmed the right of Jews to settle, form their own communities, follow their religion, and be protected from harm. *Vis-à-vis* is a presentation of Church and Synagogue, which explores how the Church viewed Jews and Judaism and how Jews viewed Christianity and Christians. The increasing hostility of the Church to the Jews is threaded through the story of Jewish settlement in Poland from the thirteenth century until the end of the period in 1500. This thematic line culminates in an interactive presentation of anti-Jewish violence in Europe and Poland from 965 until 1480 as chronicled by Jan Długosz in his 'Annals or Chronicles of the Famous Kingdom of Poland' — he lists incidents of violence throughout Europe, including Poland, from blood libels and from false accusations that Jews desecrated the host, poisoned wells, and caused the Black Plague.

Economic rivalry as a driver of antipathy appears in the medieval gallery, where burger resentment of Jewish competition is treated, and is elaborated in relation to the nobles and peasants in the Commonwealth galleries. The lampoon referring to 'Paradisus Iudaeorum' also berates the Commonwealth for being 'hell for the peasants, purgatory for the burgers, rule by servants' and, in another version, 'shelter for heretics, harvests for foreigners, fatherland for immigrants', a heady mix of economic, religious, and xenophobic resentments. A presentation of the role of Jews in the agrarian economy of the Commonwealth as managers and leasees of assets on noble estates, as middlemen between the nobles and the peasants, sets the stage for the presentation of the Khmelnytsky uprising in 1648–1649, which targeted Jews, the Polish nobility, and the Catholic church.

The original master plan for the core exhibition, which was prepared between 2000 and 2004 by Event Communications, a design firm in London specializing in multimedia narrative exhibitions, proposed treating the Khmelnytsky uprising as a 'turning point'. Indeed, the designers proposed to mark all divisions between galleries by turning points. In April 2006, when the time came to review the master plan in preparation for the next stage in the development of the exhibition, we rejected the idea of 'turning points' as schematic — historical process could not be reduced to a series of turning points. Moreover, although the Khmelnytsky uprising has been etched in Jewish memory as the worst catastrophe between the destruction

of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem and the Holocaust, recent historiographic assessments of this event consider it a caesura, rather than a watershed moment, in the *longue durée* of the Commonwealth (1569–1772). In the years following the Khmelnytsky uprising and wars with Sweden, Russia, and the Ottomans, the Commonwealth rebounded, and Jewish communities renewed themselves, as we show in The Jewish Town, the gallery dedicated to the second half of the Commonwealth period.

Adam Teller, one of the historians responsible for the Commonwealth galleries, proposed that we present the Khmelnytsky uprising in a ‘Corridor of Fire’, with the intention that visitors should experience this event as a violent break, but not a turning point, in the visitor’s narrative path, and that is what we did. Here as elsewhere, violence finds its place in the historical narrative without being its determining factor. The narrative unfolds along two sides of a narrow red corridor. Accounts focusing on the attack appear along one side, *vis-à-vis* descriptions of the brutality experienced by the victims on the other side. Here, as elsewhere, the principle of narrative space is at work: a story organized in three-dimensional space that unfolds as the visitor moves. The emplotting of the narrative in space may be linear, *vis-à-vis*, side-by-side, radiating from a central point, or some combination of these and other spatial arrangements.



### 1. CORRIDOR OF FIRE

The Khmelnytsky uprising, 1648–1659, is shown in a dramatic ‘Corridor of Fire’, inspired by eye-witness accounts recorded at the time

The experience of violence is expressed through excerpts from eyewitness accounts recorded by Natan Hannover in ‘Yeven Metsulah’ (‘Abyss of Despair’), which he published in 1653, just four years after the uprising, which is supplemented with our commentary — we provide lower estimates of the casualties than Hannover’s, for example. With no images from the period showing this violence, we took inspiration from Hannover’s graphic descriptions to create a scenography that communicates the intensity of violence without showing specific acts literally. Indeed, letting the visitor visualize the violence from Hannover’s descriptions can be even more powerful than anything we could have shown, as well as more appropriate: ‘They slashed the bellies of pregnant women, removed their infants and tossed them in their faces. Some women had their bellies torn open and live cats placed in them. The bellies were then sewed up with the live cats remaining within ... Some children were pierced with spears, roasted on the fire and then brought to their mothers to be eaten’.<sup>3</sup> While these accounts seem to defy credulity, they do convey the horror experienced by those who witnessed the violence.

Original weapons, a material expression of the historically specific character of physical violence, anchor the narrative in a material trace of such brutal events. However, for much of the story there are no objects, and even when there are artifacts, such as weapons, they alone cannot carry the story. We turned therefore to intangible heritage, to the narratives, reflections, and descriptions in manuscripts, books, documents, and visual sources to emplot the historical narrative in a theater of history. Historical actors speaking in their own voice form a kind of play script. Those voices bring visitors close to the moment of the events and speak in ways that we as scholars never could. They speak from their unique and partial perspective, in their particular personal and historical style, and with a wide range of feeling.

It is in the gallery dealing with the long nineteenth-century, 1772–1914, that we introduce modern antisemitism. Throughout the exhibition, we set the historical narrative within the borders of Poland during a given period. When it comes to the nineteenth century, however, the Commonwealth has disappeared from the map — the Russian and Austrian empires and Kingdom of Prussia had partitioned the Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795. Although the Russian empire took the lion’s share of the ‘royal cake’ and the Kingdom of Prussia the smallest piece — and despite the semi-autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland within the Russian partition — we have tried to represent developments in all three partitions, among them the Jewish enlightenment, industrialization, integration, the rise of modern Jewish political and social movements, and antisemitism and violence.

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<sup>3</sup> N. Hannover, *Abyss of Despair: The Famous 17th-Century Chronicle Depicting Jewish Life in Russia and Poland During the Chmielnicki Massacres of 1648–1649*, translated from Hebrew by A.J. Mesch, New Brunswick 1983, p. 43.

The section of the nineteenth-century gallery dealing with antisemitism takes as its centerpiece the wave of pogroms that broke out in southwestern Russia in 1881 and spread rapidly north along the railway lines. For this event, we draw on the Reuter telegrams that were sent to “The Jewish Chronicle” in London, and surround this event with presentations of the blood libel case in Chojnice, Pomerania; “Rola”, the first Polish antisemitic magazine, with its headquarters in Warsaw; and the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’, which originated in the Russian empire and circulated widely.

#### VIOLENCE AS A HISTORICAL AGENT

The presentation of modern antisemitism sits between a presentation of the integrationist ideals of ‘Poles of the Mosaic faith’ and a section dedicated to ‘auto-emancipation’, a term taken from Leon Pinsker’s 1882 pamphlet urging Jews to take matters into their own hands.<sup>4</sup> A critical issue here as elsewhere was to avoid constructing a narrative that would give undue weight to violence as a historical agent. Were the aspirations of Jewish integrationists completely crushed — some integrationists were disillusioned and became Zionists — or did some of them still hold out hope? Did Jews emigrate in such large numbers primarily because of antisemitism and violence or mainly for economic reasons? The May Laws passed in the wake of the pogroms in Russia had pauperized Jews living in the Pale of Settlement, while the economic underdevelopment of the region prompted many Jews to leave Galicia. Were the new Jewish social and political movements an expression of rising nationalisms in Europe more generally or a response to antisemitism and violence? Was the rise of modern Hebrew and Yiddish culture first and foremost an expression of competing forms of Jewish national awareness in the face of discrimination and violence or rather a mass culture phenomenon linked to urbanization, industrialization, and the rise of the mass press?

After the collapse of the empires during the First World War and formation of new nation states, Jews entered the period of the Second Polish Republic with a mixture of hope and fear — hope, inspired by the protection of minority rights guaranteed, at least on paper, by the Minority Treaties annexed to the Treaty of Versailles, and fear, marked by pogroms. Visitors pass through a short corridor expressing these two states of mind, hope on one side, fear on the other, as they enter ‘On the Jewish Street’, the gallery dealing with the 1920s and 1930s. The scenography for this gallery is a two-story street consisting of white relief facades on which are projected photographs of streets from the period.

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<sup>4</sup> [L. P i n s k e r], *‘Autoemancipation!’: Mahnruf an seine Stammesgenossen von einem russischen Juden*, Berlin 1882.



Some scholars have characterized this period first and foremost in terms of antisemitism — Jews in Poland were ‘on the edge of destruction’ — while others have focused on the political energy and cultural creativity of Jews living in the Second Polish Republic.<sup>5</sup> They ask, if it was so bad, why was it so good?<sup>6</sup> The reverse could as easily be asked. Indeed, not only is the historical perspective on this period over-determined by antisemitism as its defining feature, but also such formulations as ‘on the edge of destruction’ foreshadow the Holocaust, which comes to define the period as its prelude.

Consistent with the principle governing the entire exhibition, our approach here is to give the history of Polish Jews precedence over the history of Polish–Jewish relations. We do this by threading antisemitism and its expressions (attitudes, hate speech, attitude of the Church, boycotts, *numerus clausus*, ghetto benches, pogroms) through the narrative, and we keep our visitors in the historical present of the story, without anticipating the Holocaust. Given that the period of the Second Polish Republic is so short, just two decades, we have organized this gallery thematically. At street level, one side is dedicated to politics and the other to culture. On the mezzanine, one side deals with daily life in towns and small cities across the length and breadth of the country, while the other side is devoted to growing up.

It is in the section about politics that we present a timeline of key events and Jewish responses to them. The timeline begins and ends with the question posed by Bernard Singer in “Nasz Przegląd” in 1934: ‘So beautiful was the sound of the words: “All citizens of Poland regardless of race, language, or religion will be equal before the law”. What happened to this article of the treaty, how was it put into effect? All of this relates to the history of Jews in Poland since 1919’. The first interactive presentation on the timeline presents Jewish Members of Parliament and the issues they addressed during each term. The last interactive presentation on the timeline deals with Jews and communism. Between these two poles are events marking deteriorating economic conditions and rising antisemitism, especially after the death of Józef Piłsudski in 1935 and the rise of right-wing nationalists.

When visitors look down the street, they do not see war. They see people looking up, without knowing what they are looking up at. It is only when visitors turn the corner that they see bombs falling on Warsaw. This is how the Holocaust gallery opens — with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Those looking up are the American ambassador and his staff, standing outside the United States Embassy preparing to evacuate. We have set the Holocaust within the borders of occupied Poland and focus on what happened within those borders.

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<sup>5</sup> C.S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars*, Detroit 1977.

<sup>6</sup> E. Mendelsohn, *Jewish Reactions to Antisemitism in East Central Europe*, [in:] *Living With Antisemitism: Modern Jewish Responses*, ed. J. Reinharz, Hanover (N.H.) 1987, p. 298.

Developments beyond those borders are seen primarily from the perspective of those in Poland and through newspapers, letters, and other materials. Events taking place in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, such as the rise of Hitler, Kristallnacht, and the Anschluss, are presented in the gallery dealing with that period in the form of a news kiosk.

Principles that have governed the historical narrative and mode of narration throughout the exhibition become especially powerful here: narrating in the first person and in the historical present through quotations from primary sources, without foreshadowing or backshadowing. The experience of those whose story we tell is paramount. Holocaust museums and exhibitions have evolved over the last forty years, following paradigm shifts in Holocaust studies, from a focus on the perpetrators to a focus on the victims, and more recently to the ‘bystanders’, and especially to deconstructing this category. This shift is reflected both in massive projects to film survivor testimony and in the changing character of Holocaust museums, to mention only the permanent exhibitions at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, and the Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York. While our approach also focuses on the victims, it differs from most Holocaust museums and exhibitions in using only sources created during the period and not postwar survivor testimony on film or in any other medium. Visitors have access to tens of thousands of video testimonies of survivors in POLIN Museum’s Resource Center, thanks to a partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation. As for the third paradigm, ‘bystanders’, perhaps a time will come when museums and exhibitions will find a way to deal with the complicated subject of what until recently was a kind of residual category, a grey zone, which on closer examination has proven to be more complicated. Until recently, ‘bystander’ was a term for those who were neither perpetrators, nor victims, but even those categories are not as clear as once thought — victims can also be perpetrators and perpetrators can also be victims.

Within the Holocaust gallery itself, visitors are encouraged to bracket what they know and to experience the unfolding of events together with those in the situation, with those who recorded those events in the very moment and place they were happening. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, the lead scholars for this gallery, describe this approach to the narration as a gradual ‘lifting of the veil’, as those in the story come to realize their fate, and as they and the visitors become aware of the systemic nature and massive scale of the genocide.

In addition, POLIN Museum, as a site-specific museum, stands on the ground of the Warsaw ghetto and can draw on a unique archive created in the Warsaw ghetto, the clandestine Oyneg Shabes archive, initiated and led by Emanuel Ringelblum. It was buried during the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942 and shortly before the uprising in 1943. Two caches were excavated from the rubble of the destroyed ghetto just after the war. This material, which documents everything that was taking place in the Warsaw ghetto, forms the basis for much of what is presented

in the Holocaust gallery. This exceptional archive has been included in UNESCO's Memory of the World register. Consistent with the principle of *pars pro toto*, which governs the entire exhibition, we present one ghetto in depth, the Warsaw ghetto. Other ghettos will be presented on the mezzanine of the Holocaust gallery.



## 2. RINGELBLUM AND CZERNIAKÓW

Entrance to the Warsaw ghetto section of the Holocaust gallery, showing Adam Czerniaków, head of the Judenrat, and Emanuel Ringelblum, head of Oyneg Shabes. Quotations from their diaries accompany the visitor through the story. (Photo by Magdalena Starowieyska and Darek Golik; courtesy of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw)

The juxtaposition of imposed reality and Jewish response structures the narrative and the space, which is claustrophobic by design. Excerpts from the diaries of Emanuel Ringelblum, who wrote in Yiddish, and Adam Czerniaków, head of the Judenrat, who wrote in Polish — two perspectives, *vis-à-vis* — lead the narration. There are no literal recreations of settings and no icons so familiar from other Holocaust museums and exhibitions — no Auschwitz barrack, railway car, child's shoe, or striped uniform. Nor are there blow-ups of atrocity photographs or photomontages. If a photograph is enlarged or shown in part, we provide a visual caption, such that the whole photograph accompanies the caption text. Our use of photographs and film, most of them of necessity German propaganda material, was guided by an image ethics policy. Thus, early in the gallery, there is a section dedicated to the stages of the separation and isolation of Jews on a series of standing panels. One of those panels bears the keyword 'Humiliation' and

a life-size drawing, which is based on a snapshot of a Jew being humiliated, but the photograph itself, scanned, is presented at snapshot scale. Below the keyword is the lead quotation, which is taken from the memoir of Apolinary Hartglas, who had been a member of the prewar Sejm: ‘Three officers stopped an elderly Jew passing by and one of them took a pair of scissors out of his pocket — he cut off half the Jew’s grey beard. A fourth officer took the photograph’. This statement, in large letters, is accompanied by additional photographs showing Germans humiliating Jews. One of them is captioned as follows:

German soldiers force one Jew to cut the beard of another Jew, while posing for the camera.

Photograph by unknown German soldier in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, 1939–1940  
Archive of Łukasz Biedka

This and other captions draw attention to the act of photography, to the humiliating pose, and to the photographer, a German soldier. It is obvious from the photographs and confirmed in diaries that the act of taking such photographs was intended and experienced as humiliating in itself.

This approach — the scale of the photographs, the captions — is intended to avoid exploiting the spectacle of violence, manipulating emotion, and humiliating the victims a third time — first, the acts themselves (cutting off their sidelocks, forcing them to clean cobblestones with a spoon); second, photographing the humiliation; and third, exhibiting blow-ups of these humiliating photographs. Our approach is rather: the hotter the subject, the cooler the treatment. Such an approach can produce an intimacy with violence that is emotional in its own way.

Our task is to distance visitors from photographs that have become all too familiar, images that register as icons of a reality that has itself become iconic. Nowhere is this clearer than in the presentation of the photographs from Jürgen Stroop’s report, ‘Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!’, which documents the suppression of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943 by the German troops under Stroop’s command. These photographs are among the most familiar icons of the Holocaust and are universally accepted as photographs of the Warsaw uprising, but in fact, as we emphasize, they document the German suppression of the uprising, not the uprising itself. To get this message across, we show all of the photographs, not just the most iconic ones, and we show the report itself, all of it, in the original German and in Polish and English translation.

On entering the area of the ghetto uprising, visitors first encounter an account from one of the fighters that conveys their state of mind. This account is projected on a freestanding wall, in front of which are four ‘weapons’: a brick, fuses for a Molotov cocktail, a grenade, and a rifle. Nearby are the searing words of ‘Counter-attack’, a poem written by Władysław Szlengel at the time:

Hear, O you German God,  
 How we Jews pray in our 'barbaric' homes  
 With crowbar or pole in hand.  
 We ask you, Lord, for a bloody fight.  
 We beg for urgent violent death.  
 Before we die, let our eyes not see  
 The railway track receding,  
 [...]  
 This is our Spring! Counter-attack!  
 The heady wine of battle intoxicates!  
 These are our partisan forests —  
 Back alleys off Dzika and Ostrowska Streets ...  
 Our battle cry — six letters — blazes red,  
 A word, a battering ram: REVOLT.

On the other side of this freestanding wall are the photographs from the Strop report. They, in turn, face large photomurals showing the ruins of the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie after the Germans blew it up, and survivors of the uprising rounded up at the Umschlagplatz, awaiting deportation to their death. Visitors exit the ghetto uprising area to the 'Aryan Street', which is where the spectrum of relations with the civilian population is set. Before entering the "Aryan Street", visitors will have passed through the second part of the Warsaw ghetto narrative, life in the face of death. This is where we present the Great Deportation in the summer of 1942 and the Warsaw ghetto uprising in 1943. We were able to spatialize a double perspective — from the ghetto to the Aryan side and from the Aryan side to the ghetto — in a surprising way. Taking advantage of this double-height gallery and inspiration from the wooden footbridge across Chłodna Street, which connected the large and small ghettos, we were able to bring visitors from the first part of the Warsaw ghetto presentation, across a 'bridge', to second part. Standing on the bridge, visitors have a view down to the 'Aryan Street', which looked idyllic to Jews trapped in the ghetto. Only after the uprising, when visitors exit the Warsaw ghetto area, will they enter the 'Aryan Street' and discover the reality of occupied Poland ruled by German terror.

Here, as throughout the exhibition, we present a spectrum of relations, from the worst to the best, through testimony from the period that communicates what those living in occupied Poland saw, heard, thought, felt, and did. Those relations come into sharp focus in the area dedicated to hiding. We took our cue from the observation of Emanuel Ringelblum, who was writing a book, 'Polish-Jewish Relations during the War', while in hiding with his wife and child and about 27 others in a space of approximately 28 square meters. Ringelblum distinguished between hiding in the 'light', above ground, on false papers and passing as 'Aryan', and hiding in the 'dark', in a hiding place of some kind, with the help of local people. Accordingly, several specific hiding stories — some in the light, others in

the dark, some tragic, some treacherous, and some miraculous — are presented through photographs, documents, diary entries, and original objects in dark and light areas of the space.

Here and in the section that follows — the Barbarossa campaign, pogroms that broke out as the Germans entered the Soviet-occupied part of Poland in the summer of 1941 — photographs are to scale, not enlarged, the story is narrated in the historical present through primary sources and especially through personal documents, there is no editorializing and no spectacularizing of violence, and the principle of *pars pro toto* prevails. Jedwabne and Lwów represent the many pogroms that broke out that summer, one carried out by Polish neighbors, the other by Ukrainians. The extent of the violence — the number of pogroms and their geographic distribution — is presented on a map. Similarly, Ponary is the chosen case for the onset of direct mass murder by bullets. The story is set within an abstract forest and narrated through the amateur snapshots taken by German soldiers — they took photographs despite having been ordered not to do so — and excerpts from the almost daily death tally kept by Karl Jäger, the Einsatzkommando leader in charge of the operation, as well as from eyewitness accounts.

The gallery does not close with the end of the war and liberation of the camps. There is no redeeming moment, no redeeming message. Rather, it stops at the end of a corridor dedicated to the death camps, with a focus on Treblinka, where most of the Jews from the Warsaw ghetto perished, and Auschwitz, where so many European Jews were killed. This corridor and the gallery as a whole culminate with testimony in photographs and words by two Sonderkommando members, Jews who were forced to bring Jews into the gas chambers, remove their bodies from the gas chambers, transfer them to the crematoria, and dispose of the ashes. It was the idea of Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak to create what they called a ‘metaphysical break’ at this point, and the designers proposed a stark white space, absolutely silent and empty, where visitors would be alone with themselves, before reentering the narration. Unfortunately, for technical reasons, it was not possible to realize this plan.

It is violence in the postwar period that presented the greatest challenge, in part because this period is so close to the present and within living memory, but also because the history of violence against Jews in this period continues to be a very sensitive issue. Of the 3 300 000 Jews living in Poland before 1939, 90% perished, and most of those who survived left. Why did so many leave? What motivated others to stay? Why was it so difficult, if not impossible, for those few survivors to return to their former homes? Why, having survived the genocide, should they fear for their lives now? These questions are still difficult to address in Poland today.

We tackled these issues by organized this gallery around the most pressing question for Jews in Poland right after the war: to stay or to leave? We present the

story of leaving on one side of the gallery and the story of staying *vis-à-vis*, on the other side. Although most Jews left, it was important that the story of leaving not overshadow the story of staying. We wanted visitors to deal with Jewish presence in Poland, no matter its size. Those who stayed are, after all, an integral part of the story of postwar Poland and the country as we know it today, and among them are those responsible for the renewal of Jewish life here, however small its scale. The lead scholars for this gallery were Helena Datner and Stanisław Krajewski, who brought not only their scholarly expertise but also their personal experience to the development of this gallery.

The more sensitive the issue — and there is hardly an issue more sensitive than postwar antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence — the more important are our principles of narrating in the historical present, through primary documents, in multiple voices, without editorializing and without sensationalizing violence. Some of our stakeholders were anxious about leaving anything to chance. Should we place red dots on the most important texts to ensure that visitors do not miss them? Should one or another text be deleted or replaced because a hostile critic might quote it out of context? Responding to the way we present the Kielce pogrom in 1946, an American educator asked, ‘Are you not worried that visitors might construct their own “errant narratives”?’

Our approach to presenting this pogrom is counter-intuitive. We begin the story inside the apartment on 7 Planty Street, where young Zionists were preparing to leave for Palestine, introduce visitors to efforts to renew Jewish life in Kielce right after the war. Only when visitors turn around to the other side of the ‘doors’ to the apartment do they discover the pogrom. Consistent with the principle ‘the hotter the subject the cooler the treatment’, the first indication of the program is simply a list of the bare facts. Then, on a small monitor is the official Polish newsreel of the funeral. Visitors can hear the voice of the original Polish narrator, followed by the voice of a narrator, whom we recorded, reading the funeral oration delivered by Chief Rabbi Dr Dawid Kahane. The original narrator states, ‘We cannot decline the responsibility for this crime, which cast a shadow on the good name of Poland...’, while Rabbi Kahane states, ‘Priests of the Polish people! Polish intelligentsia! Polish people! Can you say with a clear conscience, after leaving here today, “Our hands have not shed innocent blood, our eyes have not seen this”? ... Polish bishops, where was your pastoral letter about this? Were you not aware of the papal encyclicals definitively giving the lie to all the nonsense about ritual murder? Does the commandment “Thou Shalt Not Kill” not apply to Jews?’

Excerpts from the trial testimony follow, accompanied by a single atrocity photograph, the size of a snapshot, one of many photographs taken by Julia Pirotte. ‘The Polish Soldier’ had commissioned her to photograph the aftermath and published several of her photographs together with a report on the event. At the



### 3. KIELCE POGROM

The presentation of postwar violence focuses on the Kielce pogrom. Other instances of violence are visible through cut-out letters that spell the names of places where the violence took place. Drawers contain documents and commentary related to each case. Projected on the wall behind the presentation of violence is the story of emigration. (Photo: Magdalena Starowieyska and Darek Golik, courtesy of POLIN Museum of the History of Jews)

center of the presentation are four interpretations of what happened, all of them from the period: the communists blamed the anti-communist underground; the underground blamed the communists; the Bishop of Kielce blamed the Jews; and some individuals held Polish society responsible. On an ominous wall, *vis-à-vis* the presentation of the Kielce pogrom, are other instances of anti-Jewish violence. We make no reference at this point in the narration to Jan Gross's book about the Kielce pogrom, which appeared sixty years after the event in English as *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (2006) and two years later in Polish as *Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści*. Nor do we refer to the heated debates that this book sparked, not least over its provocative Polish subtitle, *A History of Moral Collapse*. This book and these debates belong to the period after 1989 and the fall of communism.

The emigration panic that followed the Kielce pogrom and other violent episodes during these years is treated on a massive wall behind the presentation of violence. Projected on a large phomural of the Alps is a film made by Bricha (Escape), an organized underground Zionist effort to help Jews in Europe get to



Palestine. The film shows Jews carrying their possessions as they make their way through the mountains by foot. It was difficult at this time to emigrate legally from Poland and just as difficult to enter British Mandate Palestine. As a result, most Holocaust survivors ended up waiting in displaced persons camps in Western Europe. While antisemitism and violence were important motivating factors, we did not want to give the impression that they were the only reasons for leaving. Some Jews left because they did not want to live in a cemetery or under communism. Zionists wanted to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine and then Israel. Others had their only living relatives abroad. That said, there was emigration panic, even with nowhere to go other than displaced persons camps. This panic was not the ‘emigration fever’ of the late nineteenth century, which resulted largely from pauperization and the search for new opportunities in countries that had opened their doors to immigrants. Then too antisemitism and anti-Jewish violence played an important role, but not necessarily a determining one.

Of the approximately 240 000 Jews in Poland just after the war — most had survived in the Soviet Union, having been “saved by deportation — about 150 000 left between 1945 and 1948. Many more left in 1949–1950 and after 1956. Those still in Poland during the 1960s wanted to stay, and in many cases did not think of themselves as Jews, but about 15 000 emigrated after the March 1968 antisemitic campaign. Between 6000 and 10 000 Jews in Poland, depending on who counts as a Jew, were left in Poland.

It could be said that the last chapter in POLIN Museum’s historical narrative is the role of the museum itself in addressing xenophobia and violence today. As an institution of public history and an educational and cultural center, POLIN Museum is more than the core exhibition at its heart. Our task is not only to ‘exhibit violence’, but also to tackle this issue in our world today. We recently mounted a temporary exhibition of two of Wojciech Wilczyk’s photographic projects, ‘Holy War’, which deals with nationalistic and xenophobic graffiti murals in Poland, and ‘There’s No Such Thing as an Innocent Eye’, his photographs of synagogues, many of them unrecognizable or in ruins, in Poland today, and ran a series of public programs related to the exhibition. We have also organized conferences, lectures, workshops, film screenings, artistic residencies, and seminars on pogroms, antisemitism, hate speech, Polish-Jewish relations, difficult histories and conflicted memories, and the role of history in intercultural education, among others — and we have partnered with such institutions as *Nigdy Więcej* in Poland and *Facing History* in the United States, to mention but two non-profits that fight xenophobia. Last but not least is the question of how the museum should respond to expressions of antisemitism in Poland today — desecration of Jewish cemeteries and tombstones, antisemitic graffiti, the recent demonstration in Wrocław, during which a Jew in effigy was set on fire, and statements by government officials that lend credibility to the ‘Protocols of the Elders of Zion’ and blame Jews for demonstrations protesting the recent government’s actions with regard to the Constitutional Tribunal, free

speech, freedom of the press, historical policy, and the like. Above all POLIN Museum, which is a new institution, aims to create a zone of trust for engaging difficult subjects in an informed way.

Note: Jerzy Halbersztadt led the development of the museum project from 1996 and was director of the museum from 2005 until 2011. The academic team responsible for the core exhibition includes Dr. Helena Datner, Prof. Barbara Engelking, Prof. Samuel D. Kassow, Dr. hab. Igor Kąkolewski, Prof. Stanisław Krajewski, Prof. Jacek Leociak, Prof. Adam Teller, Prof. Marcin Wodziński, Prof. Hanna Zaremska, Prof. David Assaf, Dr. Havi Dreyfus, Dr. Jakub Petelewicz, and Prof. Michael Steinlauf. Prof. Marcin Wodziński and Prof. Antony Polonsky served as Chief Historians and Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt–Gimblett, as Chief Curator.

# WYKAZ SKRÓTÓW

## I. ARCHIWA

- AA — Archiwum Archidiecezjalne  
AAN — Archiwum Akt Nowych  
AD — Archiwum Diecezjalne  
AGAD — Archiwum Główne Akt Dawnych  
AIPN — Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej  
AN Kraków — Archiwum Narodowe w Krakowie  
AP — Archiwum Państwowe  
APAN — Archiwum Polskiej Akademii Nauk

### Ważniejsze zespoły archiwalne

- AKP — Archiwum Królestwa Polskiego  
AR — Archiwum Radziwiłłów  
ASK — Archiwum Skarbu Koronnego  
AZ — Archiwum Zamoyskich  
KGG — Kancelaria Generała–Gubernatora  
KRPiS — Komisja Rządowa Przychodów i Skarbu  
KRSW — Komisja Rządowa Spraw Wewnętrznych  
KRW — Komisja Rządowa Wojny  
KW — Komisja Województwa (ze skrótem nazwy województwa)  
MK — Metryka Koronna  
ML — tzw. Metryka Litewska  
RG — Rząd Gubernialny  
gr. — księgi sądowe grodzkie (poprzedzone określeniem terytorialnym)  
ziem. — księgi sądowe ziemskie (j.w.)

## II. BIBLIOTEKI

- BCzart. — Biblioteka Czartoryskich, Kraków  
BJag. — Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Kraków  
BNar. — Biblioteka Narodowa, Warszawa  
BOss. — Biblioteka Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław  
BPAN — Biblioteka Polskiej Akademii Nauk  
BUW — Biblioteka Uniwersytecka, Warszawa

## III. WAŻNIEJSZE WYDAWNICTWA ŹRÓDŁOWE

- AGiZ — Akta grodzkie i ziemskie z czasów Rzeczypospolitej z Archiwum  
tzw. bernardyńskiego we Lwowie

- CDMas. — *Codex diplomaticus et commemorationum Masoviae generalis*,  
wyd. J. K. Kochanowski
- CDPol. — *Codex diplomaticus Poloniae*
- CDPom. — *Codex diplomaticus Pomeraniae*
- CDPr. — *Codex diplomaticus Prussicus*
- CDSil. — *Codex diplomaticus Silesiae*
- DKM — Dokumenty kujawskie i mazowieckie przeważnie z XIII wieku
- KDKK — Kodeks dyplomatyczny katedry krakowskiej św. Wacława
- KDKMaz. — Kodeks dyplomatyczny Księstwa Mazowieckiego, wyd. J. T. Lubomirski
- KDmK — Kodeks dyplomatyczny miasta Krakowa
- KDMłp. — Kodeks dyplomatyczny Małopolski
- KDŚl. — Kodeks dyplomatyczny Śląska, wyd. K. Maleczyński
- KDWłkp. — Kodeks dyplomatyczny Wielkopolski
- MGH — *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
- MPH — *Monumenta Poloniae Historica*
- MPV — *Monumenta Poloniae Vaticana*
- MRPS — *Matricularum Regni Poloniae Summaria*
- Pom. UB — *Pommerellisches Urkundenbuch*
- Pr. UB — *Preussisches Urkundenbuch*
- SS — *Scriptores*
- SSRPol. — *Scriptores Rerum Polonicarum*
- SSRPr. — *Scriptores Rerum Prussicarum*
- Schl. UB — *Schlesisches Urkundenbuch*
- VL — *Volumina Legum*
- ZDMłp. — Zbiór dokumentów małopolskich

#### IV. CZASOPISMA I WYDAWNICTWA PERIODYCZNE (polskie)

- ABMK — “Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne”
- APH — “Acta Poloniae Historica”
- CzP–H — “Czasopismo Prawno–Historyczne”
- KH — “Kwartalnik Historyczny”
- KHKM — “Kwartalnik Historii Kultury Materialnej”
- NDP — “Najnowsze Dzieje Polski”
- OiR — “Odrodzenie i Reformacja”
- PH — “Przegląd Historyczny”
- RAU whf — “Rozprawy Akademii Umiejętności. Wydział historyczno–filozoficzny”
- RDSG — “Roczniki Dziejów Społecznych i Gospodarczych”
- RH — “Roczniki Historyczne”
- SH — “Studia Historyczne”
- SŹr. — “Studia Źródłoznawcze”
- WPH — “Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny”
- ZH — “Zapiski Historyczne”