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Invisible Jewish Heritage in Central-Eastern Europe: (post)JEWISH... *Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*. A Review of the Exhibition at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews

Abstract

The review discusses the preservation of Jewish material heritage in Central-Eastern Europe using the exhibition *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, organized in 2024 at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, as a case study. The exhibition offers an in-depth exploration of the Jewish heritage in Opatów through Kirshenblatt's paintings and contemporary curatorial research. The review presents the structure of the display and delves into details related to selected exhibits. It further examines the Authorized Heritage Discourse, a term used in critical heritage studies to describe the official mechanisms of heritage protection. The review argues that the exhibition highlights the significance of preserving material remnants of everyday Jewish life, which are often overlooked in official heritage practices that prioritize grand and monumental sites. It draws attention to the underrepresentation of Jewish heritage sites on the UNESCO World Heritage List and

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advocates for broader recognition and preservation efforts beyond the Holocaust narrative.

Keywords: Jewish material heritage, Poland, Central-Eastern Europe, critical heritage studies, Authorized Heritage Discourse, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Mayer Kirshenblatt, Opatów.

The temporary exhibition (*post*)*JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, running from May 17 to December 16, 2024 at the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, presented the history of the Polish-Jewish town of Opatów through the paintings of Mayer Kirshenblatt and curatorial research conducted in the contemporary Opatów. Kirshenblatt, a Polish Jew who migrated with his family to Canada in 1934, provides a unique visual narrative, while the curators' research offers an up-to-date perspective on Opatów. This exhibition serves as a critical platform for discussing the preservation of Jewish material heritage in Central-Eastern Europe.

In my review I will examine the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Harrison, 2009; Smith, 2006), which is one of the core concepts of critical heritage studies and refers to the set of official heritage practices and beliefs that shape the protection of heritage. Here, I will focus particularly on practices related to Jewish material heritage in Central-Eastern Europe. As an art historian and archaeologist specializing in museum studies and critical heritage studies, my focus lies on the material remnants of Jewish daily life before World War II. I contend that Jewish heritage in the region is predominantly Holocaust-centric, neglecting the extensive and rich history of Jews in Central-Eastern Europe before World War II, particularly in Poland. While there are commendable grassroots initiatives, such as the recent commemoration of the kibbutz in the Grochów district of Warsaw (Zakrzewski, 2023), and multiple important events organized by institutions like the Polin Museum and the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, these efforts often emphasize representation rather than preservation of (sparse) examples of tangible heritage. This review will use the exhibition as a starting point to discuss the status of Jewish material heritage within Poland's official heritage protection practices.

Curated by Natalia Romik (an artist famous for her previous projects on the materiality of the Holocaust, like *Hideouts: The Architecture of Survival*, see Romik, 2024) and Justyna Koszarska-Szulc (a curator and literary scholar specializing in Holocaust studies), in collaboration with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (a scholar specializing in Performance and Jewish studies, a renowned museum specialist and professional, the daughter of Mayer

Kirshenblatt), and co-organized by the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the exhibition occupies two rooms: the main gallery on the first (ground) floor and a smaller room on the second floor. Both spaces are enveloped in dim lighting and dark colors, predominantly grey and burgundy. The main gallery features Kirshenblatt's paintings, accompanied by his own commentaries, material objects, videos, photographs, maps, documents, digital reconstructions, and other visual materials. These elements collectively narrate the story of the Opatów shtetl, where Poles and Jews coexisted before World War II. The second room focuses on the reception of Kirshenblatt's work and his return to Poland, featuring videos and contemporary artistic interventions related to prewar Polish-Jewish history.

Visitors begin their journey through Opatów with a curatorial message emphasizing that the exhibition does not indulge in nostalgic portrayals of a multicultural Poland. Instead, it aims to reveal the harsh realities of interwar life through Kirshenblatt's often joyous paintings, which also contain social and economic critiques. The exhibition introduces the concept of "post-Jewish" [styled as (post)JEWISH] (for further literature and discussion on the term "post-Jewish" see, for instance, Lehrer & Meng, 2015), describing forgotten and abandoned places and objects in post-Holocaust Poland that often provoke anxiety and alarm. The curators stress the importance of preserving the memory of Polish-Jewish history, culture, and identity through the display of these material objects.

In the main gallery, Kirshenblatt's paintings are prominently displayed (Fig. 1), with objects and visual materials collected by the curators during their research in Opatów positioned on perpendicular walls in the center of the room (Fig. 2). This setup creates a dialogue between the paintings and the artifacts, showing how the depicted places have transformed or vanished. Kirshenblatt's artworks, created long after his migration to Canada, depict daily life in Apt (the Jewish name for Opatów) using a naïve, folk-art style. The paintings are organized into sections: Opatów, Christians, Holidays, Market Square, Jewish Street, and Holocaust, each offering insights into the heritage of the Jewish community. The visitor first sees a panorama of Opatów (Fig. 3), then a series of paintings that show the coexistence of Christian Poles and Jews, to further concentrate on the Jewish heritage recorded by the painter: both material heritage such as buildings (e.g. mikveh, synagogue) and intangible heritage like traditions and celebrations (e.g. Yom Kippur Eve, klezmer bands).

The perpendicular walls close to the entrance to the main gallery provide additional context, linking Kirshenblatt to the wider tradition of Polish folk art and presenting videos about the post-Jewish remains in Opatów (Fig. 4).





Figure 1. Paintings by Mayer Kirshenblatt, *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka



Figure 2. A view of the exhibition *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka

These videos highlight the deteriorating state of Jewish-built heritage and the failures of existing heritage protection mechanisms. The ruined and forgotten houses and schools are now slowly being demolished. The only remnant that is left is the timber from dilapidated houses. A piece of timber is exhibited in the gallery to demonstrate the material state of this forgotten heritage to visitors. The way it is presented resembles the idea of curated decay, another core concept of critical heritage studies introduced in 2017 by Caitlin DeSilvey (2017). This new approach calls for attention to biological transformations of objects that may not necessarily be considered heritage in traditional discourses and practices.

The next wall refers to the hardships encountered by the Jewish community in the interwar period (Fig. 5). It provides some details on the typical jobs that Jews would take. With the help of original artifacts, it additionally tells the story of the soap factory owned by Leyzor Mandelbaum. Artifacts displayed in glass cases include pottery, menorahs, and architectural fragments, offering a tangible connection to the past lives of Opatów's Jewish community (Fig. 6). Exhibits also address the transformation of significant sites such as the mikveh, synagogue, and cemetery, illustrating the curators' research into their current states and histories.

The research conducted by the curators casts light on the afterlives of these places. The mikveh became the District Dairy Cooperative in the 1990s. This story is reminiscent of an earlier photographic series by Wojciech Wilczyk (*Niewinne oko nie istnieje*, 2009; see Marszałek, 2022; Wróblewska, 2015), in which the artist documented the new roles of synagogues and prayer houses in the postwar reality. The new function of the Opatów mikveh did not overshadow the original architecture and the curators were able to retrieve the mikveh through laser scanning. The effect of the digital work showing the original basin in the building is presented alongside the cream fudge candy produced by the District Dairy Cooperative.

The synagogue, on the other hand, was completely ruined after the war. The last remnants are currently located on a private property. The exhibit narrates the story of the synagogue with the help of archival aerial photos, paintings by Kirshenblatt, and a few remaining candelabra. The cemetery exhibit presents a similar story – razed to the ground, it was also a site of executions. The materials exhibited along its tragic fate consist of a scientific analysis of the soil and a map, together with material remains of the weapons used for executions. Finally, the last exhibit presents the contrast between Jewish Street as remembered by Mayer Kirshenblatt and the current state of the place (Fig. 7). “These humble remnants of the Jewish past” were meticulously photographed





Figure 3. The opening of the exhibition *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka



Figure 4. Screen presenting a video from contemporary Opatów, *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka



Figure 5. One of the perpendicular walls providing context to the paintings by Kirshenblatt, *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka



Figure 6. Artifacts from Opatów, *(post)JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka



Figure 7. Exhibit presenting contemporary views of Jewish Street in Opatów, (post)*JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt*, Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2024. Photo by Monika Stobiecka

during the curatorial research and today serve as evidence of the poor state of protection of Jewish prewar heritage in Poland.

The second part of the exhibition, located in the smaller upstairs room, showcases videos of Kirshenblatt's return to Poland and contemporary art-works related to Polish-Jewish history.

The educational program accompanying the exhibition focuses on the heritage of other Polish shtetls. It features film screenings, guided walks, workshops, and a podcast. Most events aim to explore what remains of the Jewish communities that once thrived in Polish cities before World War II. The exhibits on display compellingly address this question, providing a thoughtful and persuasive response. The display will also be remembered through the exhibition catalog (Koszarska-Szulc et al., 2024).

The fragile, fragmentary remnants of the presence of Polish Jews displayed in the main gallery do not fit into the traditional definition of heritage as outlined by the Authorized Heritage Discourse, which prioritizes old, grand, monumental, and aesthetically pleasing sites (Smith, 2006, p. 11). The objects presented at the Polin Museum are far from such an identification. Instead, these objects align more closely with Bjørnar Olsen's description of unruly and problematic things: things out of hand, discarded, destroyed and

forgotten “but which stubbornly remain” (Olsen, 2012, p. 21). Such things cannot be treated as heritage in official heritage practices. They are not “old” (in comparison with ancient civilizations), they are neither grand nor monumental. They resist being called “beautiful” and “pleasing” as they come to testify about a life that was brutally annihilated. This disparity highlights the limitations of official heritage practices, which often overlook less grandiose but equally significant artifacts.

The UNESCO World Heritage List exemplifies this system, recognizing and legitimizing sites as heritage of universal value (Harrison, 2009). Besides acknowledging the value of heritage, the list has other multiple roles. A site registered on the list boosts tourism and therefore affects the economy. It points to important chapters in history and culture and has educational significance. Finally, it presents an image of a state/nation/country to the international audience. Poland’s entries include 2 natural and 15 cultural sites (*World Heritage List*, 2024), with only two explicitly linked to Jewish history: the Historic Centre of Kraków, including the Jewish district of Kazimierz, and Auschwitz Birkenau. If we think about Jewish history and culture outside of the paradigm dominating in Jewish heritage protection in Poland, namely the history of the Holocaust, we may say that Jewish history and culture is underrepresented. Only one town tells the story of the rich traditions of Polish Jews. The Historic Centre of Kraków is, of course, a remarkable example of a complex heritage site, but we should not forget that this entry on the list consists not only of Kazimierz, but also Wawel Royal Castle, Sukiennice, and the Market Square, i.e. all the important sights in the center of the city. The limited recognition of Jewish history and culture, especially outside the Holocaust narrative, underscores the need for broader acknowledgment and preservation efforts.

My short survey of Jewish heritage sites in Central-Eastern Europe on the UNESCO list reveals a similar pattern, with only six other recognized sites in the region (*World Heritage List*, 2024). Czechia has three of them: one in Prague, a similar case to Kraków, the Jewish Quarter in Trebic, and Zatec with the Landscape of Saaz Hops; Germany has two sites, one of them acknowledged only in 2023: the Jewish-Medieval Heritage of Erfurt, and the older serial site of Speyer, Worms and Mainz; finally, Slovakia has one Jewish heritage site, namely the Bardejov Town Conservation Reserve. Notably, Belarus, Lithuania and Ukraine, with their significant Jewish histories, have no recognized sites, pointing to a broader issue of the underrepresentation of Jewish heritage in the official heritage discourse in Central-Eastern Europe.



The temporary exhibition (*post*)*JEWISH... Shtetl Opatów Through the Eyes of Mayer Kirshenblatt* is not only a presentation of a vibrant collection of paintings by Mayer Kirshenblatt but, first and foremost, a much-needed opening of a discussion on the status of prewar Jewish heritage in Central-Eastern Europe. The display highlights the everyday life, traditions, customs and built heritage of the Jewish communities living in over a thousand shtetls in today's territories of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus. The exhibition is a call for a more comprehensive approach to Jewish heritage before World War II. It is not the role of this review to come up with a fully developed proposal, but rather, on the basis of the exhibition and the problems it covers, to offer some preliminary ideas.

This new approach to prewar Jewish heritage demands transcending the understanding of heritage as promoted and realized by the Authorized Heritage Discourse. AHD, which prioritizes aesthetically pleasing, grand, old and monumental heritage sites and objects, often sidelines less impressive but equally important places and artifacts. The exhibition at the Polin Museum in Warsaw provided a counter-narrative to AHD. Instead of focusing on values promoted by official heritage agendas (such as UNESCO or local heritage conservation institutions), it presented the values of mundane and fragmentary remnants of the recent past: the things that survived. The exhibition thus underscored the importance of preserving and restoring not just grand monuments (which did not survive war damage), but especially humble, everyday objects that are a materialization of the lives and experiences of Jewish communities before the war. Therefore, a comprehensive approach to Jewish heritage before World War II should incorporate a more object-oriented perspective on heritage (Olsen, 2013) that prioritizes “things” over “monuments.” Focusing research on prewar Jewish heritage on things and objects would allow to educate more effectively about Jewish culture, tradition and identity in Central-Eastern Europe.

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Niewidoczne dziedzictwo żydowskie w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej: (po)ŻYDOWSKIE... Sztetl Opatów oczami Majera Kirszenblata. Recenzja wystawy w Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin

Recenzja wystawy (po)ŻYDOWSKIE... Sztetl Opatów oczami Majera Kirszenblata zorganizowanej w 2024 roku w Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin służy otwarciu dyskusji na temat zachowania materialnego dziedzictwa żydowskiego w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Wystawa eksploruje ten temat poprzez prezentację malarstwa Majera Kirszenblata oraz współczesne, pogłębiane badania kuratorskie. Recenzja prezentuje strukturę wystawy i zagłębia się w szczególności dotyczące wybranych eksponatów, by następnie odnieść je do usankcjonowanego dyskursu dziedzictwa, pojęcia z zakresu krytycznych stu-

diów nad dziedzictwem opisującego mechanizmy oficjalnej opieki nad dziedzictwem. Ekspozycja dostarcza argumentów za tym, by podejmować kroki w kierunku zachowania dziedzictwa życia codziennego Żydów w regionie. To zaś jest często przeoczane w oficjalnych praktykach dziedzictwa, które przyznają priorytet ochronie monumentalnych i imponujących miejsc i obiektów. Recenzja także zwraca uwagę na niedostateczną reprezentację miejsc dziedzictwa żydowskiego na Liście Światowego Dziedzictwa UNESCO i postuluje szersze uznanie i działania na rzecz ochrony dziedzictwa wykraczającego poza narrację Holocaustu.

Słowa kluczowe: żydowskie dziedzictwo materialne, Polska, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia, krytyczne studia nad dziedzictwem, usankcjonowany dyskurs dziedzictwa, Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin, Majer Kirszenblat, Opatów.

Note

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