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Kinga Migalska

Prints and Drawings Room
National Museum in Kraków
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2070-9394
kingamigalska@gmail.com

The Museums in Tykocin and Włodawa as Institutions Shaping the Local Collective Memory of Polish Jews[1]

Abstract

The article contains an analysis of the activities of two museums: in Tykocin and in Włodawa. These institutions have a number of common features: both are located in small towns in the eastern part of Poland, where large and flourishing Jewish communities existed before World War II. In addition, in both cases, these institutions are housed in buildings that belonged to Jews before the war: a synagogue, bet midrashim, the Kahal headquarters. The article aims to analyse how these institutions affect local communities – both in the general context of the development of social and cultural life and the memory of the pre-war local Jewish community.

Keywords: Jewish heritage, museology, multiculturalism, synagogues.

[1] The article is based on research conducted for the doctoral thesis *Muzea judaistyczne zorganizowane w synagogach w Polsce w latach 1945–1989. Historia, teraźniejszość, perspektywy* [Judaic Museums Established in Synagogues in Poland in the Years 1945–1989: History, Present, Prospects] (Migalska, 2023).

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The issue of the symbolic dimension of the material Jewish (or post-Jewish) heritage and Jewish places of memory in Poland, in the context of difficult Polish-Jewish and Jewish-Polish relations, has already been the subject of several studies, especially in the last 30 years. This issue has so far been discussed by Yechiel Weizman (2016, 2022), Erica Lehrer (e.g. Lehrer, 2010), Michael Meng (e.g. Meng, 2011) and Ruth E. Gruber (R. E. Gruber, 2004, 2015), as well as Monika Murzyn (e.g. Murzyn-Kupisz, 2015) and Sławomir Kapralski (e.g. Kapralski, 2015), among others.

The Jewish past of Polish cities and towns and its tragic end was suppressed in the collective memory of Polish society after World War II (as in other European countries) until the 1980s (Clark, 1999, pp. 274–277). The topic began to return more widely in Polish public debate in the 1990s, and in many places the history of local Jewish communities is still being discovered. In this context, there are several towns where the restoration of the memory of pre-war Jewish inhabitants began somewhat earlier; this was the case in Tykocin and Włodawa.

After World War II, synagogues (along with the less "visible" spaces of local Jewish cemeteries) were the last material traces that remained of the once rich and numerous Jewish communities in both Tykocin and Włodawa. The silhouettes of these buildings were (and still are) strong dominants in the urban space of both of these towns. And yet, for the first three decades after the war, these historical sites remained outside the local community's interest. It was not until the second half of the 1970s (in Tykocin) and the early 1980s (in Włodawa) that these buildings were designated for museum purposes. This article is a partial summary of broader research on the situation of Judaica museums that arose in the time period of the Polish People's Republic, and of the changes they have undergone over the last 30 years, since the fall of communism in Poland. A number of factors were taken into account in this study, including the circumstances of the establishment of these institutions, their exhibition, educational and research activities, their development over time as well as the role they play within their local communities, analysed in the context of the difficult legacy that the material Jewish heritage has become as a result of the Holocaust and the events of the post-war years in Poland.

Museum in Tykocin – Branch of the Podlasie Museum in Białystok[2]

The Great Synagogue in Tykocin is located in the former main square of the historical Jewish "district" of the town, called Kaczorów.[3] It was built in the 1640s when the town was widely recognised as a centre of Jewish culture and Talmudic learning. The new house of prayer was built in a style characteristic of 17th-century synagogues in the eastern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: an almost square-shaped hall with a so-called bimah-tower.[4] The ground-floor galleries adjoining the main hall to the north and west, as well as the three-storey tower at the north-west corner, may have been built in the initial phase of the synagogue's construction or during a thorough renovation in the 1730s. In the 18th century, a C-shaped market hall was erected at the northern side of the synagogue, and a masonry bet midrash was built in the row of buildings along the western wall of the synagogue.

During World War II the Nazis converted the synagogue into a warehouse and demolished the Talmudic house. The collections of ritual objects and the rich library stored in both buildings were looted or destroyed (Bar-Yuda & Ben-Nachum, 1959, pp. 117–121). On 25 and 26 August 1941, almost all the Jewish inhabitants of Tykocin (approximately 2,100 people) were transported to the forest near the village of Łopuchowo and executed (Rogalewska, 2013, p. 50). Until the mid-1950s, the synagogue building continued to serve as a warehouse. In the meantime, due to the shortage of building materials in the town, the local population dismantled the galleries.[5] In the late 1950s and early 1960s the synagogue (in a state of partial deterioration) and the ruins of the bet midrash (reconstructed in the 1970s) were added to the Polish Register

[2] Up until 1998, the official name of this institution was "The District Museum in Białystok", and in the years 1998–2000 "The State Museum in Białystok".

[3] The history of the Tykocin Jews has so far been researched and described by A. Gawurin (n.d.), Grzegorz Worobjew (1900), Ewa Rogalewska (1995), Ewa Wroczyńska (2016), and Adam Rudawski (2017), while the following publications have been written about the synagogue in Tykocin: Baranowski (1959, 1960, 1971); A. Kubiak (1953); Pakentreger (1982); Piechotka and Piechotka (2017, pp. 232–240).

[4] In the 18th century, the synagogue was partially rebuilt. The renovation of the building was forced by the destruction resulting from a fire in 1736. It is likely that at that time the form of the synagogue roof was changed from a butterfly to a mansard type (Baranowski, 1960, p. 160).

[5] About 60% of the buildings in Tykocin were destroyed or badly damaged during the war. In the post-war years, the shortage of building materials led to the gradual demolition of many partially ruined buildings in the town (Baranowski, 1971).

of Historic Buildings,[6] which was followed by some basic restoration work undertaken at the synagogue (Kosel & Sękowski, 2021, p. 239).

It is difficult to determine definitively who made the decision to establish a museum in the Tykocin Great Synagogue and bet midrash. It was probably a simultaneous initiative of many administrative bodies (municipal and provincial authorities together with the regional monument conservator). The idea of creating a museum first emerged during a conservation survey in 1965–1966, although at that time it was planned as a future "Museum of the Baroque".[7] The town of Tykocin, which developed dynamically in the 18th century, was marginalised in the following century by neighbouring Białystok. As a result, the town survived until the second half of the 20th century with an almost unchanged 18th-century urban layout and a considerable amount of historical architecture (J. Kubiak, 1991, p. 54). The historical potential of the town's urban layout was quickly recognised by the provincial authorities in Białystok. As a result, restoration work in the synagogue – aimed at adapting it to house the museum – was an element of a broad renovation campaign involving all the most valuable Tykocin monuments, which originally included the idea to make the synagogue part of a historical open-air museum covering the entire centre of the town.[8]

The Tykocin museum was officially opened on 1 November 1976. According to Andrzej Lechowski, former head of the Tykocin branch and then director of the Białystok Museum for almost 30 years, there was external political pressure to weaken the "Jewish tone" in the museum's activities during the first years of its existence. However, the museum's employees did not yield to this pressure, understanding that the evocative form of the synagogue did not

[6] *Odpis zawiadomienia o wpisie synagogi do Rejestru zabytków z 1957 roku oraz potwierdzenie tegoż wpisu z 26 lipca 2012*, Tykocin Museum Archive (TykMA), f. *Zabytki Tykocina 1956–58.*

[7] TykMA f. *Orzeczenie o stanie technicznym konstrukcji z 1966 roku* and *Projekt wystroju sklepienia głównej sali z 1965 roku*.

[8] The term "Museum of the Baroque" in reference to the Great Synagogue in Tykocin first appeared in the *Detailed Urban Development Plan for Tykocin for the Years 1968–1974*. Regarding the synagogue, the following note was included: "The synagogue – a regional and Baroque museum is being adapted together with the plot on which an exhibition pavilion of regional folklore, sculpture and periodic exhibitions is planned during the perspective period" (National Archive in Białystok (NAB), f. 4/1449/0/-/9/87/2015, p. 18). It can therefore be assumed that either the reconstruction of the bet midrash was already planned at that time, or the construction of a completely new building was planned. The name "Baroque museum" was then repeated in the design documentation for the synagogue in 1970 (TykMA f. *Synagoga – Muzeum Baroku. Projekt techniczny – zamienny architektoniczny, grudzień 1970*, p. 4).

allow its original purpose to be forgotten (Jaworowska, 2016, p. 199). Due to the low surrounding residential buildings, the Tykocin synagogue together with the Roman Catholic parish church, located on the other side of the main square, constitute the two largest dominants in the landscape of the town's centre. The synagogue's visibility in the urban space of the town is unquestionable, which makes the denial of its existence impossible. Moreover, from the very beginning, the museum had a fairly clear division of its exhibition space into topics related to the history and ethnography of the region, presented in the bet midrash (also called the Talmudic House), and the interior of the synagogue (especially the men's hall), devoted to Jewish culture. This division, with a few exceptions, has been maintained to this day.

The museum very quickly became the main driving force of tourism in Tykocin. The town was severely damaged during World War II and depopulated (mainly due to the mass murder of almost all the Tykocin Jews in 1941). As a result, the population of Tykocin in the 1970s and 1980s oscillated around 2,000 people, all of them Poles.[9] Simultaneously, from 1980 the museum was visited by over 20,000 tourists every year (by the end of the 1980s it was over 30,000, and that number grew even further in the next years), more than 50% of them in organised groups,[10] therefore the presence of visitors in the town was very noticeable from the very beginning.

From the first years of the museum's existence, a kind of symbiotic relationship existed between the institution and the administrative authorities of Tykocin: museum representatives often participated in meetings of the municipal council, serving as consultants,[11] supported the creation and operation of local cultural initiatives (e.g. the Society of Friends of the Tykocin Region,[12] active since 1982, and the Tykocin Amateur Theatre) as well as initiatives to restore municipal rights to Tykocin in the early 1990s.[13] At the same time,

[9] As a result, Tykocin lost its town status in 1950 and did not regain it until 1993; it is worth adding that this was achieved with the help of the museum staff.

[10] Attendance at the Museum in Tykocin – Branch of the Podlasie Museum in Białystok, collected on the basis of the following archival documents: PMA f.: MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004; MT-43-Wystawiennictwo 1978–1999; TykMA, f.: MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2018–2019; MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2005–2014; MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2017–2019; MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2016.

[11] *Sprawozdanie z działalności Oddziału za rok 1992*. PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, p. 178.

[12] *Sprawozdanie z działalności Oddziału za rok 1981*, Podlaskie Museum Archive (PMA) f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, p. 32.

[13] *Sprawozdanie z działalności Oddziału za rok 1992*. PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, pp. 103, 160.

the local authorities took care of maintaining the museum's surroundings and supported its activities.[14] This symbiosis was particularly strong during the 1980s and 1990s. During this time, the Museum in Tykocin organised and co-organised many cultural events aimed primarily at local residents, including concerts, lectures, historical re-enactments, film screenings as well as meetings with writers and artists, and many others.[15] From the 1990s, the museum also began to play an essential role in educating local students, mainly by organising workshops and lectures (for example, in cooperation with the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw).[16] Most of these projects were initiatives of the museum staff, especially Ewa Wroczyńska, the museum's most pro-active manager (she ran the institution in the years 1990–2007).

The presence of the museum in the Tykocin area was so influential to the life of the local community that the author of an article published in 1986 in the newspaper *Kurier Podlaski*, entitled "A Small Town Near a Museum", stated that the museum was more visible in the region than the town itself (Rosiński, 1986, pp. 1, 14). Together with the Municipal Cultural Centre and the Public Library, the museum shaped the cultural life of not only Tykocin but the whole surrounding area as well. However, unlike the other two institutions, the museum played an additional role by promoting the town internationally.[17]

Despite the relatively wide range of activities described above, a survey conducted at the beginning of the 21st century showed that the museum could influence the perception of Tykocin's Jewish history by its contemporary residents, especially the older generation, only to a certain extent (Smagała, 2005). The research was conducted on a relatively small group (25 people) from a very narrow age range (60–70 years old) and of a similar social status, most of whom had only visited the museum occasionally and their knowledge of its history was superficial (Smagała, 2005, p. 22). The interviewees expressed satisfaction with the presence of the museum in the town and praised its educational role. At the same time, upon hearing that the Jewish

[14] *Sprawozdanie z działalności Oddziału za rok 2000*. PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, p. 236.

[15] For example, plen-air workshops. *Plener plastyczny. Inspiracje – Tykocin'88*. TykMa, f. without catalogue number.

[16] *Sprawozdanie z działalności Oddziału za rok 1988*. PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, p. 144

[17] Proof of this includes the museum's commemorative book from 1983, which contains numerous entries from foreign tourists. This is the only guest book from the first 20 years of the museum's history that has been preserved. TykMA, f. without catalogue number.

Religious Community in Warsaw was attempting to regain the synagogue, the respondents showed a clearly "combative" attitude in defence of keeping the museum with its current owner; some of them expressed negative opinions about various Jewish groups visiting Tykocin, and only a few agreed to speak about the history of the Tykocin Jews (Smagała, 2005, pp. 18–24). Among other things, this research reveals a still frequent mechanism of fear concerning the uncertain legal and moral status of so-called "post-Jewish property", a mechanism described in recent years by Konrad Matyjaszek. In his understanding, the linguistic construction of post-Jewish space is a strategy that involves deconstructing the original narrative associated with the space that previously belonged to Jews and adapting its selected elements to new purposes, combined with the adaptation of the physical space itself (Matyjaszek, 2013, p. 131). In the case of Tykocin, this meant adapting the synagogue and the bet midrash for museum purposes (actually the most commendable of all the utility categories for which synagogue buildings were used in the times of the Polish People's Republic)[18] and simultaneously familiarising its space, originally strange to the local Poles, and accustoming people to it. At the same time, the museum staff took care to provide visitors and residents with information about Jewish culture and (as their own research developed) the history of the local Jews (e.g. through the exhibition *We, the Jews, Came to Tykocin Centuries Ago: 75th Anniversary of the Extermination of the Tykocin Jews*, shown in 2016). However, while taking care of the synagogue, the museum never undertook regular maintenance of the destroyed Jewish cemetery in Tykocin, located less than a kilometre away (Bielawski, n.d.).

As culture expert Jeffrey Shandler put it, Tykocin has become one of the centres of Polish "shtetl tourism" and "a place of multi-layered work, architectural renewal, museums, tourism, and performance art, which in all its manifestations is based on selective remembering and forgetting" (Shandler, 2014, p. 107). Due to the presence of the museum and a marketing campaign ongoing since the 1970s that advertises the town as an exemplary historical place, both as a small Polish provincial town and a model shtetl, over time Tykocin has become a very attractive place for Polish tourists seeking trails of historical and Judaic importance, and also to Jewish tourists from around the world looking for a connection with the pre-Holocaust past. And yet, while the museum was undoubtedly at the forefront of studies into Tykocin's Jewish past for many years, conducting archival research, translating fragments of

[18] At that time, abandoned synagogue buildings were used as warehouses, fire stations, cinemas and libraries, among other examples (See e.g. Bergman & Jagielski, 1996; S. Gruber et al., 1995 as well as Weizman, 2016, 2022).

the *Sefer Tiktin* book of remembrance (Rogalewska, 1996; Wroczyńska, 2022), and initiating the annual commemoration of the victims of the mass murder of the Tykocin Jews (since 1991),[19] on some levels it did not go beyond what Maria Kobielska calls self-affirmative memory. This often appears in the content provided by Polish museums, especially those presenting the Polish-Jewish past. Under this term, Kobielska includes all the patterns leading to such a presentation of history that does not threaten the positive self-image of a national community; in this case – the Polish community (Kobielska, 2023, p. 143). American anthropologist Alan Duben (whose grandmother came from Tykocin) has visited the town many times since he went there for the first time in 2016, and has made several observations about how it deals with its Jewish heritage. Among the questions that troubled him during his visits, one in particular is worth noting:

> I wonder how the goyim of Tykocin managed to endure the terrifying silence that fell on the morning of August 26, 1941 in the abandoned houses – in the houses where there were still chairs, tables covered with tablecloths, toys, books, food products for dinner, where the ordinariness of everyday life had been hastily abandoned. And those streets, shops – quiet, deserted, empty. How could one endure this overwhelming absence? (Duben, 2017, p. 75; transl. KM)

This is a question that the Tykocin museum – bounded by the proximity of the town community in question on the one hand, and by a set of rules imposed on it through its subordination to the Polish state administration on the other – never asked, at least not loudly enough for the local inhabitants to hear. This role has been taken over in recent years by a grassroots social initiative established in 2010 under the name of the Foundation for the Research Centre for the History and Culture of Small Towns (*Plac Czarnieckiego 10*, n.d.). The activities of the museum and the foundation, although conducted independently, often overlap and complement each other (in some areas, the foundation likely fills gaps in the museum's activities, taking advantage of the greater flexibility of operation provided by the status of a nongovernmental organisation), for example thanks to a collaboration with Duben, who has conducted extensive research in recent years on the contemporary memory of Jews in Tykocin.

Both Shandler and Duben have so far drawn attention to the way in which the Tykocin museum presents content on the Jewish past, referring, among other things, to the annual custom of staging a Purimshpil (Duben, 2024, p. 273; Shandler, 2014, pp. 106–107). This is a cultural event intended to intro-

[19] PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, pp. 179–180.

duce the audience to the specifics of the Purim holiday, which is in fact part of a broader project presenting the most important Jewish holidays throughout the year. As another part of this project, an imitation of a sukkah made for Sukkot is displayed in front of the synagogue in autumn.[20] Both of these events can be analysed as examples of how differently a message can be received depending on who its recipient is. Although the Great Synagogue in Tykocin is visited by numerous groups of Jewish tourists from all over the world every year, their time for sightseeing is very limited, and the purpose of their search is often determined in advance by the tour guides who come with them. Meanwhile, projects such as the Purimshpil or sukkah are created almost exclusively for Poles. On the one hand, they are meant to engage the local community in action (here: actors of the Amateur Theatre), and on the other, they are meant to educate the audience. They are not free from simplifications used to increase their colourfulness and attractiveness, or from stereotypes – as Duben characterises it: "the Jew *in extremis*" (Duben, 2024, p. 273) – which the Polish eye will not catch, but for a viewer of Jewish origin they may seem grotesque, and in places also inappropriate. This is an example of one of the problems experienced by practically all museum institutions of the Tykocin type in Poland, which are created by non-Jews almost exclusively for non-Jews – they are unable to be sensitive enough to the Jewish perspective of history.

Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District Museum in Włodawa

While the first Jewish settlers in Włodawa, located on the River Bug, were recorded as early as the 1530s, the dynamic demographic and economic development of the town's Jewish community took place primarily at the turn of the 17th and 18th centuries (Piechotka & Piechotka, 2017, p. 458).[21] At that time, most of the local production of "forest goods" (timber, charcoal, tar, etc.) was concentrated in the hands of Jews, who also almost monopolised trade and river transport of all products as well as distilling and, in the 19th

[20] PMA, f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004, pp. 176–177.

[21] The history of Jews in Włodawa has been described by Krzysztof Skwirowski (1996a, 1996b), among others; partial information about the Jewish past of the town can also be found in the collective publication *Dzieje Włodawy* from 1991. The history of the synagogue complex (or its individual buildings) is discussed in the following works: Jerzy Baranowski (1956, 1959), Ireneusz Wojczuk (1996) Jakub Nastaj (1998), Maria & Kazimierz Piechotkowie (Piechotka & Piechotka, 2017). Information about the interior furnishings from these synagogues can be found, for example, in publications by Bracha Yaniv (2017) and Lidia Wociór (2015).

century, also the fishing industry (Górny, 2012, pp. 28–29; Szczygieł, 1991, p. 41).

In the 1760s, the Jews of Włodawa built a monumental masonry synagogue (called the Great Synagogue) in the street leading south from the town market square, more or less where a previous wooden synagogue probably stood (Baranowski, 1959, pp. 59–60). The synagogue originally consisted of a high and spacious rectangular main hall covered with a nine-panel vault supported by four massive columns arranged symmetrically to the axis of the building, two single-storey, elongated women's halls added to the men's hall from the north and south, and a rectangular annexe from the west, flanked by two two-storey pavilions.[22] Before 1786, a second synagogue (called the Small Synagogue or the Old Bet Midrash) was built on its northern side, on an elongated plan and with a two-storey vestibule added to the men's hall on the west side. Both buildings were partially destroyed during World War I and renovated in the interwar period (Nastaj, 1998, pp. 16–17). At the end of the 1920s, in the vicinity of these two buildings, in the north-western part of the quarter, the Włodawa Jewish community erected a third one that the locals called the New Bet Midrash. It was a single-storey structure with an attic (Wojczuk, 1996, p. 17).

During World War II, shortly after entering Włodawa the Nazis established a closed ghetto and imprisoned the entire local Jewish community there, later opening a forced labour camp (Olszewski, 1991, p. 236). In 1942–1943, most of the Włodawa Jews were murdered in the extermination camp located in nearby Sobibór. Simultaneously, all the kahal buildings were turned into military warehouses and all the furnishings and interior decorations were devastated (Makus, 2014, pp. 19–20; Nastaj, 1998, p. 17; Wojczuk, 1996, p. 9). Although some of the Jews of Włodawa returned to the city in the first years after the war, the town's local authorities continued to use the synagogue buildings as warehouses, and management of the entire synagogue complex was transferred to the Samopomoc Chłopska Communal Cooperative (Baranowski, 1956, pp. 12–14).

[22] Due to the introduction of corner pavilions, the architectural model used in the Great Synagogue in Włodawa was an unusual solution for masonry synagogues. In contrast, it was often used in wooden structures of synagogues in the eastern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century. The Włodawa synagogue was not the only masonry synagogue built in this shape, but it is probably the oldest one (Kravtsov, 2018, p. 120). The fact that both pavilions were erected together with the construction of the synagogue and not added later is indicated by the Włodawa *pinkas* from 1774 (the content of which is known from the extract in *The Memorial Book of* Włodawa *Jews*) (Kanc, 1974, p. 55).

In 1931 Włodawa had 8,592 inhabitants, of whom 5,363 were Jews, mostly unassimilated. They owned about 90% of the town's businesses (Makus, 2014, p. 17). At the end of 1944, about 4,000 people were living in Włodawa, including 3,800 Poles, 200 Ukrainians, and 90 Jews (Cieślińska-Lobkowicz, 2010, p. 106). The whole region was the scene of active fighting with the armed underground, both Polish and Ukrainian. Almost all the Jews from among the pre-war residents were murdered, and most Ukrainians were forced to move to the territories occupied by the Soviet Union, while others were eventually resettled to the so-called "Recovered Territories".[23] In the following years, the population began to decline steadily due to, among other things, the departure of most of the surviving Włodawa Jews, who had to leave because of the difficult living conditions on the one hand and fear of hostility from their neighbours on the other (Gross, 2008, p. 49).

The geopolitical location of Włodawa changed significantly as a result of the new borders of Poland created in 1944–1945, which changed the areas along the River Bug into the border zone with the Soviet Union and later the border of three countries: Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus. Border life left its mark on Włodawa and still partially determines its existence, especially culturally. The River Bug, which for centuries had been a source of income for many Włodawa residents, suddenly became "the border of fear", as Konrad Górny, the author of an anthropological analysis on the culture-forming role of the Bug, put it (in the times of the Polish People's Republic, there was a saying that "even birds turn back on the Bug"). The state border actually tore Włodawa in two, as the other part of the town, Tomaszówka – together with the Włodawa railway station, old cemeteries, and a large part of the pre-war inhabitants – remained on the other side of the river (Górny, 2012, pp. 29–30). The problem of the town's inconvenient location did not disappear with the fall of the Soviet Union but, in fact, intensified when the eastern border of Poland became first the border of NATO and then of the European Union and the Schengen Area. Additional difficulties have been caused by the recent hostile attitude of the Belarusian authorities towards Poland.

The third important factor that shaped modern Włodawa and provided the basis for establishing the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District Museum was the extensive development plan for the town undertaken in the 1960s, focused mainly on tourism. A decade earlier, the administrative authorities noticed that the town was overpopulated and therefore decided to expand

[23] The lands incorporated into Poland after World War II at the expense of the former Third Reich, which included Upper and Lower Silesia, Western Pomerania as well as Warmia and Masuria.

it: in the 1970s, its entire urban area was practically doubled. At the same time, extensive tourist infrastructure for holidaymakers coming to the nearby lakes has developed in Okuninka, located south of Włodawa, and the municipal authorities have repeatedly emphasised the importance of the historical town centre with its 17th- and 18th-century historic buildings and Baroque urban layout (Olszewski & Połuszańczyk, 1991, pp. 279–280). Establishing a museum in 1981 to promote the region's culture and provide cultural entertainment to residents and tourists was a natural consequence of these events. Most importantly, the town's authorities decided to house the new institution in all three buildings of the synagogue complex.

In the first years of its existence, the museum in Włodawa carried out exhibition activities that were primarily ethnographic in nature (the basis for the gradually expanded collection of this institution was a set of items related to the region's fishing industry). Despite this, the museum staff did their best from the beginning to collect objects related to local history as well as Judaica, and the first temporary exhibition that showed Jewish ritual objects was opened in 1983 (in connection with the 40th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising).[24] Since the 1990s, the Great Synagogue has almost exclusively hosted Jewish–themed exhibitions, while the displays in the Small Synagogue and the Kahal House have presented ethnographic and historical themes as well as exhibitions on "exotic" cultures, e.g. the art of various African, Polynesian or South Asian nations and ethnic groups (Wojczuk, 1996, p. 10).

While the museum's activities in the 1980s focused exclusively on organising exhibitions, building collections and holding educational events, in the 1990s its employees became involved in research and publishing activity (through the popular science magazine *Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego we Włodawie. Zeszyty Muzealne*), opened a new branch (the Museum of the Former Extermination Camp in Sobibór, opened in 1993) and became active in shaping the cultural zone for the town's residents. In the first two decades of the 21st century, the museum initiated a public discussion on the uniqueness of borderland life and the positive aspects of multiculturalism. Similarly to the institution in Tykocin, a key role in the development of the museum in Włodawa was played by the outstanding individuals working there, led by Marek Bem, the museum's director in the years 1999–2010, and Krzysztof Skwirowski, a historian strongly involved in researching local histo-

[24] Włodawa Museum Archive (WMA) f. 1984-1/B-1: *Katalog wystawy Z dziejów i kultury Żydów polskich*, p. 5.

ry (including Jewish history), and for many years responsible for running the museum branch in Sobibór.[25]

Bem was not only an efficient and very ambitious manager of this institution, but also the main originator of the Three Cultures Festival, a cultural event organised annually since 1995 and aimed at promoting the historical multiculturalism of the region.[26] Through this festival as well as other activities, the museum pursued a goal defined as "reducing the distance of misunderstanding, alienation, and uncertainty of feelings" towards Jewish heritage, emphasising the need to bring visitors closer and accustom them to Jewish culture in the most comprehensive way possible. It also included the commemoration of the armed uprising in Sobibór, to increase people's knowledge about the history of the Sobibór Extermination Camp and honour its victims (Bem, 2000b, pp. 152–153; Bem & Podlewska-Bem, 1998).

The success of the festival's first editions inspired the management of the museum to make the historical multiculturalism of Włodawa the main focus of its activities. The author of the project himself defined the aim of the festival as follows:

> We are interested in such learning [about one another] that does not impose any preconditions, but is an attempt at understanding differences without judging them. … Perhaps then we will understand "outsiders" so well that the concept of alienation will no longer be necessary. (Bem, 2000b, p. 152; transl. KM)

In fact, the visual and symbolic traces of historical multiculturalism in the town space cannot be ignored: walking along one route, one can visit places unique to all three religions that once lived in Włodawa: Judaism, Orthodoxy, and Roman Catholicism. The problem is, only two of them still have their followers in the town (with a significant predominance of Catholicism), while the third one – like a symbolic prosthesis – is represented on a daily basis by the museum. And, the Jewishness represented by the museum is mostly virtual, as Ruth Ellen Gruber described it (R. E. Gruber, 2004, pp. 42–46), shown through the lens of Polish perception. Proof of this can be seen, for example, in the exhibition

[25] In 2012, the museum in Sobibór was transferred from the management of the museum in Włodawa to the State Museum at Majdanek, and Krzysztof Skwirowski was appointed its manager. Skwirowski's obituary is available on the website of the State Museum at Majdanek: https://www.majdanek.eu/pl/news/krzysztof_skwirowski/1367 (*Krzysztof Skwirowski*, 2020).

[26] The Three Cultures Festival is not the only event of national and international scope held in Włodawa. The International Polesie Folk Summer has been organised in Włodawa since 1991, gathering numerous folk groups from Poland and abroad every year (Bem, 2015, pp. 12–13; *Zapraszamy na Międzynarodowe Poleskie Lato z Folklorem*, 2019).

In Melamed's Room that has been on display since 2000 in one of the pavilions of the Great Synagogue (*W pokoju Mełameda*, n.d.): this is an arranged interior that is a bedroom as well as a space for studying and praying. The exhibition, although it undoubtedly stimulates the imagination and has educational value, consists of furniture and everyday objects mostly collected to create an atmosphere of antiquity, rather than authentically having belonged to a pre-war Jewish teacher. The only objects that could actually have come from a cheder (Jewish religious school) are the old books lying on the shelves, more as part of the decor than as individual museum exhibits. The whole image is completed by two wooden figures that are supposed to represent Jewish elders – one leaning over a lectern and the other, dressed in a tallit, bowing his head as if in prayer. Along with similar arrangements of the Seder supper or a Rabbi's room, shown in the previously discussed museum in the Great Synagogue in Tykocin, Melamed's room in Włodawa is also nothing more and nothing less than a reconstruction of the world as imagined by the Polish curators. In the first quarter of the 21st century, artificially constructed multiculturalism is the only kind we can speak of in Włodawa – there is not a single resident in the town identifying as a Jew.[27]

Interesting conclusions about the contemporary understanding of Włodawa as a multicultural place were brought by sociological research conducted by Mirosław Bieniecki at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, as part of a broader research project on local communities of the Polish borderland. During interviews with residents of Włodawa, Bieniecki stated that, as a result of the festivals, "a climate of multiculturalism and a sense of participation in many interpenetrating cultures" had been introduced into the life of the town, even though the vast majority of residents represented only one of the cultures being celebrated. This multiculturalism includes the remembrance and celebration of Jewish culture and the town's Jewish past, but it serves to build the local future rather than to analyse the past. Bieniecki described Włodawa as an example of "a new urban local culture dominated by the tension between the postulated and desired multiculturalism (which is not accompanied by actual multiculturalism) and the imagination of a possible, idealised multiculturalism in the future", also noting that the project of constructing such a culture might actually succeed in this case (Bieniecki, 2004, pp. 308, 316).

Due to the existence of the aforementioned festival, the modern idea of historical multiculturalism in Włodawa is presented to audiences in an attrac-

[27] In addition, although representatives of the Ukrainian minority became active in the region in the second half of the 1980s, they did not constitute a group influencing local cultural policy, and by the end of the 1990s they had become practically invisible again (Redde, 1991, p. 309).

tive, colourful way, through the presentation of various culinary customs and languages as well as dance, music, theatre, fine arts and literature. Although difficult topics such as the Holocaust are also woven into this riot of multisensory experiences, they remain somewhat on the margins of the celebrations. The organisers try to maintain visual equality: a separate day and separate exhibitions are devoted to each of the three cultures, although historically there was no demographic balance in Włodawa, i.e. Jews constituted the vast majority of the city's inhabitants. The aim of the festival is not to faithfully reflect history, but, rather, to make it more familiar and, by using selected elements of it, to build the future in the spirit of dialogue. And although the festival fulfils this purpose, it also makes it difficult to fully confront difficult elements of the past, including the friction that occurred on a daily basis between the different nations and religions that coexisted in this multicultural town before World War II, the anti-Jewish violence that took place in the Włodawa region after the end of the war, and the question of what happened to the property of Włodawa's Jews.

Regardless of the festival, the museum has long been conducting its own research on the history of the Jewish community of Tykocin, at least since the early 1990s. It has also attempted to translate fragments of the Włodawa Yizkor book (Skwirowski, 1996a) and presented a photographic exhibition based on this publication (Skwirowski, 1996b). The museum's employees also made efforts to bring the history of the Sobibór Extermination Camp, the people who died there and the revolt that ended its history to as wide an audience as possible, although the limited resources at their disposal did not allow for very broad activities (Bem, 2000a, p. 5). In recent years, the museum has also been conducting a project aimed at researching and commemorating the history of the Włodawa ghetto, and has been actively collecting historical photographic documentation showing life in the town in the first half of the 20th century.[28] The museum's activities do not focus solely on building an imagined multiculturalism, although this is what is most visible outside Włodawa thanks to the organisation of the Three Cultures Festival, for which the museum has received a number of awards and distinctions.[29]

In theory this festival, as the most visible and attractive part of what the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District Museum offers, motivates a rise of

[28] Information about current projects run by the museum is published regularly on its website, for example: https://muzeumwlodawa.eu/wlodawa-w-i-pol-xx-wieku (*Włodawa w I poł. XX wieku*, n.d.).

[29] A full list of awards is available on the museum's website: https://muzeumwlodawa.eu/nagrody-i-wyroznienia (*Nagrody i wyróżnienia*, n.d.).

local pride (Bieniecki, 2004, p. 316). It also makes the residents of Włodawa (pushed to the margins of the now border province after World War II and separated from their former neighbours by the border) gravitate towards this constructed, imagined multiculturalism, making it part of their identity, while the administrative authorities simultaneously build the city's brand on it. These activities also encourage them to acquire knowledge about local history and draw attention to the need to protect historical monuments;[30] also, successive editions of the festival leave visual traces in the city space.[31] The multiculturalism promoted by the museum in Włodawa for decades has made a clear contribution to the town's economic development, being one of the main factors driving local tourism (Krukowska, 2009, p. 146). Today the Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District Museum still carries out its mission through methods designed and developed at the beginning of the 21st century, offering users a regularly updated set of exhibitions, a number of various accompanying events as well as mass events such as the festival and the Sobibór Run (a 13-kilometre run from Sobibór to Włodawa commemorating the escape of prisoners from the Sobibór camp on 14 April 1943 and paying tribute to the victims of the Holocaust), not to mention numerous virtual projects. It also undoubtedly influences the changes taking place in the town's space, especially in its historical centre.

During many years of thorough renovation and conservation work carried out since 2014 at both synagogues and the Kahal House, the Włodawa museum also tidied up and arranged the spacious square that is a part of the synagogue complex, two sides of which are marked by the Great Synagogue and the Kahal House. This space was sown with grass and planted with low-growing vegetation in such a way that from an appropriate distance (especially from above, for example when taking satellite photos) it would form the image of a large menorah, the foot of which is located directly on the axis of the entrance to the Great Synagogue. Through this, symbolically Włodawa has come a long way – from rejecting its Jewish past in the 1950s and 1960s when, with the general consent of the local community, the synagogue buildings fell into disrepair, to presenting it today with great panache and pride.

[30] In recent years, in addition to the thorough renovation of the synagogue complex, the Włodawa market square and the surroundings of the Orthodox Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary have also undergone revitalisation (*Włodawa: Metamorfoza rynku wokół Czworoboku*, 2023).

[31] Promotional material of the 17th Three Cultures Festival: "23–25.09.2016 XVII Festiwal Trzech Kultur" (2016).

Conclusion

The Tykocin museum has had an undeniable influence on the life of the town from the very beginning. Not only has it served tourist traffic in the town (many times greater in number than the town's population), but also, through cooperation with all local administration bodies as well as a wide range of events accompanying its basic activity and addressed directly to the inhabitants of the region, it has had the opportunity to shape local cultural and tourist policy. The museum has reintroduced knowledge about Jewish culture into the collective consciousness of Tykocin and popularised the history of the Tykocin Jews on a national and international scale. It has also allowed the local community to become partially familiar with the "sensitive heritage" of the complicated Polish-Jewish relations throughout history, by organising annual anniversaries commemorating the Holocaust victims from Tykocin.

The Łęczyńsko-Włodawskie Lake District Museum in Włodawa underwent a significant transformation in the context of its role in the town during the first two decades of its existence. Opened as a regional museum, with an offer aimed at local residents and tourists visiting the region for its recreational value, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries the Włodawa museum was already an institution recognised on a national scale, mainly due to the development of the Three Cultures Festival into a broad-based annual initiative. This extensive mass event responded to the cultural needs of the local population, at the same time offering a number of cultural events and related substantive content, affirming the threads of historical multiculturalism, attractive not only to the local community but also to people coming from the entire Lublin region and even more distant corners of Poland. In the local context, the museum thus played an extremely important role, helping the residents of Włodawa to develop a positive image of their city, which historically could boast a centuries-old tradition of religious and ethnic tolerance based on diversity and multiculturalism, encouraging a sense of local patriotism. This was extremely important especially in the face of the high level of unemployment that plagued Włodawa in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, and although it did not stop the outflow of younger generations of residents from the town in pursuit of an education and employment, it gave the young people leaving the town the opportunity to feel proud to identify with their place of origin.

The role of these two institutions should not be dismissed. Their influence on local development in the area of culture and self-identification of local

communities is undeniable, as is the fact that they build a positive image of the history of their town and region. However, sociological studies conducted in both Tykocin and Włodawa clearly indicate that the activities of these museums primarily reach younger generations of residents and have a much smaller impact on older generations. This is best seen in relation to the local Jewish heritage, or the broadly understood issue of historical multiculturalism, which in the case of older residents of these towns often manifests itself through a kind of dichotomy: on the one hand, these people seem to accept the existence of this heritage, and even react to it positively, while on the other, it has no clear impact on their antisemitic prejudices. This dichotomy is not specific exclusively to Tykocin and Włodawa. As Sławomir Kapralski (and Iwona Irwin-Zarecka before him) pointed out, this two-track thinking, separating acknowledgement of a historically Jewish space from thinking about Jews, is common to many communities in Poland (Irwin-Zarecka, 1989, p. 175; Kapralski, 2015, p. 151).

The activities of the museums discussed here do not focus exclusively on the history of the local Jewish communities, but they are still the main (in the case of Włodawa) or one of the main (as in Tykocin) sources of current knowledge on this subject. The current activity of both of these museums is influenced positively by the fact that they have much better substantive support than in the initial years of their activity. They also have a much broader support base, due, among other things, to the activity of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which regularly expands the network of cooperation between institutions dealing with the history of Polish Jews. At the same time, both of these institutions remain bound by limitations resulting from their geographical location and administrative subordination, which translates, for example, into the problem of having a small team of employees despite the large scope of activities being undertaken. As a result, while many other museums presenting Jewish content in the world are currently engaged in new ways of asking questions about their place in local culture and showing the many facets of Jewish identity, the museums in Tykocin and Włodawa continue to face the arduous task of discovering facts from local history. Fortunately, both of these institutions remain open, to a certain extent, to prospects of development and a search for new paths. One can hope that it will be possible to conduct further research in the next decade, to show how their impact on the local community and the way they present Jewish history is changing.

Appendix

Archiwum Muzeum w Tykocinie – oddziału Muzeum Podlaskiego w Białymstoku (Tykocin Museum Archive – TykMA)
- no ref. No., *Odpis zawiadomienia o wpisie synagogi do Rejestru zabytków z 1957 roku oraz potwierdzenie tegoż wpisu z 26 lipca 2012*, f. *Zabytki Tykocina 1956–58*.
- no ref. No., *Orzeczenie o stanie technicznym konstrukcji z 1966 roku* and *Projekt wystroju sklepienia głównej sali z 1965 roku*.
- no ref. No., *Synagoga – Muzeum Baroku. Projekt techniczny – zamienny architektoniczny, grudzień 1970*.
- no ref. No., *Plener plastyczny. Inspiracje – Tykocin'88*.
- no ref. No., Museum's commemorative book of 1983.
- f. MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2018–2019.
- f. MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2005–2014.
- f. MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2017–2019.
- f. MT-0221-Sprawozdawczość 2016.

Archiwum Muzeum Podlaskiego (Podlaskie Museum Archive – PMA)
- f. MT-021-Sprawozdawczość 1976–2004.
- f. MT-43-Wystawiennictwo 1978–1999.

Archiwum Państwowe w Białymstoku (National Archive in Białystok – NAB)
- ref. No. 4/1449/0/-/9/87/2015, Detailed spatial development plan for Tykocin for the years 1968–1974, p. 18.

Archiwum Muzeum Pojezierza Łęczyńsko-Włodawskiego we Włodawie (Włodawa Museum Archive – WMA)
- f. 1984-1/B-1: *Katalog wystawy „Z dziejów i kultury Żydów polskich"*.

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Muzea w Tykocinie i Włodawie jako instytucje kształtujące lokalną pamięć zbiorową o polskich Żydach

W artykule autorka analizuje działalność dwóch muzeów: w Tykocinie i we Włodawie. Instytucje te łączy szereg cech wspólnych: obie znajdują się w niewielkich miejscowościach we wschodniej części współczesnej Polski, w których przed wojną istniały liczne i kwitnące społeczności żydowskie. Ponadto w obu przypadkach siedzibą tych instytucji są budynki należące przed II wojną światową do Żydów (synagogi, bet midrasze, siedziby Kahału). W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano, w jaki sposób te instytucje wpływają na lokalne społeczności – zarówno w ogólnym kontekście rozwoju życia społecznego i kulturalnego, jak i pamięci o miejscowej społeczności żydowskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: dziedzictwo żydowskie, muzeologia, wielokulturowość, synagogi.

Note

Kinga Migalska, Prints and Drawings Room, National Museum in Kraków, Cracow, Poland.
kingamigalska@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2070-9394
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