

Why do Jewish Museums Matter? An International Perspective

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So, what is a Jewish museum?

For as long as I have been involved with the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which started informally in 2003 and then formally in 2006, I've always insisted that we're not a 'Jewish museum' though I often hear us referred to--by taxi drivers, by colleagues—as 'the Jewish museum in Warsaw' or 'the Holocaust Museum in Warsaw', which makes my hair stand on end.

My answer is no! We are a history museum, we are an international museum, we're a site of conscience, we're a site-specific museum, we are a museum in the nation's capital, on a world stage.

But, when I made my declarations to my European colleagues during an advisory board meeting at the Vienna Jewish Museum a few months ago, I was brought up short. 'You *are* a Jewish museum,' they insisted, and I was stopped in my tracks.

What was I assuming? Clearly my model for something called a 'Jewish museum' was based on a lifetime experience somewhere else, not in Europe. In North America, Australia, South Africa, Israel--and only more recently, Europe, in Poland, which is quite exceptional in many ways.

Whatever the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will be, it will not be the Warsaw Jewish museum, notwithstanding the classic questions we have to answer—Will we put mezuzahs on the doors? Will we be open on Saturdays and Jewish holidays? Will the restaurant be kosher?

There are other questions. While the answers would not necessarily define us as a Jewish museum, they could define us as a place that was really friendly to our Jewish visitors. There is a difference.

So what was I thinking? First and foremost, I was thinking about museums that are created more or less by, more or less for, and more or less about Jews—though not exclusively.

Now, such museums have generally been committed to strengthening Jewish identity and continuity. For many museums in Europe, that's not the first thing on their mission statement, if it's there at all. Such museums are often committed to celebration, whether the success of American Jews or the State of Israel, although not exclusively. History museums in my view shouldn't be in the business of celebration per se. They should be in the business of history. Celebratory histories are of course very attractive to donors, very attractive to stakeholders, and very attractive to audiences. And, for good reason, whether to instil pride and confidence and strengthen Jewish identity of a new generation or to put forward a positive self-image in opposition to negative stereotypes

The idea that a Jewish museum outside of Israel would be created—even initiated—and supported primarily by the state may be typical for Europe more generally, but not in the UK and certainly not in the United States. That the local Jewish community might be against the creation of such a museum or just indifferent to it is inconceivable to me.

Think of The Jewish Museum and Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Skirball Cultural Centre in Los Angeles, Jewish Museum of Australia in Melbourne, and South African Jewish Museum in Cape Town. The idea that somebody other than Jews would create it and that Jews locally would be either indifferent, or even worse—that is difficult for me to imagine. It would not come as a surprise if non-Jews were uninterested, which is decidedly not the case in Poland, which we'll come to in a moment.

So, who is telling whose story to whom, and why? If we can't answer that question, we can't answer the question why we need Jewish museums, however we define them, and why they matter.

Looking at Jewish museums internationally today, I see three situations that shape their context, their mission, their story, and their relationship to their stakeholders and audiences. Fundamentally for Europe, it's the Holocaust. I'll make a radical and controversial statement: virtually all 'Jewish museums' in Europe are Holocaust museums by another name, with some possible exceptions. Outside Europe, Jewish museums are often immigration museums by another name. In Israel, museums take part in telling a Jewish national story, whether alone or together, state funded or not.

Perfect fit

Clearly I was assuming alignment. I was assuming the perfect fit between mission, story, stakeholder, and audience. The 'perfect fit cases' are essentially success stories—the success of immigrant Jewish communities or the success of the state of Israel.

Take Beit Hatfutsot. It is no longer the Museum of the Diaspora. It is now the Museum of the Jewish People. The shift says much about Israel's changing relationship to Jews around the world. From the Chairman of the Board:

Its purpose is to convey the unique and ongoing story of the Jewish People, while giving expression to a new perception about the relationship between the Jewish People and the State of Israel—the perception of one Jewish People, incorporating Jews living in Israel or any other place in the world. For this reason we decided to change the name from 'the Museum of the Jewish Diaspora' to the 'Museum of the Jewish People'." (ynetnews, 28 June 2009)

The premise of the former Museum of the Diaspora was that with the establishment of the State of Israel, the Diaspora would shrink if not disappear. Clearly the Diaspora is here to stay and its relationship to Israel cannot be taken for granted. The new Beit Hatfutsot has recast itself around the idea of Jewish peoplehood. Indeed, the Knesset passed a Beit Hatfutsot law that defines it as the national centre for the Jewish communities of Israel and the world.

When Beit Hatfutsot declares ‘You are part of the story’, to whom is it speaking? I’m trying to imagine that tagline for European Jewish museums. Jewish Museum London: ‘You are part of the story’. Jewish Museum Berlin: ‘You are part of the story’. Jewish Museum Vienna: ‘You are part of the story’. What would that actually mean? How would the story be told in London, Berlin, or Vienna to fulfil that tagline for its visitors—its international visitors, non-Jewish visitors, Jewish visitors, Russian immigrants living there today.

Clearly, Beit Hatfutsot is speaking to other Jews: the museum ‘*connects Jewish people to their roots and strengthening their personal and collective Jewish identity.*’ A perfect fit? Within Israel today, this is a big issue. To be Israeli and to be Jewish are not the same thing, so perhaps the fit is not so perfect after all.

When speaking to the world, Beit Hatfutsot’s tone is celebratory: the museum ‘*conveys to the world the fascinating narrative of the Jewish people. Transmitting the essence of the Jewish culture, faith, purpose and deed, while presenting the contribution of world Jewry to humanity.*’

But Beit Hatfutsot is no longer alone. A National Museum of the Jewish People has been proposed for Washington D.C., whose mandate is as broad—if not broader: it will ‘*present the sweep of Jewish heritage across the world, from antiquity to the present. Its dual purpose is to define what Jewish culture is and how Jews and Judaism have affected and been affected by an array of cultures and civilizations.*’ The masthead of their website features portraits of great Jewish individuals—no doubt all of us at our museums have had to struggle with the expectation, desire, and the attractiveness of celebrating Jewish achievement. How various museums deal with this expectation is worthy of discussion. The National Museum of American Jewish History’s Only in America Hall of Fame is a recent example.

While neither of these museums are a ‘Holocaust museum by another name’, they define themselves in relation to this cataclysmic event. The Chairman of the Washington museum’s board was quite explicit: ‘*The Holocaust having a major presence in Washington only shows one side of the coin, the tragic side, about failure. And I thought the other side of the coin, the uplifting side, of Jewish contributions to civilization deserved equal footing.*’ Such statements position Europe in a very particular way and point to one of the reasons that we need ‘Jewish museums’ in Europe, about which more in a moment.

Turning now to the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, one of the most recent ones to open. The ‘perfect fit’ is expressed in their mission statement: ‘*to preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America. Our purpose is to connect Jews more closely to their heritage and to inspire in people of all backgrounds a greater appreciation for the diversity for the American Jewish experience and the freedoms to which Americans aspire*’—not unlike the London Jewish Museum.

American Jewish museums, like their counterparts in Australia and South Africa, stress identity and continuity and generally have strong support from their local Jewish communities. Jews in Philadelphia are enormously proud of their Jewish museum and have every reason to be so. Acclimated to its setting on Independence Mall, symbol of the birthplace of American democracy, the National Museum of American Jewish History’s exhibition sets the Jewish immigrant success

story within an American historical narrative of freedom. The 'perfect fit' has its price, in this case, the danger of one big idea—freedom—overdetermining the narrative.

In contrast with these Jewish museums are the many Holocaust museums and centres in North America and elsewhere. The Museum of Jewish Heritage, a 'living memorial to the Holocaust', was established in Lower Manhattan at a time when there was a debate over whether the main Holocaust museum in the United States should be in Washington, D.C. or New York. To distinguish itself from The Jewish Museum uptown and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the nation's capital, the Museum of Jewish Heritage bracketed the Holocaust between the decades the preceded and followed this event. The exhibition follows the postwar story in America and Israel—but not Europe. This approach locates the future elsewhere—the story in Europe is over. The Holocaust closed that story. As visitors exit the exhibition, they look out over a vista of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty.

So much for 'perfect fit' museums. Let's now consider 'imperfect fit', which brings us to European Jewish museums.

Imperfect fit

European Jewish museums are essentially attempts to recover stories of success that have been overshadowed by the failure represented by the Holocaust. This accounts in part for why Jewish museums located elsewhere turn their backs on post-war Europe. This is a colossal mistake and a missed opportunity-- a real limitation of Jewish museums outside Europe. For many of them, the story of Jews in Europe is a closed story. And, this is precisely why we need Jewish museums in Europe: to reopen the story--a story essentially forgotten, untold, and unknown.

In Europe, this story should be an open question. This can be seen beautifully in the temporary exhibition currently at the Berlin Jewish Museum, *Heimatkunde: 30 Künstler blicken auf Deutschland*, loosely translated as "How German Is it? 30 Artists' Notion of Home'. The Welcome Gallery at the London Museum looks for what it means to be Jewish in the UK today in unlikely places and finds surprising answers—not quite what might be expected in the 'perfect fit' Jewish museums. They may be too perfectly aligned for those kinds of answers.

I find misalignment more interesting. I think it offers more opportunities. It is full of surprises. It has the potential to shake up the assumptions of those—and I include myself—who have had the good fortune to live in 'intact' or 'whole' Jewish communities. Those are the communities that create and support the perfectly aligned Jewish museums in the United States, Melbourne, Cape Town, and Israel.

So when I say that European Jewish Museums are 'Holocaust museums under another name', I'm thinking in terms of two modes of Holocaust memory. The first is to remember the genocide. This is the mission of the bonafide Holocaust museums. Holocaust museums tend to embed this catastrophic event within an axis of genocide rather than within an axis of Jewish history. Having exhausted the pool of Holocaust survivors', the Spielberg Archive, for examples, has started interviewing victims of other genocides. Even when Holocaust museums locate the genocide along 'axis of history,' it is along the line of various national histories--French, German, Macedonian, Lithuanian—but not Jewish. Indeed, Salo Baron, the great Jewish historian, did not consider the

Holocaust to be part of Jewish history. He believed it should be taught within European history as part of World War II. He was not alone, as David Engel demonstrates in his book *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust*.

The first mode of Holocaust memory honours those who died by documenting how they died—the genocide. This is perpetrator history, even when largely reported by the victims, an approach pioneered by Yad Vashem. The second mode, which to my way of thinking is a defining feature of European Jewish museums, honours those who died by remembering how they lived—especially in the very places where they once lived. It is in this respect that Jewish museums in Europe today are ‘Holocaust museums by another name’. It is not accident that the Berlin Jewish Museum sets the 2000-year history of German Jews with an architectural program that is Holocaust through and through.

In contrast, the architectural program for Museum of the History of Polish Jews sets 1000 years of the history of the Polish Jews within a house of light. Located on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto and pre-war Jewish neighbourhood, the building faces the Warsaw Ghetto monument. At home in this building, with its understated geometry and shimmering glass fins, the multimedia narrative exhibition and educational and cultural programs will complete the story and the memorial complex. A challenge for this museum, as for virtually all Jewish museums in Europe, is the overwhelming teleology of the Holocaust as the defining event and inevitable endpoint for the preceding millennia of Jewish history. Not surprisingly, many Holocaust museums are Holocaust memorials by another name. At the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, we pay special attention to the relation between history and memory and avoid a memorial style of exhibition.

Place and Time

Jewish museums in Europe find themselves not only in a post-Holocaust period but also in a post-war—and in several cases post-colonial or post-communist—period. The same cannot be said for North America.

What does *post-war* mean? It means essentially the period after death, destruction, the redrawing of Europe’s map, and migration. Where does the wider society find itself in a story that for them is defined by the war, rather than the Holocaust? This is one of the most interesting questions we face in developing the historical narrative for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. It is our intention that the wider public be able to find themselves virtually *everywhere* in a story that offers an integral history, a history “in common,” if not a “common history”.

What does *post-colonial* mean for countries that had empires? France, Germany, the UK, Belgium. What are the new diversities and xenophobias that arrive when the colonies come home? Where is the Jewish story in that mix? The Welcome Gallery and the public programmes at the London Jewish Museum are exemplary in their approach to these questions.

What does *post-Holocaust* mean for countries that once had large and vibrant Jewish communities? Today, they may have small—even minute--Jewish communities. In many places in Europe, the majority of Jews are not from the place where they now live. Their histories are remote from the histories told in the local Jewish museum. Where do they find themselves in that

story? Are they to adopt it as their story? Are they to adapt to it? Are they to learn to identify with it?

What does *post-communist* mean for the eastern bloc? In the case of Poland, it means the possibility for creating a Museum of the History of Polish Jews. This would have been inconceivable under Communism.

Consider the particular circumstances under which this museum is being created as a way of returning to the question 'Why do we need Jewish museums?' I would still insist that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is not a Jewish museum, which begs the question of what makes a museum 'Jewish'. The easy answer--'It's about Jews.' 'Jewish museum' becomes shorthand for thematically Jewish? But the issue is less thematic, than relational. The question is rather in relation to what and to whom? To whom does this story matter—or, should it matter—and why?

Our challenge is to create a relational rather than a contextual history. This is not about a Polish context into which Jews are placed. We strive to present a truly relational history, a history 'in common,' if not a 'common history'. Stated in other words, this is an integral history: Jews are an integral part of Polish history and Polish history is incomplete without a history of Polish Jews. The museum itself is part of that history, an agent in that history, and not only a mirrored expression or celebration of it. We strive also avoid an apologetic history—a history of 'influence' and 'contributions', though of course accomplished individuals and their achievements find their proper place in the historical narration.

Resisting teleology

The teleological pull of the Holocaust is felt perhaps most strongly in Poland, the epicentre of the Shoah. All the death camps were built in Poland. It was to Poland that Europe's Jews were sent to be killed. Material evidence of the genocide is pervasive, whether death camps, mass graves, memorials, exhibitions, books, and public debates. When Poland and Jews are uttered in the same breath, the immediate association is Holocaust and 'Polish antisemitism', even though Poland does not top of the list of European countries contending with antisemitism.

Once the largest Jewish community in the world, Jews in Poland is today form one of the very smallest. Once very diverse—multidenominational, multilingual, and multinational—Poland today is relatively homogeneous: the borders were redrawn, populations were relocated, 3,000,000 Jews were lost to the Holocaust, and most of those who survived left. Today Poland is essentially Catholic and Polish.

First, If not for the story that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews tells, one thousand years of Jewish life in Poland would disappear into the axis of genocide. The world would forever know more about how Jews died than about how they lived--and would know virtually nothing about how they continue to live, albeit on a small scale, in Poland today. This place, more than anywhere else, is identified with the Shoah proper. Recovering a story of 1000 years matters here.

Second, this museum can restore the place of the Holocaust within the axis of Jewish history—and Polish-Jewish history in particular--lest the Holocaust become simply one genocide along an axis of genocide.

Third, the Jewish experience in Poland is a way to recover Poland's historic diversity from within its own history.

Finally, what about Jews, not only those in Europe today, but also worldwide? What is our obligation to those whose story we tell—wherever they may be? One of the biggest surprises was the resistance I encountered from Jews abroad, at least initially. Why is this museum being built in Poland, they asked. Would anyone ask why a museum dedicated to French Jews is in France? Or, why a museum about British Jews is in the UK? 'There are no Jews in Poland. Better to build such a museum in America or Israel,' they would explain. They were sceptical as to the motives of our Polish supporters and the interest of the Polish public, even though the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland initiated the project and is responsible for creating the exhibition that tells the story and for raising funds for producing the exhibition. As the international Jewish public learns more about the project—and especially when they visit Poland—and as our opening in April 2013 approaches, the tide is turning. That in itself is a major accomplishment.

To return to the question why Jewish museums—and above all European Jewish museums—are necessary? To take a closed story, a story closed by the Holocaust, and to open it. The message? The story is not over. Many people told us to end the exhibition with the Holocaust: 'the story ends with the Holocaust, the Holocaust is the absolute end'. We said no, we're going to take the story all the way up to the present and into the future.

Given the small number of Jews in Poland today—those who can be counted number about 4,000, with estimates ranging from 20,000 to 60,000 for the rest. But Jewish presence in Polish consciousness is very big. We take this situation--small numbers, big presence—as the organizing concept for the last chapter in the narration.

This brings me to a second reason why we need Jewish museums. Jewish museums can offer a constructive model of engagement and complement to Holocaust museums, which take as their starting point lessons from the negative past. Jewish museums also address difficult issues, but within a longer and wider historical narrative. A millenium or two offers rich resources for a constructive model of engagement.

Third, I would like to think that the misalignments of the so-called Jewish museums of Europe could challenge assumptions of Jews living elsewhere about what it means to be a Jew, to be a whole Jew, true Jew, an authentic Jew. To see what 'Jewish' looks like in post-war, post-Holocaust, post-colonial, post-Communist Europe.

Finally, the chasm created by the Holocaust can never be repaired, but European Jewish museums can build bridges across the rupture. Those bridges could reconnect Jews abroad to their own histories in Europe, a worthy goal.

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Q: By what I understood from the lecture, in each country, the story is different. How would you say with your experience is the way to make the right decisions about the running of museums?

I think every case is really different.

First, I do think though that we have a moral responsibility to the people whose story we tell, even if they are absent or small in number or are from elsewhere. So for me that's the first principle—a responsibility to the people whose story we tell—I think it's an ethical principle for museums. I know in the US, largely from the ethnographic museums, that anthropologists told the story. It was not told by those who it was about—the situation has changed. That for me is critically important and I would take my lead from there.

Second, I think that the professional historical competencies are of the first importance and have to be independent of political pressure and demands from various stakeholders. The intellectual independence is critically important.

Third, I would propose a strongly multidisciplinary approach. I think it is critically important that not only classically trained historians are involved. Our team in Warsaw is really interdisciplinary – we have a sociologist, social psychologist, philosopher, literary scholar, historians, myself from the social sciences, and art historians as well. I think that is hugely important.

Fourth, it's critically important that those responsible for realising the project be aware of the very best work being done in the field. They need to go see the best practices and lots of good and interesting examples.

Q: Certainly since 1945 in the Anglo-Saxon world I think we've seen a polarisation within the Jewish community – a smaller group going much more observant religiously, and a much larger group going the opposite way. And I wonder whether Jewish museums are able—if we are meant to be talking to Jews as well as the general public—to cope with different expectations of different groups.

Some of the most interesting examples are being created by Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidim. They are creating a massive Jewish museum in Moscow. They established the Jewish Children's Museum, just across the road from 770 Eastern Parkway, the headquarters of Lubavitch, as a memorial to a Lubavitcher boy who was killed in this conflicted interracial neighbourhood. The Jewish Children's Museum aims to engage young visitors, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, in Jewish life and Jewish values.

I'm always fascinated to see Orthodox Jews go to the Jewish Museum in New York. I wouldn't underestimate the potential of Jewish museums to reach a religious audience. Although, a delegate commented yesterday that the synagogue is for them and the museum is for others. It's the secular shul. Yes, there's something for everybody. That said, I do think it would be great for Jewish museums to reach out to the full spectrum of the Jewish community.

Q: How did you decide which audience you are speaking to in Poland – Jews, Poles, tourists?

We expect about 50 to 60 % of our audience to be from Poland, about 20 to 25% to be a Jewish audience from abroad, and the others to be international—largely from the Eastern block, Germany and other parts of Europe, and the world. And we hope to reach them all and to encourage them to talk to each other. In other words, we don't think about our audiences as being compartmentalised market segments, but rather we would like to get them in the same room and talking to each other. That's one of our goals. We think of the Museum as a place of dialogue and debate, a forum. That is not generally the first thing one thinks of when one thinks of a Jewish museum, nor is it generally at the top of the list in their mission statements, if on the list at all.

Q: One rarely sees Europe today represented in the press in the United States, in any kind of way – not just in Jewish Museums – and when one does see it, it's always about travel to exotic Jewish communities, nothing about mainstream Jewish communities.

You're right. What you read in the press about Europe today is either about vandalised cemeteries, or it's about tourism, heritage trips. I talked with the Forward about regularly reporting on Jewish life in Poland, but that seems unlikely, whether because there is not enough interest or not enough of interest to report to their readers. I would like to think that our museum will help to change that.

Q: Your last point about 'small numbers, big presence' is on the one hand nice, but on the other hand its puzzling because it means that Jews are not just real figures, but symbolic figures in the public and I would love to hear something from you on how you reflect on this public role and the instrumentalisation and use in society of this symbolic Jewish presence. And maybe on how this differs between Warsaw and Berlin, Paris, Vienna, London etc.

I see this as the bad faith approach—the perception that in Poland there are no Jews except dead Jews, who exist as just phantoms, symbols. I don't see it that way, I don't feel it that way. My experience in Poland is that the debates are very real, very alive. The heatedness of those debates tells you that those issues are very, very real, even if the number of Jews is small.

Kielce and Jedawbne, icons of antisemitism, is not the only aspect of Jewish presence in Polish consciousness. Nor do I see Jewish presence in Polish consciousness as instrumentalisation or exploitation. The interest is serious and sincere, which is difficult for people outside Poland to understand.

We have a project called [Virtual Shtetl](#), which engages local history enthusiasts in thousands of localities in recovering the Jewish past of their towns. This is real. This is sincere. I'd love to see those places and those people connect with Jews abroad who can trace their families back to those places, but have turned their backs completely on Poland. That is my dream. You need efforts like the Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Virtual Shtetl to make that happen. That is constructive engagement.

Q: There are some concepts that should be really discussed – the concepts of roots and identity. I'm very strongly opposed to the use of these concepts. I think they are misleading, and killing the possibilities we have of defining and representing Jewish existence, by aligning it with a thought that is leading to more nationalist and problematic political tendencies in general in Europe. In France this question is coming from the State. I think we do need to question very strongly those lines which are pre-made and which are keeping us from taking other positions to look at Jewish identity or the Jewish future. This will be the main challenge that we will have to face – to extract ourselves from visions which were imposed on us by general codes of political correctness.

Roots and identity—I'm not happy with these assumptions either, but for completely different reasons. As I said earlier, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is not, in my view, an "identity museum," another reason it is not—or does not look like—a 'Jewish museum". We need to consider the difference between civil society in France, with its republican ideals, and the UK, which is very strong on diversity. The US, Canada, and Australia are very big on multiculturalism. Austria, it seems, is strong on the idea of integration. So there are really different models of how to deal with difference in civil society, with the lessons of xenophobia close at hand. Roots and identity don't necessarily lead to parochialism, nationalism, insularity, and hate. They can actually lead to a very vibrant civil society. The idea that it might not—and did not in the recent past—is not a reason to be afraid of difference.