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Local vs. National: Commemorative Practices of Jewish Cultural Heritage in Lower and Upper Silesia

Abstract

The article examines how Jewish heritage is commemorated in the cities of Lower and Upper Silesia, Poland. After World War II, these parts of Poland experienced a selective representation of its past, in which Polish narratives were prioritized, often overshadowing the German presence. Through a comparative analysis, this research examines recent initiatives, including the opening of the Upper Silesian Jews House of Remembrance in Gliwice and the activities of various organizations in Wrocław dedicated to preserving local Jewish history. Using qualitative methodologies (in-depth interviews with museum staff and direct observations), as well as the examination of various texts, this study analyzes how nationalism shapes the representation of the Holocaust in different organizations and highlights the challenges in effectively educating the public about the shared history of Poles and German Jews in contemporary Poland.

Keywords: Jewish heritage, Lower Silesia, Upper Silesia, Gliwice, Wrocław, museums.

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Introduction

While there is no shortage of specialized literature on Upper and Lower Silesia, Polish researchers and cultural creators are now "rediscovering" this region for a broader audience.[1] For many years, regional memory – shaped by the foundational myths of postwar Poland – has overshadowed the heritage of the area's earlier inhabitants, in an area now referred to as a "formerly German" region.[2] Local activists have long advocated for the inclusion of German-Jewish monuments in Polish guidebooks (Walerjański, 2011, p. 105). Today, researchers strive to acknowledge the multilayered nature of this heritage and find an effective way of "recycling the German ghost."[3] Is it possible to not hear the voices of such ghosts in today's Poland?[4] And what role does Jewish heritage play in this quest?

Silesia is a historical borderland region in Central Europe that now spans parts of Czechia, Germany, and Poland.[5] Power over these lands passed from one state to another many times over the years. Seeking political independence, the region broke into two separate parts in the 15th century, i.e. Lower and Upper Silesia. The history of Jews in this region dates back to at least the Middle Ages. A Jewish community existed in Wrocław (the largest city of Lower Silesia, known as Breslau until 1945) as early as the 13th century, as evidenced by a tombstone dated 1203 – the oldest preserved tombstone in Poland (Wodziński, 1996, pp. 167–170; Ziątkowski, 2016, p. 254). The oldest document about Jews in Upper Silesia dates back to 1226 (Kubit, 2019, p. 14). Jews who lived in the historical Silesia constituted an integral part of the communi-

[1] See e.g. the novel *Drach* (Twardoch, 2014). See also *Kajś* (Rokita, 2020), a nonfiction book on Upper Silesia which received the prestigious Nike Literary Award in 2021 from both the jury and readers. Also: the thematic issue of the Kraków quarterly *Herito*: *Odra / The Oder* ("Odra / The Oder", 2023); *Odrzania* (Rokita, 2023); *Chachary. Ludowa historia Górnego Śląska* (Zalega, 2024); *Pamiętniki kobiet z rodzin górniczych* (Glosowitz, 2024).

[2] Karolina Kuszyk popularized the term "formerly German" (Polish: *poniemieckie*) through her widely discussed and award-winning book of the same name (Kuszyk, 2019).

[3] See e.g. the project Recycling the German Ghosts: https://spectralrecycling.ispan.edu.pl/ (*Recycling the German Ghosts*, n.d.), which refers to Derrida's concept of hauntology.

[4] I ask this question in reference to various contemporary acts of vandalism targeting the Jewish community in Wrocław, which include tombstones demolished in the Jewish cemetery in 2021; a destroyed cemetery wall at 51 Lotnicza St.; a hanukkiah destroyed in the city center on Hanukkah, as well as an antisemitic inscription that was written on the synagogue in December 2023.

[5] Silesian identity is a subject of extensive research among political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians. See e.g. Bjork et al. (2016); Kamusella (2016); Nijakowski (2002).

ty, and the polysystem of Jewish culture interacted with other systems through contact, influence, and exchange. Before World War II, Jews living in Lower and Upper Silesia identified primarily as German citizens, despite the growing public hostility they faced. As a result of World War II and the Holocaust, the region lost its Jewish inhabitants, although traces of their presence prevailed, despite the extensive destruction. Within Poland's new postwar borders, the inhabitants of this area distanced themselves from the region's German heritage. As a result, in the context of these new sociopolitical conditions, Jewish heritage faced (at least) a double exclusion: It was regarded as both part of the unwanted German heritage and part of the forgotten Jewish heritage which was left without heirs (see e.g. Friedla, 2017). During the times of the Polish People's Republic, historical narratives focused on the communist party and emphasized Polish history, resulting in a selective and biased representation of the past and the suppression of the German presence in the region. However, the approach towards German heritage in Poland has since evolved.

In this article, I investigate how the cities of Lower and Upper Silesia, two neighboring regions in Poland, commemorate their Jewish heritage. These areas in the southwestern part of Poland represent an often-overlooked aspect of Polish memory that rarely receives attention from researchers. My comparative analysis focuses on recent activities undertaken in two cities: Gliwice, the site of the Upper Silesian Jews House of Remembrance (opened in 2016), and Wrocław, the historical capital of Silesia and capital of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship, where many different organizations work to preserve local Jewish history. Gliwice is located in Upper Silesia, a densely populated urban agglomeration, and although it is not the largest city in the region, it is the only one with an independent museum entirely devoted to the history of Jews. This study covers the museums and commemorative practices of Poland, although I am aware that there are museums in Germany focusing on Silesia as well.[6] Also, the study does not cover institutions based in towns that are currently located within the administrative borders of the Silesian Voivodeship but do not belong to the historical territory of Silesia. I therefore exclude institutions in Zagłębie Dąbrowskie/Dąbrowa Basin (for more, see Januszewska, 2011),[7] as this area was not under the direct influence of the German authorities.

[6] Foremost is the Upper Silesian Museum (German: Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum) in Ratingen and the Silesian Museum in Görlitz (German: Schlesisches Museum zu Görlitz).

[7] The largest Jewish communities in the Dąbrowa Basin were located in Będzin and Sosnowiec. Since 2009, the Brama Cukermana Foundation has focused on the heritage of local Polish Jews in Będzin in its diverse work, see *Fundacja Brama Cukermana* (n.d.).

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The events of World War II and the Holocaust have played a crucial role in shaping the memory model of the Polish state and its national community. This collective memory exists not only at the national level, but is also intertwined with various memory practices (Szacka, 2006). The commemoration of the Holocaust has its own distinctive dynamics in various national and local contexts (Manchin, 2019). During the 1990s and the early 21st century, the Holocaust became a European "negative founding myth," extending its influence beyond Western Europe to former Eastern Bloc members (see e.g. Levy & Sznaider, 2002). The transnational Holocaust narrative has become the starting point of many educational programs around the world and continues to influence contemporary ways of thinking about the past (Macdonald, 2021, p. 289). Researchers of Lower and Upper Silesia emphasize that the changes resulting from World War II in this region are important because they raise questions about the continuity of the historical memory of the region's inhabitants. There is also a strong belief among inhabitants that World War II completely ended Jewish life in the area (see e.g. Pospieszałowska, 2021, pp. 244, 259). Despite Poland's current portrayal as a paradigmatic illustration of a homogeneous, exclusive national and cultural identity, scholars note that in various locations, rather than adhering to a static framework of memory conflict, Poland also offers dynamic models of remembrance, such as memory frictions (Kobielska & Siewior, 2023). Examples of such memory can be found in the present text.

The starting point of my research is museums in Lower and Upper Silesia. Lorenzo Posocco (2022) emphasized that museums, beyond their typology and subject matter, serve as symbolic representations of the nation-state. He posited that within a world dominated by nation-states and nationalist ideologies (Malešević, 2019), all museums and their stakeholders, including personnel, directors, and curators, are inherently influenced by nationalism. It is crucial to study Holocaust museums within a comparative and interdisciplinary framework, as the Holocaust, and particularly the process of its commemoration, involves transnational, national, and local interactions. This text explores the connections between Polish, German, Jewish, and Silesian heritage, while also addressing how nationalism influences the representation of the Holocaust in Lower and Upper Silesian museums.

Museums were central to the history politics implemented by the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), the ruling party in the years 2005–2007 and 2015–2023. Museums are institutions with a long-lasting im-

pact, and the ethnocentric perspective embedded in their messages appears to resonate with a large part of Polish society. The number of history museums in Poland has increased in recent years, and some of them have proved controversial due to their authoritarian nature (Żychlińska & Fontana, 2016). Polish memory researcher Maria Kobielska describes recently established institutions as "memory devices," highlighting their intricate operational mechanisms, including the organization of exhibitions, utilization of diverse multimedia, and implementation of various complex activities (Kobielska, 2017). Hence, in this study I analyze the present state in Lower and Upper Silesia, including new museums and recent activities related to the commemoration of Jewish heritage. In Poland there is no tradition of teaching about Polish-Jewish heritage and shared history (Kania, 2017, p. 17). Consequently, in Poland, as in other regions of Central and Eastern Europe, the memory of the Holocaust is susceptible to distortion and political manipulation (Zisook, 2023, p. 25). The aftermath of PiS's second electoral victory in October 2015 was marked by a series of highly contentious controversies related to changes in education, culture, and law.[8] Although the October 2023 elections resulted in a change of power, this did not automatically cause an immediate shift in the field of commemoration.

This study falls within the realm of cultural and social studies.[9] It presents an in-depth examination using many qualitative methodologies, including direct observation, one-on-one in-depth interviews conducted with museum personnel and staff from other institutions, transcript analysis, and the examination of various texts as well as audio and visual elements. It is a case study which enables contemporary phenomena to be examined through detailed contextual analysis, focusing on a limited number of events and relationships within the studied environment (Simons, 2009, p. 21). I invited representatives from various institutions in the region – local government, national bodies, educational institutions, and NGOs – to discuss the issue of heritage commemoration in Poland, which is important in their work. Not everyone responded to the invitation. The aim was to juxtapose different viewpoints on the necessity and potential avenues for commemorating Jewish heritage in the region. I employed a semi-structured approach in interviewing the participants, using open-ended questions as outlined in the research. Each inter-

[8] For example, changes in Holocaust education in Polish primary schools resulting from the post-2015 nationalist approach, promoted by PiS as part of its "politics of history," are discussed in detail in Stec et al. (2024).

[9] The research was conducted between October 2022 and March 2023, and between December 2023 and March 2024.

view lasted from one to two hours. This method offers greater flexibility and autonomy for respondents compared to closed questions. The objective was to enable participants to freely discuss facts and events that might not have been initially considered by the researcher. In this article, my interest extends beyond the shaping and presentation of Jewish heritage in the analyzed institutions, to also include the conceptualization of the social role of these institutions and their presence in the public space. The interpretation framework of the presented research is determined by considerations from heritage studies, museum studies, and memory studies.

Jews in Upper Silesia: Example of a Positive History

Upper Silesia has historically been a region marked by the coexistence of many cultures, traditions and spheres of influence (Germans, Jews, Poles, Czechs, Silesians, Roma). Jews came to this borderland area from the territory of modern-day Germany and Czechia, enticed by trade opportunities. In 1910 there were 415,926 Jews living in the German Empire, which amounted to 1% of the total population. Before the outbreak of World War II, Jews lived in almost every town in the current Silesian Voivodeship. The pressure exerted by national movements that emerged in Europe from the 19th century also pushed Jews towards self-determination. The majority of the Jewish population of Upper Silesia identified with the culture of the German state, as evidenced by the Jews who joined the German army and voted for the German option in the plebiscite of March 1921. When part of Upper Silesia was incorporated into Poland in 1922, many Jews identifying with the German and German-Jewish cultures left the Polish part of Silesia. They were replaced by Jews from Galicia and the former Congress Poland, who arrived in Silesia in large numbers looking for work and better living conditions (Walerjański, 2011, pp. 106–107). The differences between Polish and German Jews were significant, and the two groups influenced each other.[10] German Jews in Silesia were less numerous and had a wide range of professions, which facilitated social advancement and wealth accumulation. This group had a strong influence on the region's industrial development, possessed significant capital strength, and was politically and socially active.

Although various aspects of the fate of Upper Silesian Jews during the Holocaust have been discussed by many researchers, a comprehensive mono-

[10] The image of Jewish society in Silesia consists of at least four groups: German Jews living in German Silesia, Polish Jews living in German Silesia, German Jews living in Polish Silesia, and Polish Jews living in Polish Silesia.

graphic study of this topic is still to be written (cf. Węcki, 2014). It should be noted that the first years of Nazi rule were relatively peaceful for German Jews, including those from Upper Silesia. This resulted from the application of the Geneva Convention, which covered these areas and protected minorities until 1937. Then, antisemitic laws issued after 1933 in the Third Reich came into force in the post-plebiscite area, depriving local Jews of protection. The next phase of the persecution of German Jews was the 1938 pogrom known as Kristallnacht, seen as a prelude to World War II in these areas (cf. Kaczmarek, 2018). Those Jews who were unable to emigrate from the German part of Upper Silesia before the war were sent to concentration camps in 1942–1943 and were murdered there. Those identified as Mischlinge (half-breeds, according to the Nuremberg Laws) or who were married to non-Jewish people remained in Upper Silesia. Some of them survived the war (Węcki, 2014, p. 307). After the tragic experiences of World War II, new people began to arrive in these areas, now under the rule of the Polish administration, from the eastern areas of the former Second Polish Republic as well as northern and central Poland. These changes were part of the difficult process of creating a new society and establishing local structures for Polish unions, associations, political parties and cultural institutions in the new circumstances. The surviving Silesian Jews did not manage to rebuild their religious, social and political life in these postwar sociopolitical conditions, although they engaged in rebuilding attempts in various Silesian towns (cf. Gołasz, 2014).

Nowadays, there are no Upper Silesian cities or towns among the most popular tourist destinations in Poland (*10 Najbardziej popularnych miast*, 2013). The region's landscape suffered damage from local heavy industry, and the difficulty attracting tourists is a big challenge for Upper Silesian cultural institutions. It also raises the question of whom the regional cultural offer is addressed to, especially when – as in the case of German Jews – there are no direct heirs in the area. Although Katowice, the capital of the voivodeship, is home to the only Jewish community in the region (consisting of 140 people as of 2021; see Ciecieląg et al., 2022, p. 250) and hosts other Jewish organizations, it is a small community with limited visibility in the public sphere. There is no museum dedicated to the Holocaust in Upper Silesia, and there are few museums that showcase Jewish heritage as part of their permanent exhibits. Before I discuss the museum in Gliwice, I would like to explain how this particular museum compares to other institutions in the region.

The Jewish heritage in Upper Silesia is well documented and primarily includes cemeteries, synagogues and funeral homes preserved in varying conditions. However, it is not uncommon to come across towns where there are

hardly any material traces of the Jewish community left, even though some Jewish families lived there for many generations. World War II represents a complete cut-off point, and, as noted by Marta Paszko (curator of one of the regional exhibitions devoted to Jews), current residents of the region are afraid to speak on "the (still sensitive) topic of Jews" (Paszko, 2014, p. 653). There are a few institutions in the region that devote exhibition space to local Jewish heritage, but they are a relatively new phenomenon. They include the Museum in Rybnik and the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom. In 2012, the first of these institutions mounted an exhibition entitled *Rybniccy Żydzi* [*The Jews of Rybnik*]. When presenting the concept, curator Marta Paszko drew attention to the fact that when contemporary inhabitants have no knowledge or memory of a given community, the function of a museum is not so much to preserve memory as to evoke it. At the same time, exhibition curators must take into account the need to "constantly prove that there is a point to their unprofitable activities" that focus on a community which is hardly present in the collective memory of the local inhabitants (Paszko, 2014, p. 651).

In 2017, the Upper Silesian Museum in Bytom was gifted some objects from the Bytom House of Prayer (from the defunct prayer room of the local Jewish community). The museum obtained a grant from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and organized a number of events that were very popular among the city's residents (Pospieszałowska, 2021, pp. 245–246). In 2021, the museum opened a separate room with a permanent exhibition titled *Ślad pokoleń. Od synagogi do Żydowskiego Domu Modlitwy w Bytomiu* [*Trace of Generations: From the Synagogue to the Jewish House of Prayer in Bytom*]. It can be said that in both cases, museums as institutions played an important role in the process of rebuilding and discovering history. They have undoubtedly also taken steps to foster positive attitudes towards local history and heritage among current residents.

The situation is somewhat different in Katowice, where there is no separate museum dedicated to Jewish heritage. In order to see whether information about Jewish heritage is present in local museums, I visited the Silesian Museum. Located in the post-industrial area of the former Katowice Coal Mine and, since 2015, housed in a new, modern headquarters, the museum is dedicated to the history of the region. Its permanent historical exhibition *Światło historii. Górny Śląsk na przestrzeni dziejów* [*The Light of History: Upper Silesia Through the Ages*][11] references the area's Jewish inhabitants, but the information is scattered and not exhaustive. A persistent visitor would be able to pick up the most important information about the contributions of the Jew-

[11] Juliane Tomann (2016) presents a critical voice analyzing the permanent exhibition.

ish community to the development of the region, the fate of this community, and its local specificity. However, from a conversation with one of the substantive staff members (who requested to remain anonymous), I learnt that the museum does not organize additional events related to Jewish history or the Holocaust, although it has a modest collection of Judaica that it keeps in storage (Anonymized interview, January 31, 2024). My interlocutor said that the current atmosphere in the museum is not conducive to any discussions on Jewish heritage. Previous attempts to broach the subject were described by the management as "awakening demons" (to quote my interlocutor) and suppressed at an early stage. Jewish heritage, marked by the "German stigma," is considered difficult and unnecessary for the institution's current activities. The museum also tries not to accept objects attesting to the German roots of Silesia into its collection. According to the employee, there is strict censorship in the museum, which does not allow the broaching of topics that do not fit the centralized, officially imposed and unified image of Poland. The employee claimed that this approach began when the current director, Maria Czarnecka, was first appointed to the post (without going through a competition procedure) in 2021.[12] She had worked at the National Bank of Poland for many years and had no experience in managing a museum facility. The museum operates under the authority of the voivodeship, and the current marshal (since 2018), Jakub Chełstowski, was a candidate of the PiS party. The choice of director testifies to the ruling party's influence on cultural policy implementation in Poland, through the appointment of trusted people, who will implement the "expected" ideologized political program, to important positions in Polish institutions. From the interview, it can be concluded that the museum is used as a tool to contribute to the construction of national identities, with a strong "national priority" (Posocco & Watson, 2022). The museum appears here as part of "hegemonic authorized heritage discourses," an important component in nation-building (Smith, 2006), and is deeply linked to state cultural agencies. According to my interlocutor, there is an interest in Jewish topics among the employees of the research and exhibition departments, but no one takes them up as projects because they have zero chance of getting implemented.[13]

[12] The Silesian Museum exemplifies a larger trend unfolding in Eastern Europe, where far-right parties assume control of prominent cultural institutions, replacing art organization directors with political appointees. For more, see e.g. Archey (2022, pp. 23–24). For more about the controversy surrounding Czarnecka's work, see Osadnik (2023). After the completion of my research, in March 2024, it was officially announced that Czarnecka had been dismissed from the position of director.

[13] A large role in the protection of cultural heritage in the region, including the care and protection of monuments and historical sites, is played by individual people – activ-

The Upper Silesian Jews House of Remembrance (hereinafter referred to as the House of Remembrance) in Gliwice is located in a former Jewish funeral preparation house which was opened to visitors in 2016, after a comprehensive renovation. The building is a large neo-Gothic historical building from 1903, which testifies to the wealth of the community at that time (Fig. 1). It was designed by Max Fleischer, a Viennese architect, co-creator of the new Vienna town hall and many synagogues, almost all of which were destroyed during Kristallnacht. The building in Gliwice is his only project in Silesia (for more, see Kubit, 2018). It is one of the best-preserved and most impressive Jewish buildings in the region, next to which is a cemetery that dates back to 1903. The house and cemetery remained in operation until World War II. At the end of the war, the funeral preparation house was taken over by the German authorities and was used as a military warehouse; it was not significantly damaged (Kubit, 2018, p. 69). In January 1945, the main routes of "death marches," the pedestrian evacuation of prisoners from KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, ran through Upper Silesia. The cemetery was reopened in 1946 and is still in operation today, although it is rarely used (Kubit, 2018, p. 74).[14] The building was used until the 1970s, and then began to fall into disrepair. Various social groups and individual activists took steps to save the facility. It was entered into the register of historical monuments in 2003, and in 2007 the Jewish Community handed it over to the City of Gliwice. In 2012, the city began its renovation entirely funded from its own budget. The House of Remembrance is one of five branches of the Museum in Gliwice, a municipal museum operating since 1905, first as the Oberschlesische Museum (Upper Silesian Museum), and, after 1945, under its current name.

In 2018, the permanent exhibition *Żydzi na Górnym Śląsku* [*Jews in Upper Silesia*] was opened at the House of Remembrance. It presents the history of the local Jewish community[15] from the first settlements in the Middle Ages to modern times. It depicts and problematizes the social, economic and religious life of the Jewish community, using documents, a rich photographic database, Judaica, and multimedia tools. Of particular interest are the exhibition's historical works by Jewish researchers (history of the settlement, Upper Silesian cities), which can be considered expressions of the growing regional awareness about Upper Silesian Jews. The exhibition's curator, supported by

ists and enthusiasts (e.g. historian Sławomir Pastuszka; *O mnie*, n.d.), as well as NGOs (e.g. Stowarzyszenie Gliwicka 66 in Tarnowskie Góry; see *Gliwicka 66*, n.d.).

[14] In Gliwice, there is also an older Jewish historical cemetery on Na Piasku Street.

[15] This is Upper Silesia within the 19th-century Opole Government Region, i.e. without Cieszyn and Opavian Silesia, which were part of the Austrian state at the time.

Figure 1. The Upper Silesian Jews House of Remembrance.
Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska (2022)

many Jewish history specialists, is Bożena Kubit, a well-known local historian and author of many local exhibitions on the region's history. The exhibition was also organized under the honorary auspices of Agata Kornhauser-Duda, Spouse of the President of the Republic of Poland, whose grandfather is buried in the adjacent cemetery.

The Holocaust is prominently featured at the exhibition, taking up the penultimate room, and the information presented there allows for the reconstruction of the region-typical historical framework (e.g. the Geneva Convention, Kristallnacht), which is different from the history of central Poland. Maria Kobielska and Kinga Siewior, researchers specializing in the issue of memory in Polish museums, astutely noted the exceptional nature of the Gliwice museum: It tackles the heritage and history of the German-Jewish community within the framework of a modern Polish museum. The museum's narrative focuses on people who were both Jewish and German, and who both identified and were identified by others as such. Within the Polish cultural context, this signifies the integration of two significant figures of other-

ness (Kobielska & Siewior, 2023, p. 119). The researchers interpret the Gliwice museum as an implicated subject or implicated space, but direct inquiries regarding their potential involvement in the narrative appear to be sidestepped or downplayed. The narrative is crafted to portray the Polish community in a relatively favorable manner, as modern caretakers of the region, relieving them of any significant accountability for its historical legacy (Kobielska & Siewior, 2023, p. 122).

Are the researchers right in saying that contemporary visitors have no chance to feel connected to this heritage, seeing it as a neutral, depersonalized history, told from a suitably distant perspective? If a visitor to the House of Remembrance limits their visit solely to the permanent exhibition, this might be their conclusion. The activities of the House of Remembrance raise questions about how we practice heritage, especially in a small, regional, intimate museum with two permanent employees, and in a city that, unlike larger cities, does not attract many tourists. The permanent exhibition at the House of Remembrance is primarily descriptive in nature and its main goal is to convey knowledge. It is the first step, an introduction to seeing the local heritage and its richness in a broader perspective. The multilayered nature of this heritage requires and encourages us not to limit its exploration to the framework of a traditional permanent exhibition. I think that it is worth looking at the activities of this museum as a cultural process that plays out on different levels and, in my opinion, makes this institution unique. Heritage is not only a place, but also everything that happens in that place, as well as the emotions and experiences associated with it (cf. Smith, 2023). Let us take a closer look at this cultural process.

As the head of the House of Remembrance, Karolina Jakoweńko,[16] declares, "…the memory of the former inhabitants should be part of our contemporary identity, i.e. the identity of the contemporary inhabitants of Gliwice" (Jakoweńko, 2017, p. 7). Jakoweńko has no doubts about the current position of the inhabitants of former Gleiwitz, which is why she states the following: "… we are the heirs of the legacy left behind by those who have already passed away. We owe them a place in our memory" (Jakoweńko, 2017, p. 7). My conversation with Jakoweńko made it clear to me from the start that she had extensive activist experience, was aware of her mission and knew that she was working with a difficult heritage (as defined by Macdonald, 2008). She was also not blind to the various problems that result from the location of the city of Gliwice and the museum itself.

[16] Jakoweńko is also co-founder of the Brama Cukermana Foundation operating in Będzin (Zagłębie Dąbrowskie), so she works with the heritage of both Polish and German Jews.

In the context of the difficult heritage, it is worth noting a number of additional activities that take place at the museum which – as Jakoweńko puts it – "breathe life into the institution, transforming it into a living space" (K. Jakoweńko, interview, December 7, 2022). Gliwice residents will rarely make repeated visits to the permanent exhibition, but they show up for other events accompanying the museum's activities. The permanent exhibition, as the institution's showcase and an information base about the Jews of Upper Silesia, is intended for an outside audience interested in getting to know this specific place and its history. The additional activities are intended for the inhabitants of Gliwice who are willing to ask questions and are interested in working with memory and existing heritage. First and foremost, they include temporary exhibitions, which rely on the involvement of the region's inhabitants and are often directly inspired by them. For example, the series *Miniatury o Żydach z Górnego Śląska* [*Miniatures About Jews from Upper Silesia*], first initiated in 2021, is devoted to people, issues and events included in the permanent exhibition, expanding on or supplementing its topics and themes. The first person highlighted in the series was Artur Kochmann (1864–1943) – an alderman and long-time chairman of the Jewish community whose death marks the symbolic end of the Jewish community in Gliwice.[17] Another was Artur Neubauer (1910–1963), a local illusionist whose daughters responded to the museum's appeal to share their family history (see *Artur Neubauer*, 2022). They donated family memorabilia to the museum's collection, which made it possible to use them as the basis for the exhibition. Creating the museum has become a social activity, likely motivated by a sense of connection with the region or city as well as a sense of kinship with and obligation towards one's ancestors (cf. Giergiel & Taczyńska, 2023).

Secondly, the museum organizes meetings with outstanding specialists and artists dealing with Jewish issues, including the Holocaust, at the House of Remembrance, during which residents of Gliwice can engage the invited guests in a synergistic dialogue and ask difficult and uncomfortable questions, thereby bringing the idea of reflection within critical heritage studies to life (Stobiecka, 2023, p. 16). According to Jakoweńko, these meetings have a regular audience that turns up for them in relatively large numbers. Hence, it can be concluded that such activities also help build and strengthen social bonds, which are a very important part of the cultural process (K. Jakoweńko, interview, December 7, 2022).

[17] Artur Kochmann was arrested on December 24, 1943 and deported to KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he died. See *Miniatury o Żydach* (2021).

Thirdly, the Gliwice museum publishes works dealing with topics related to the region's Jewish heritage. As an example, it is worth mentioning the book *Śladami Żydów z Górnego Śląska* [*In the Footsteps of Jews from Upper Silesia*], "a guide through the void" (Pomykalska & Pomykalski, 2019, p. 16), a catalog of the most important places related to the Jewish cultural heritage of Upper Silesia, as well as an album titled *Synagogi na Górnym Śląsku* [*Synagogues in Upper Silesia*] (Kubit et al., 2021),[18] which was first created as a publication accompanying the main exhibition at the House of Remembrance. It is a catalog of Upper Silesian synagogues – preserved ones, ones that were demolished during World War II, and those that were destroyed after the war.

Let us take a look at the issue of visitors. According to the information provided to me by Jakoweńko (K. Jakoweńko, interview, December 7, 2022), the House of Remembrance is visited annually by 3,500 to 4,000 tourists, 10% of which consists of foreign groups (e.g. groups of educators from Yad Vashem).[19] Students from Polish schools represent a significant share of the total number, and 90% of them come from Gliwice. In addition to Jakoweńko, there is only one person that works at the museum on a permanent basis. Both Jakoweńko and the other person perform substantive and administrative tasks alike, and the museum also collaborates with a number of people on various projects on a project-specific basis. As the House of Remembrance is located in a less visited region, in a smaller city and outside the city center, it has difficulties attracting visitors. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum is located only about 60 km from Gliwice and can be seen as the Gliwice facility's "competitor" in this field. Because KL Auschwitz-Birkenau is a symbol of the tragedy of Jews in Poland and an institution with enormous research and educational facilities, it is often chosen as the destination for class trips, e.g. as part of history lessons. All these factors add up to a significant challenge for the Gliwice museum's operations. However, it is also worth noting that perhaps the institution's peripheral location has protected it from the government's political interference, allowing it to remain on the sidelines of the main efforts in the politics of memory.

Analyzing the activities of the House of Remembrance, I interpret the sidelining (but not abandonment) of a more critical approach to heritage in favor of an affirmative one as a deliberate step towards alignment with the engaged humanities and Ewa Domańska's rescue history project. The project diverges from the late 20th-century method of examining history, which

[18] This type of catalog is missing for many regions in Poland, including Lower Silesia.

[19] This is the data as of 2022; since 2023, the museum no longer maintains such statistics.

often dwells on calamities and conclusions, aligning with endeavors aimed at dispelling negativity and advocating for empowering concepts in order to establish room for alternative future perspectives. Thus, it embodies a "positive history" approach, emphasizing a future-facing orientation and crafting a historical narrative that fosters potential for a future depicted in a more optimistic manner compared to the doomsday scenarios prevalent in Positivism (Domańska, 2014, p. 22). I perceive this caring for what has survived, commemorating what has disappeared, and constantly asking questions, as a solid initial strategy for a Polish public institution to adopt in its heritage work in this region. The museum's purpose is to foster experiences and knowledge that promote healing over harm, and to bolster the advancement of more socially equitable societies (Lehrer, 2023, p. 16). At this stage (in a still relatively young institution), it becomes impossible to assess the extent to which the local is integral to the national within a broader state model. Currently, the process that can be observed locally is an ongoing process of constructing a sense of belonging, which will be time-consuming and filled with numerous challenges.

Wrocław: From National to Local Memory and Back?

As the capital of Lower Silesia, Breslau/Wrocław holds a special place in Jewish history.[20] In the 1920s, the city had a population of over 550,000 and boasted the third-largest Jewish community in Germany (Spielvogel, 2022, p. 100). Prior to 1933, Breslau was a vibrant hub of German-Jewish life, with a diverse community of over 23,000 members who made significant contributions to the region's cultural and social fabric. This thriving community supported centers of Jewish higher learning (such as the Judisch-Theologisches Seminar[21]), two synagogues, schools, hospitals, newspapers, and various cultural institutions (see e.g. Ziątkowski, 2010). The turning point in the life of Silesian Jews came in 1933: The National Socialists came to power in Germany, and Breslau became their political stronghold with substantial NSDAP support. The number of Jews declined steadily as their repression gradually increased. During that period, Breslau was also affected by the nationwide pogrom against Jews (Kristallnacht) that took place during the night of November 9–10, 1938 and is still commemorated to this day. The New Synagogue,

[20] For more on Jewish history, see e.g. Ziątkowski (1998, 2000).

[21] The Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, founded in 1854 on the initiative of Abraham Geiger and the Jonas Fränckel Foundation, was the first modern scientific institution in Central Europe educating rabbis and other teachers. To learn more about the tradition of academic Jewish studies in Wrocław, see Wodziński and Tworek (2023).

an impressive neo-Romanesque building designed by Edwin Oppler, was set on fire and blown up that night. Still, by the fall of 1939, there were approximately 11,000 Jews in Breslau alone. The outbreak of the war brought mass deportations and ultimately led to the annihilation of the Jews' rich cultural and European heritage by 1944.[22]

In 1945, the German city of Breslau became part of the newly established Polish state. Renamed Wrocław, it experienced rapid migration due to forced resettlements, resulting in an influx of new inhabitants. As noted by Katharina Friedla (2017), the history of Breslau/Wrocław reflects the tumultuous events of the 20th century: from racially motivated nationalism to the tragic mass murder of Jews, the chaos of war, and the subsequent upheavals of flight, expulsion, and totalitarian rule. For German-Jewish survivors from Breslau, the liberation of May 1945 marked a new tense chapter fraught with fresh traumas. Despite having endured the horrors of the National Socialist regime in hiding, concentration camps, and forced labor, after the war they faced further persecution and mistreatment at the hands of both Soviet forces and the Polish administration, much like their fellow German citizens. When the German inhabitants of Wrocław were forced to resettle between 1945 and 1948, German Jews faced a second wave of persecution, expropriation, and expulsion.

Following World War II, Breslau (now Wrocław) and Lower Silesia were included in the so-called "Recovered Territories" – a name referring to the eastern regions of Germany that became part of the newly established Polish state. The border change resulted in a large-scale population exchange throughout the region (Douglas, 2012). In postwar Poland, many people found themselves displaced, deterritorialized, and dislocated, without a sense of belonging and fearing further potential displacements (Nycz, 2013, p. 6). Thousands of people came to the "Recovered Territories" from the eastern part of prewar Poland, which had been incorporated into the western republics of the Soviet Union, as well as from central Poland. Approximately 1,600 German Jews returned to Wrocław in 1945 and 1946, but they soon emigrated again. Facing the stark contrast between the former German city of Breslau and the newly Polish city of Wrocław, and burdened with the vulnerable status of both Holocaust survivors and German nationals, they encountered violence from Soviet soldiers and Polish police, as well as hostility from Polish settlers (Jabłońska, 2023, p. 191).

Shortly after the end of hostilities, the Polish authorities decided to concentrate most of the surviving Jews in Lower Silesia. The idea of Jewish settle-

[22] For more, see e.g. Tausk (1977); Połomski (1986).

ment in Lower Silesia resulted in the influx of numerous groups of Jews, and the region became home to approximately half of Poland's Jewish population, most of whom lived openly within organized Jewish communities, supported by a robust network of institutions. This openness set many Lower Silesian locations apart from the numerous towns and villages in central Poland where the Jewish presence was often concealed (Kijek, 2024, p. 418).[23] The process of Jewish settlement lasted until 1949/1950 – years which marked another turning point in the life of the Jewish community in Poland. The establishment of a full-blown communist dictatorship and restrictions on the functioning of Jewish institutions resulted in further departures of Jews from Poland (Kijek, 2024, p. 422). The ongoing emigrations during the postwar period, which lasted until the antisemitic campaign of March 1968, contributed to a gradual decrease in the Jewish presence in Wrocław.

Poland's annexation of the western territories, including Wrocław, necessitated the establishment of legitimacy for Polish settlement and the creation of the city's new founding myth. The communist authorities promoted their own historical narrative, centered around the ideology of reclaiming the "Recovered Territories" and cultivating antagonistic relations with Germany. Consequently, in the postwar reconstruction of Wrocław – a city that had suffered extensive destruction during the war – its German heritage was gradually forgotten and erased (see e.g. Thum, 2008). In this political context, the German-Jewish heritage did not align with the ideological expectations of the authorities, who sought to emphasize Polish martyrdom and heroic narratives. The omission of the Jewish community's plight during the wartime occupation exemplified a broader pattern of suppressing Holocaust commemoration during the People's Republic of Poland era (see e.g. Forecki, 2013; Wóycicka, 2009). After the war, no scientific institution was established that could continue the prewar traditions of Breslau's Jewish studies. Archival collections of the Jewish community in Breslau were quickly relocated to Warsaw, where they remain to this day, kept in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (Wodziński & Tworek, 2023, p. 52). If Jewish heritage was in any way commemorated in Wrocław at all, the main focus was on the heroic actions of the fighters from the Warsaw Ghetto. This led to the establishment of Ghetto Heroes' Square in Wrocław in 1946 (initially, in the immediate postwar period, it had been referred to as Jewish Square).[24] The centralization of memory

[23] For more on Jewish settlement in Lower Silesia, see Szaynok (2000); Kijek (2018).

[24] The heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto are commemorated in the names of streets and squares in many Lower Silesian cities (Włodarczyk & Kichler, 2019, pp. 113–114) as well as other Polish cities (e.g. Taczyńska, 2024, p. 334).

during the People's Republic of Poland era is further evidenced by a monument unveiled in Wrocław on April 19, 1963, the 20th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It features inscriptions in both Polish and Yiddish: Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto (Włodarczyk & Kichler, 2019, pp. 114–115). In Wrocław, the cultural continuity of heritage was broken in the postwar years. The written word, shaped by a number of historians' narratives (cf. Ziątkowski, 2016, p. 252), remained the primary vehicle for historical memory. Despite the lack of institutional support, individual researchers persisted in studying various aspects of the history and culture of Jews in this region (Wodziński & Tworek, 2023, p. 53). The situation began to change in the 1980s, when growing opposition to the communist regime led to an increased interest in topics which had been discriminated against by the communist authorities, including the history of minority cultures. Jewish life began to be revived in Wrocław, with the Jewish community engaging in new activities. This resulted in various forms of cooperation between the Jewish community, other Jewish organizations, and scholars of Jewish history and culture (Wodziński & Tworek, 2023, p. 54).[25]

In 1998, the Monument to the Victims of Kristallnacht was unveiled at the site of the New Synagogue which had been burned down in 1938. The monument consists of three tombstones, each inscribed in three languages: Polish, German, and Hebrew. It was funded by the Jewish community and Germany's Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kichler, 2023, p. 556; Włodarczyk & Kichler, 2019, p. 74). In 1999, a plaque was placed in the courtyard of the city's surviving synagogue, the White Stork Synagogue, informing visitors that Wrocław Jews were deported from this place during 1941–1944. The plaque, inscribed in Hebrew, Polish, and German, was funded by the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Włodarczyk & Kichler, 2019, pp. 28–29). In 2008, Wrocław joined the ranks of sites whose former Jewish inhabitants are commemorated with *Stolpersteine* ("stones of memory").[26] The renovation of the White Stork Synagogue, originally built in 1829 and reopened in 2010 (see

[25] It is worth noting that Wrocław is home to one of the most important centers for research on Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe: the Taube Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław. Local topics related to pre-WWII heritage are included in the department's research interests. In 2023, historian Tim Buchen joined the department's team, and his research will focus on the history of Jews in Silesia and Wrocław from the Haskalah to the Holocaust.

[26] The first stone was dedicated to the memory of Breslau-born Edith Stein (1891–1942), see Siemieniec (n.d.). Most recently, on February 19, 2024, at 4 Solny Sq., a ceremony was held to commemorate four people from the Jewish Herz family: Olga, Hilde, Walter and Steffi. Since 2018, this address is also the site of the headquarters of the OP

Kos, 2002), along with the Small Synagogue (2015) and the mikveh (2018), was another important step forward in the city's efforts to commemorate its Jewish heritage. The reopened synagogue now serves as the center of Jewish life in Wrocław. The private Bente Kahan Foundation played a significant role in the restoration process, which is further detailed in subsequent parts of this article. Additionally, since the 1990s, the Museum of Cemetery Art situated on the premises of the 19th-century Jewish cemetery (on Ślężna Street) has been operating in Wrocław as part of the City Museum (Łagiewski, 2004).[27] In 2018, a commemorative plaque was also installed at the Nadodrze Railway Station from which Jews from Wrocław and other Lower Silesian cities and towns were deported by the Nazis in 1941–1944. The plaque was a joint project of the Wrocław City Museum, the Silesian Museum in Goerlitz, the Jewish Community in Wrocław, and the Bente Kahan Foundation.

Although a complete synthesis of the history of Jews in Silesia has yet to be written (Ziątkowski, 2016, p. 251), there is undoubtedly a lot of public activity aimed at disseminating knowledge about Jewish heritage in the region. From time to time, there are even sensational discoveries made in Wrocław,[28] although some of the activities of local Jewish organizations cause controversy.[29] Nonetheless, Barbara Pabjan's (2015) research on Wrocław's collective memory reveals that the lack of cultural continuity with previous inhabitants remains significant to contemporary residents' perception of the city and its past. Negative reactions to commemorating former German residents and limited engagement in history practices indicate that the local historical memory is poor, and local residents tend to prioritize events of national significance over local ones. Moreover, those who feel disconnected from the city's German past typically show little interest in its Jewish history, often associating it with "Germanness." According to the findings from Ewa Banasiewicz-Ossowska's 2019 research on young Wrocław inhabitants' perception of the Jews of Wrocław (Banasiewicz-Ossowska, 2020a, 2020b), the vast majority of them do not know the history of Wrocław's Jews. Their knowledge is fragmentary and superficial, largely based on guesses, stereotypes, and imaginings. To contextualize this, let us consider what knowledge about Jews and,

ENHEIM Foundation, which focuses on contemporary art. For more information, see *OP ENHEIM* (n.d.).

[27] The only cemetery which is still used by the Jewish community is the cemetery at 51 Lotnicza St. (opened in 1902), which also belongs to the Jewish Community in Wrocław.

[28] One example is the discovery of a synagogue complex dating back to the 14th century, uncovered in 2023 ("Poland", 2023).

[29] The most important problem is the Jewish community's plan to sell the plot of land on which the New Synagogue once stood, to a developer, see Maciejewska (2019).

above all, which forms of commemoration of the Holocaust can be found in the urban space in Wrocław.

No museum in Wrocław is exclusively dedicated to the history of World War II, the Holocaust, or the history of Jews, although the necessity of establishing a Jewish Museum in Wrocław consistently arises during discussions at meetings focused on Jewish heritage.[30] In these discussions, the museum appears both as an important democratic institution for learning and debate, and as a space that will clearly commemorate the history of a marginalized group in the public space. In these conversations, the museum is an institution understood rather traditionally, without any discussion about what a "museum" is today or about its contemporary position and role (cf. Szántó, 2020). However, nowadays in Wrocław, topics connected with the Holocaust and the history of Jews are addressed, in dispersed form, in activities undertaken by at least several entities. Still, heritage studies deal not only with officially recognized and sanctioned heritage discourses, but also with the ways in which heritage operates at the local level (Harrison, 2023, p. 37). To understand how this "local landscape" works, we must first see its regional specificity (Pasternak, 2020, p. 63).

In this context, noteworthy museums include the Historical Museum (part of the City Museum), which showcases monuments related to the history of Wrocław. Housed in the impressive baroque-classicist Royal Palace, the museum features collections presented at the permanent multimedia exhibition *1000 Years of Wrocław*, first inaugurated in 2009.[31] As Maciej Łagiewski, the director of the Wrocław City Museum, notes in the exhibition's introductory text, museums in the 21st century aim to represent universal collective memory, and thus the goal of the Wrocław exhibition is to impart "the lesson of the complex and difficult history of a city located in the heart of Europe" (Łagiewski, 2014, p. 9). This emphasizes the museum's efforts to place Wrocław within the broader context of European heritage.

Jewish history is presented in two rooms. The first room delves into various aspects of the social, economic, and cultural life of the Jewish community, portrayed through the lives of specific individuals, until the fall of 1944 when "the Jewish community in Wrocław definitely ceased to exist … with its centuries-long cultural, economic, academic, and political tradition of not only

[30] I mean, for example, discussions conducted as part of the summer school on the history of Lower Silesian Jews (June 30 – July 2, 2023) and during meetings promoting the book *Breslau/Wrocław 1933–1949. Studien zur Topographie der Shoah* in Wrocław (November 23–24, 2023).

[31] For more, see *Muzeum Historyczne* (n.d.).

German but also European significance" (Łagiewski & Okólska, 2014, p. 252), once more highlighting the local heritage's broader implications. The second room, titled *Nazi Dictatorship – World War II*, explores the city's wartime history, including the destruction of nearly 70% of its buildings, the detention of war prisoners and forced laborers, and the history of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp (now Rogoźnica) located in the Lower Silesian Voivodeship.[32] The exhibition at the Historical Museum adopts an informative, distant, and neutral narrative tone, describing the past within the context of European history, primarily rooted in local (rather than national) history. An interesting aspect of the exhibition is the use of the city's current name (Wrocław) and its Latin equivalents in both the Polish and English versions, such as "Wratislavian Jewry," while the German name (Breslau) appears only in the German version. This may have been aimed at forging a stronger historical connection between Wrocław's current inhabitants and the city which, up to 1945, was predominantly German, while also making them more familiar with the Wrocław of today. However, such a decision should be explained in the exhibition's introduction and could serve as an intriguing prelude to discussions on challenging heritage. The shift towards cultural factors shaping the city's identity is clear and appears justified, though not always easily understood in practice. This may give the impression that the museum tries to avoid political context, which could be confusing, especially when it results in phrases such as "Wratislavian art." Semantics wield the power to alter reality (cf. Coen-Uzzielli, 2020, p. 89). Further clarification on these decisions and being more precise in semantics could enrich visitors' understanding of the exhibition's narrative and its engagement with complex heritage issues.

Undoubtedly, the earlier-mentioned White Stork Synagogue is the most significant location representing Jewish Wrocław, and serves as one of its symbols. In 1996, the Jewish Community in Wrocław became the owner of the building[33] and began working on securing funds for its reconstruction from the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation (Kichler, 2023, p. 555). The current good shape of the building could not have been attained without the efforts and fundraising of Bente Kahan. Her contribution was also noted by Tamara Włodarczyk and Jerzy Kichler, authors of a guide to Jewish Wrocław,

[32] Rogoźnica is located approximately 60 km from Wrocław. The camp was operational in 1940–1945, primarily as a labor camp until 1944. The Gross-Rosen State Museum was established in 1983, pursuant to a regulation of the Minister of Culture and Art. For more, see *Gross-Rosen Museum in Rogoźnica* (n.d.).

[33] In the 1970s, the synagogue building was taken over by the Polish authorities and gradually fell into ruin due to neglect and lack of maintenance.

who wrote that: "the reconstruction of the facility was completed thanks to her dedication and the acquisition of funds from the Financial Mechanism of the European Economic Area (EEA), supported by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, in cooperation with the Association of Jewish Religious Communities and the City of Wrocław" (Włodarczyk & Kichler, 2019, p. 31). It is also worth noting the enthusiastic involvement and support from the then mayor of Wrocław, Rafał Dutkiewicz, which was crucial for the endeavors of all the parties involved.[34] The activities of that period were part of a broader societal process of domesticating a foreign city and instilling it with a new identity, as recognized by city authorities and local activists (see Zabłocka-Kos, 2008).[35]

Bente Kahan played a significant role in the development of the White Stork Synagogue. Kahan, a Jewish woman born in Norway, is an artist and a representative of the second generation of Holocaust survivors.[36] In 2006, she established a foundation bearing her name (the Bente Kahan Foundation, FBK).[37] This nongovernmental organization proved to be an important link and mediator between local authorities and the Jewish community. Kahan consciously worked with local heritage from the outset, viewing it as a shared value that unites the inhabitants of the city and the region, regardless of their religious affiliation (B. Kahan, interview, March 4, 2024). She perceives the history of the Holocaust as a burden that affects every person in the world (B. Kahan, 2021, p. 204). The first step in the FBK's activities was the renovation of the White Stork Synagogue building, completed in 2010. The official inauguration was accompanied by a small exhibition entitled *History Reclaimed: Jewish Life in Wrocław and Lower Silesia*, which can still be found in the first gallery of the synagogue (Kahan was the exhibition's project manager). It provides a synthesized though multi-threaded introduction to the

[34] Rafał Dutkiewicz was mayor of Wrocław in 2002–2018. The previous mayor, Bogdan Zdrojewski (1990–2001), also actively supported efforts to create a new identity for the city based on its multicultural tradition. Zdrojewski was a candidate on the list of the Solidarity Citizens' Committee in Wrocław, a nationwide movement of supporters advocating for political changes in Poland. Dutkiewicz ran for the mayoral position with the support of former Mayor Zdrojewski and the Civic Platform (PO) party.

[35] Efforts to create a new identity for a city (such as Wrocław's attempts to position itself as a meeting place or a multicultural city) are sometimes seen as a marketing strategy used by city authorities to legitimize their otherwise not always justifiable operations. For more, see Czajkowski and Pabjan (2013).

[36] Bente Kahan is an actress, theater director, playwright, and musician. Her father was Herman Kahan (1926–2020). He was born in Sighet (Romania) and was a Holocaust survivor and a close friend of Elie Wiesel. For more, see H. Kahan (2006).

[37] Full disclosure: I have cooperated with the FBK on several projects since 2021.

history of the Jews of Lower Silesia, in which the Holocaust is a significant turning point. In the historical narrative, the Holocaust is represented by the events of Kristallnacht, symbolizing the beginning of the end for the local German-Jewish community. The collaboration between the local Jewish community and the FBK brought about important changes in the perception of the local Jewish heritage and the commemoration of the Holocaust. Art emerged as a key medium in this endeavor, as a channel of communication accessible to audiences worldwide.[38] Today, the synagogue serves as a place of prayer for local Jews as well as a cultural venue for all the residents of Wrocław, hosting concerts, lectures, and other events (Figs. 2 and 3). For the small contemporary Jewish community,[39] vastly different from its prewar counterpart, the creation of a new and significant usable space was an important step in preserving and promoting the local heritage.

At this point, I would like to analyze one more area of activity of local Jewish organizations: annual commemorations of the events of Kristallnacht, as they contributed greatly to the commemoration of Wrocław's Jews as well as pointing to a certain crisis regarding the perception of the local heritage. Jerzy Kichler, a Jewish activist from Wrocław, employs the apt metaphor of "social aphasia" to describe the postwar memory of Wrocław's inhabitants. He notes that after the war, local Jews "could not and did not want to talk about the experiences connected with the Holocaust of German Jews" (Kichler, 2023, p. 551). In his view, a significant change occurred in 1994, when the March of Remembrance for the Victims of the November Pogrom of 1938 was held for the first time on November 9. This marked Wrocław's first-ever instance of commemoration of the German Jews who died in the Holocaust (Kichler, 2023, p. 555). According to Kichler, the March of Remembrance was intended as a bridge across aphasia, connecting the contemporary awareness of the Jews of Wrocław with the city's pre-WWII, German community (Kichler, 2023, p. 554). Organizing a march commemorating German Jews was not a simple endeavor in the 1990s. Some organizations refused to join in, while others aimed to celebrate only those anniversaries that aligned with the Polish

[38] It is impossible to list all of the FBK's projects here. For example, its current flagship project *Unfinished Lives* is a multimedia and multilingual project that presents artists from various countries who were imprisoned and murdered because of their Jewish origins. Visitors can view the artists' work on the project website at https://unfinishedlives.eu/ (*Unfinished Lives*, n.d.). Many of these materials were recorded during concerts and theater performances produced by the FBK.

[39] The Jewish Community in Wrocław numbers 300 people. Another Lower Silesian community is located in Legnica and has 48 members (Ciecieląg et al., 2022, p. 250).

Figure 2. Concert at the White Stork Synagogue as part of the Krzyżowa International Chamber Music Festival. Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska (2022)

Figure 3. *Tales of Love and Resistance*, a concert performed by Arnold Zable and Bente Kahan in the mikveh of the White Stork Synagogue. Photo by Katarzyna Taczyńska (2022)

national paradigm of memory, such as the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Kichler, 2023, p. 554).

The FBK participated in the organization of the marches from 2005,[40] working in cooperation with the Jewish Community. The march was renamed the March of Mutual Respect and continued to be held on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, with the Monument to the Victims of Kristallnacht as its end point. Over time, the march evolved beyond commemorating Kristallnacht to become an action against antisemitism, racism, and intolerance, reflecting contemporary issues. As a repeatable event following a specific route, it has become a permanent fixture in the city's calendar of urban activities. It holds performative significance, as it is a crucial activity for the collective identity of the city's inhabitants, emphasizing the importance of the local community over the national. This anniversary, significant in the history of Breslau's Jews, provides a space for the unification of the urban community in the present (Macdonald, 2021, p. 290). The ability to connect with the collective past of others represents one form of cultural capital associated with heritage (Harrison, 2023, p. 75). Building relationships with local heritage becomes particularly important when school education neglects their development, focusing solely on narratives of national greatness and celebrating national anniversaries (E. Skrzywanek, interview, January 11, 2024).[41] However, in 2022, there was a notable change in attitudes towards the march, and the Jewish community and the FBK organized two separate versions of this event. Then, in 2023, only one march took place, organized by the Jewish community under a changed name: March of Remembrance. This shift signaled a certain crisis in the cooperation between these institutions.

There are currently several organizations in Wrocław focusing on the city's Jewish heritage, especially that of German Jews,[42] and residents take part in

[40] First as the Center for Jewish Culture and Education, and from 2006 as the Bente Kahan Foundation.

[41] In an interview (E. Skrzywanek, interview, January 11, 2024), Ewa Skrzywanek (formerly a consultant at the Wrocław Teacher Training Center, and Lower Silesian education superintendent since March 2024) emphasized that methodological support centers for teachers, like schools, are highly politicized in Poland and dependent on the current political leadership. Particularly noticeable sidelining of regional education took place in 2015–2023, under the PiS government.

[42] It is worth mentioning the Urban Memory Foundation, which has been working to preserve the memory of Breslau's prewar Jewish community since 2020, and the Żydoteka Foundation, which has been promoting Jewish culture and history since 2021. Since 1999, Wrocław has hosted the Jewish Culture Festival, now known as *Simcha*.

celebrating national[43] and local anniversaries related to local Jews. However, recent years have seen the rise of competition and hierarchization among the various entities involved, and, consequently, exclusion and division. The march commemorating the victims of Kristallnacht, which could have served as an event bringing the local community in Wrocław together, has lost its unifying power. At the White Stork Synagogue, apart from the *History Reclaimed* exhibition, projects led by the FBK have either disappeared from the exhibition space or are not accessible to the synagogue's visitors. The latest exhibition presented at the White Stork Synagogue indicates a clear change in the approach to how local heritage is to be presented.

Considering that all exhibitions are complex statements that make specific claims (Butler & Lehrer, 2016), this shift raises questions about the intended message of the new exhibition at the White Stork Synagogue. Titled *The Jewish Soul: Treasures of the Jewish Community of Wrocław*, it was first opened in 2022 and can be viewed in the second gallery of the synagogue. A collaboration between the Jewish community and the National Museum in Wrocław, it showcases Judaica from the treasury of the Jewish Community in Wrocław. In 2023, it was enriched with, among other things, medieval manuscripts and incunabula from the collection of Leon Vita Saraval.[44] It is planned to be gradually expanded even further. Although the exhibition of the collection from the treasury offers a great opportunity to view beautiful historical artifacts, the presentation format may be questionable and, in this case, is not error-free.[45] Moreover, it does not allow visitors to gain an understanding of what the titular "Jewish soul" represents, and the accumulation of silver Judaica may evoke ambiguous associations. The currently adopted model of presenting historical heritage could benefit from specialist consultations and less focus on archaic thinking about heritage in general. In this form, heritage does not necessarily

[43] By which I mean, first and foremost, the observance of the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. For more, see Taczyńska (2023). The director of the Wrocław Institute of National Remembrance, Kamil Dworaczek, also participated in the observances in 2023. During our conversation, Dworaczek emphasized that he believed it was important for a representative of a government institution to be involved in this event, as it is significant for the history of Poland (K. Dworaczek, interview, February 8, 2024).

[44] For more on the Saraval collection, see *The Saraval Collection* (n.d.).

[45] There are errors in reading the titles (for example, "the Book of Leviticus" is used instead of "the Book of Numbers"), excessive simplifications of descriptions leading to distorted definitions (e.g. in the case of "kiddush"), as well as incorrect interpretations of cultural facts (for instance, the acronym "Maharash" refers to Shmuel Engel, not, as the exhibition's authors indicate, Shmuel Schneersohn). I would like to thank Wojciech Tworek for the consultation in the field of language and cultural studies.

contribute to building cultural capital, which is actively created and used by people to maintain relationships and address current social, cultural, and political issues, thereby fostering inclusiveness (Harrison, 2023, p. 76).

Conclusion

When compared to other Polish centers such as Warsaw or Kraków, Lower and Upper Silesia and its major cities may appear to be devoid of their individual stories because they are poorly known to the wider audience of Polish culture. They are rarely included in national Polish heritage, and when they are, such attempts often result in the imposition of a vision of Polishness on local cultural identity. The above overview of activities commemorating the Holocaust and Jewish heritage in Upper and Lower Silesia, albeit limited, presents a whole spectrum of activities taking place there and proves that these topics are important today. Using the example of this region, we clearly observe that heritage is a social and cultural process in which important present meanings are revealed and constructed (Smith, 2023, p. 148).

Looking at the example of the institutions described here, we also see the "friction of national and local memory" in the current political reality (Kobielska & Siewior, 2023). In this region outside central Poland, we see the ideas of local heritage being implemented by governmental and nongovernmental organizations as well as residents. The region's history is culturally distinct from the rest of Poland, a fact that is acknowledged and emphasized in the latest commemorations. There is also a clear need in the region to explore, learn about, and preserve its heritage. Although it is difficult, based on existing research, to conclude whether the heritage of German Jews is considered part of the national heritage, it can be said that it is becoming an important point of reference for shaping local cultural identity. In this narrative, museums and commemorations materialize and sanction an inclusive need for heritage. Based on the example of commemorations in the regions described, we can observe the crossing and departure of "national priority" (Posocco & Watson, 2022) in favor of local (German-Jewish) heritage, which interacts with the contemporary borders of Polishness imposed by central state institutions.

However, there are clear differences between the parts of Silesia described here. Firstly, these differences result from the historical and social conditions of the region. In Upper Silesia, which functions as a polycentric urban agglomeration, the heritage is scattered across many cities and towns, and its distinctive characteristics may not necessarily be found in its capital, Katowice. Meanwhile, in Lower Silesia, where the provincial capital has always

served as the uncontested center of the region, most activities are concentrated there. The above fact also leads to a second difference. Wrocław is a prominent urban center deeply ingrained in the culture of the region, where since the 1990s, mayoral power has been wielded by politicians advocating liberal policies. The support of the mayor and city officials has for years been a significant force in giving recognition to multiple narratives, backing grassroots activities, and engagement in various social groups. In Upper Silesia, however, it is the voivodeship authorities that hold a stronger voice, not the individual city mayors. If a politician for whom central policy plays a primary role comes into power, regional specificity becomes secondary. From the examples provided in this text, we can observe the importance of support from local authorities in the commemoration process, such as understanding the harmful effects of imposed projections on heritage users, as demonstrated by the Silesian Museum in Katowice.

In this regard, I would like to draw attention to another example from Katowice that emerged as part of the wave of creating new museums, such as Kobielska's "memory devices," in Poland. In 2022, the Upper Silesian Pantheon, located in the basement of the Katowice cathedral, was opened as a cultural institution jointly operated by the Silesian Voivodeship, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Archdiocese of Katowice, and the City of Katowice (see *Panteon Górnośląski w Katowicach*, n.d.). This collaborative effort between the archbishop's curia and both national and local authorities, undertaken without social debate, is considered the pinnacle of the 100th anniversary celebration of the incorporation of part of Upper Silesia into Poland. The establishment of this institution, devoid of self-criticism and self-reflection about the nation, highlights the emergence of museums as key tools of history politics in Upper Silesia and underscores the influence of well-funded institutions with an ethnonationalist agenda, which often marginalize other ethnic groups and perspectives. Only time will tell how the establishment of such an institution will affect the memory of other non-Polish inhabitants of the region and the cultural and national identity of the region's contemporary community. It also prompts us to consider whether a lack of criticism towards the nation will not impede the Polish nation's ability to address the contemporary challenges it faces, as discussed by Ulrich Beck (2016).

Interviews

K. Jakoweńko, interview, December 7, 2022.
E. Skrzywanek, interview, January 11, 2024.
Anonymized interview (Silesian Museum), January 31, 2024.

K. Dworaczek, interview, February 8, 2024.
B. Kahan, interview, March 4, 2024.

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Lokalne vs. narodowe. Praktyki upamiętniające żydowskie dziedzictwo kulturowe na Dolnym i Górnym Śląsku

Artykuł prezentuje, w jaki sposób dziedzictwo żydowskie jest upamiętniane w miastach Dolnego i Górnego Śląska. Po II wojnie światowej dziedzictwo tych regionów Polski prezentowano w sposób selektywny, spuścizna niemiecka pozostawała w cieniu narracji polskich. Analizie porównawczej zostają poddane najnowsze inicjatywy podejmowane w regionie, w tym otwarcie Domu Pamięci Żydów Górnośląskich w Gliwicach oraz działalność różnych organizacji we Wrocławiu, które zajmują się zachowaniem lokalnej historii żydowskiej. Wykorzystując metodologie jakościowe (pogłębione wywiady z pracownikami muzeów oraz bezpośrednie obserwacje), a także analizę tekstów, autorka omawia, w jaki sposób nacjonalizm kształtuje wizerunek Holokaustu w różnych organizacjach, oraz podejmuje refleksję nad wyzwaniami związanymi ze skutecznym edukowaniem społeczeństwa na temat wspólnej historii Polaków i niemieckich Żydów we współczesnej Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo żydowskie, Dolny Śląsk, Górny Śląsk, Gliwice, Wrocław, muzea.

Note

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