
Polin: “Ultimate Lost Object”*

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Abstract: The article is a critique of the POLIN Museum’s contemporary exhibition, which – according to the author – suppresses the most difficult aspect of Polish-Jewish past, the ones associated with the violence of the pogroms that were the decisive factor in the greatest waves of Jewish emigration from Poland.

Keywords: POLIN Museum in Warsaw; erasing; performative democracy; politics of memory.

In *Objects of Ethnography*, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that in addition to exhibiting objects, every museum also exhibits the authors of the exhibitions (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p. 434). To know the authors is to examine the conventions they have applied, how they construct the subjectivity of the objects they choose to exhibit, and consider the “implications for those who see and those who are seen.”¹ I will address Barbara Kirshenblatt’s suggestion as it relates to the Core Exhibition of the POLIN Museum, curated by Professor Kirshenblatt herself. Who are the authors of the works she has selected to exhibit? What can we say about them based on the decisions they have made about what to exhibit? Who is the imagined audience and counteraudience (Warner, 2002) of the POLIN Museum? I can only ask these questions and point towards answers, which have yet to be fully developed.

Narrative

I will begin with the essay *Categorically Jewish, Distinctly Polish* (Rosman, 2012), authored by Moshe Rosman – an outside consultant for the POLIN Museum. Referring to the theories of Hayden White’s equivalent and incommensurable metanarrative, Rosman extols the advantages of a distinctive museum narrative. Rosman argues that a clear thesis constitutes an “Archimedean point,” which will then focus discussion among the spectators. There is no need to prove one’s choice of narrative is right, he claims. The only thing one has to do is to effectively present the narrative. Rosman writes, “[t]his means that a museum will actively seek to do what the writing scholar at times appears

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1 “The first order of business is therefore to examine critically the conventions guiding ethnographic display, to explicate how displays constitute subjects and with what implications for those who see and those who are seen” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1991, p. 434).

to be trying to avoid: distill the metanarrative in a way that makes it both apparent and compelling” (Rosman, 2012, p. 4). The author does not elaborate on a contradiction I deem critical for the entire strategy of the POLIN Museum: a contradiction that is becoming apparent between that which belongs to the museum and that which is scholarly. Consequently, another apparent contradiction arises between the purported neutrality of the scholar and the enthusiastic approach of some Polish scholars towards the “distinctive narrative” offered by the Museum.

Rosman summarizes POLIN’s narrative, which is the history of the Polish Jews, in short as a “story of overall achievement punctuated by crisis and persecution” (Rosman, 2012, s. 13). By no means is this a story about persistently resurgent antisemitism. “There is no gallery devoted to ‘Polish Antisemitism.’ Neither is it the running subtext of the Museum’s story” (Rosman, 2012, p. 17). The essence of the project is

“that Poland’s relationship to its Jews was expressed in a range of behaviors and attitudes. These were combined in a complex calculus of cause and effect, mixed motives and unintended consequences. Yes, there were many modes and examples of Jew-hatred, but there were also, in varying measures, tolerance, religious freedom and economic opportunity for Jews...” (Rosman, 2012, p. 17).

(Transferred into the reality of the Native American Museum in Washington D.C., such a conciliatory narrative would probably rule out the exhibition *Nation to Nation*, devoted to broken treaties.) In the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the narrative rules out isolating a thread of anti-Jewish violence, including the pogroms, which became one of the main reasons why East-European Jews emigrated to America.

Just as the pogroms are apparently blamed on Russia, the Holocaust is univocally blamed on the Germans: “The Shoah was not the culmination of Jewish history in Poland. [...] Conceived, imposed and executed by Germans [...], it was not emblematic of Polish-Jewish history; neither was it that history’s organic or logical conclusion. It was not a conclusion at all” (Rosman, 2012, p. 19). The crucial fragment of the Museum’s program concerns Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* and the book *Neighbors* by Jan Gross, of which we read that they

“have contributed to a different accusation against Poles. It is true that Poles neither planned nor implemented the Final Solution, but it is a fact that at least a fair number of Poles enthusiastically cooperated with the Nazis in its execution in Poland.

The Museum has crafted a sophisticated, nuanced ‘Polish response’ to this charge. First of all, while not hesitating to show Polish antisemitism in its manifold manifestations, the Museum asserts that this had nothing to do with the German Nazi Final Solution. The Holocaust was of a whole different order. Genocide was not the objective of even the most rabid Polish antisemites, in any period. [...] Third, with respect to cases of Poles killing Jews during the war independently of the Germans in places like Lwow and Jedwabne, the Museum classifies these as ‘local violence’” (Rosman, 2012, pp. 24–25).

Foreseeing controversies over the above-described issues, the author stresses that even though the Museum is formed by an international team, the arguing parties display a dichotomous identity. The author writes that the “sophisticated” and “nuanced Polish response” to the accusations made by Jan Gross will not be liked by “many Jews, who will see such distinctions as a kind of apologetics” (Rosman, 2002, p. 25). The thing is that the standpoints in this dispute do not run along cultural or national lines. Just like an apologetic vision of Poland’s future will be contested not only by Jews, the group of apologists will not include only Poles the best example being the apologists in the group of non-Poles who co-founded the Museum.

A shortcoming of Rosman’s argument is the fact that he completely fails to notice that the Museum’s program as it has been formulated constitutes an unexpected and incomprehensible backlash against the crucial historical debates in Poland of the recent 15 years. By using tools at the museum’s disposal, POLIN’s narrative makes yet another attempt to settle the dispute.²

Surrogacy

A culture that has survived a disaster recovers in the process of surrogacy, and a museum by its very nature is a collection of surrogates. “Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure [...] survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates” (Roach, 1996, p. 2).

In the case of POLIN, the process of surrogacy has had an exceptional dimension. This surrogacy is accentuated by the tensions arising between the Muranów *environments of memory*, in which the Museum was erected, and the *place of memory* constituted by the Museum itself. The building is located in the center of Muranów, a district raised out of the ruins and on the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. Based on multimedia, the museum becomes a memorial by default devoid of artefacts, which stands in opposition to the neighborhood, which in turn is an artefact in itself.

A decision which proved to have similar repercussions was to subjugate Jewish death on this spot to a rather vague life. “We are a museum of life,” the founders emphasize (“Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: Opowiadamy o życiu,” 2014). The idea of life is expressed in the building designed by Rainer Mahlamaki by a cavernous entrance hall open towards both sides of Plac Muranowski. While the spokeswoman for the Museum interprets the open space as a crack in the history of Polish Jews made by the Holocaust,³ the shape of the

2 We can learn how Polish politicians use the “Polish answer” to the accusations made by Jan Gross as formulated by the POLIN Museum by looking at the words uttered by one of the advisors of the President of Poland, a professor of history, who managed to link a remark about the Museum to a comment on Roman Polański. The President’s advisor said that as a “child of the Holocaust,” the famous film director is safe in Poland, where he came to witness the opening ceremony of the POLIN Museum, which “proves what a hospitable and safe land it [Poland] was for Jews” (kospa, 2014).

3 Nitzan Reisner from the Press Office of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews: “Curvilinear walls created a gap, a tear reflecting the tragic break in the 1000-year-long history of Polish Jews, i.e. the Shoah” (Wojciechowski, 2014).

hallway, “reminiscent of waves or dunes” (Pawłowski, 2014) lived to see an interpretation which is a far better match for POLIN’s message. If the mentioned entrance hall was to symbolize the Crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews, then it had been placed in an unfortunate location. The figure of miraculous salvation seems to be rather out of place in Poland, a country which lost Jews in the Shoah, successive waves of immigration and the expulsions of 1968.

An empty, white space was intended by the authors in the Shoah gallery at the end of the exhibition to serve as an attempt at emphasizing that the Shoah was not only an episode in history, but also the end to the history of Eastern European Jewry. According to Barbara Engelking, this aspect of the project had already received approval; however, it eventually was not implemented, allegedly due to technical reasons.⁴

Based on the above premises – the obsession with life and erasure of death – one can get the impression that the authors of POLIN Museum’s metanarrative not only attempt to forcefully, and in Poland – by far too early, close the mourning after Shoah, but also fit it into a sort of a new *grand récit* of the Red Sea: about life, salvation and time that heals all wounds. Meanwhile, according to Dominick LaCapra, “some wounds of the past – both personal and historical – cannot be healed without leaving scars or remnants, which in a sense are archives of the present” (LaCapra, 2010, p. 137). The preservation of such archives in architecture can be exemplified by Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veterans’ Monument in Washington D.C., with its form of the letter “V” lying on its side, which may stand both for “Vietnam” and “victory” as well as “violence.” A similar method was followed by German architects, who created characteristic *counter-memorial architecture*, which according to James C. Young, “could express the breach in the faith in civilization without mending it” (Young, 2014).⁵ Indeed, their projects constitute social programs embedded in architecture, while the public debates, which had preceded them, have profoundly transformed the German society.

Is it not strange that the first Jewish museum in a country where the Shoah took place does not show similar ambitions? Barbara Kirshenblatt says: “Jedwabne, Kielce and the discussion on the books by Jan Tomasz Gross have, in my opinion, little to do with Polish-Jewish relations, but above all relate to Polish-Polish relations. [...] antisemitism is not a Polish-Jewish, but a Polish problem” (“Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: Opowiadamy o życiu,” 2014). Effective as a rebuff of the cliché of the “Jewish question,” which has never been Jewish, the above sentence contains a deep ambivalence, highlighted by a joke made by Dariusz Stola – Director of the Museum: “The Museum of the History of Polish Jews is not a museum of antisemitism. The antisemites have to build their own museum!” (Kolesnyczenko & Stola, 2014). Unfortunately, this is all but a good joke in Polish realities.

4 “It turned out that in the place where it should be located there was ‘an emergency corridor, which could not be blocked or isolated...’” – from a letter by Barbara Engelking to Jan Gross, March 5, 2015, made available to me by Jan Gross.

5 The two aforementioned examples originate from James E. Young, *The Stages of Memory: Berlin, New York, Oslo* (Young, 2014).

The reason why antisemitism in Poland is not a museum object, but a collection of active codes is precisely that there is no museum here which would like to tell its story.

What proved memorable in the comment made by Professor Kirshenblatt, who gave us a tour of the exhibition back in October 2014, was her description of the meticulously reconstructed synagogue in Gwoździec. She called the synagogue the “ultimate lost object,” and this wording aptly reflects the Poland we may see in POLIN. This Poland is even better than the original one. Antisemitism disappears and what remains is nothing but kind-heartedness. This is an example of a *Poland rebranding procedure* – an operation which proves beneficial for all: the Polish authorities, who show what a hospitable country Poland is; American tourists who share with their grandchildren their heritage polished of antisemitic obscenity; and tours of Israeli youth, who until recently had been brought nowhere else but to Auschwitz. I hypothesize that from the perspective of *local knowledge*, this rebranding is a self-colonizing operation that will lead to less self-reflection of the country’s past on the part of Poland and its citizens. Unlike some of the German museums, POLIN does not require the audience to reflect on difficult issues. Instead of being thought-provoking, the museum tells a self-complacent tale of a colorful past life and a pitiful and somewhat incomprehensible “disappearance” of Jews from Poland.

Reception

Sociologist Helena Datner was the President of the Jewish Community of Warsaw between 2006 and 2014 and the co-author of the exhibition on the post-war era. Shortly before the opening of the Museum she resigned in protest against corrections being introduced to the exhibition. She describes domestic reactions to the Museum as a need for apology:

“...an apology for Poland, which unlike other countries is free of antisemitism, a sign of which is the very fact that the Museum had been opened. An apology for mutual relations of a thousand years, in which Poland, except for short moments, has been identified with Po-lin, ‘a place where you rest’, a country for the Jews, a country better than other countries. Finally, an apology for the Museum itself, which unlike most Jewish museums in the world, is devoted to life, and not to martyrdom or the Shoah. You could hear slogans about the ‘Museum of life’ coming from everywhere (‘Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: Opowiadamy o życiu,’ 2014). I heard the thing was not to picture Jews as ‘eternal victims’, because this is a stereotype, a very boring one as a matter of fact. That is a terribly stupid opinion. Once again we are witnessing a display of Jewish complexes and relieving those who persecuted Jews from taking responsibility. Of course, this is presenting Jewish life – however, the question is: where did the Shoah come from? Why have the Jews always occupied a ‘dangerous place’ in the [Polish] society? What answer can there be to these questions but a great, ongoing, educational, moral and civilizational challenge? Does this contradict the importance and colorfulness of Jewish culture?”⁶

6 A conversation of Leopold Sobel with Helena Datner was published in “Plotkies,” No. 62 (Sobel & Datner, 2014).

According to Datner, the museum narrative, especially as it pertains to the most recent past, is devoid of “respect for difference”: “everything in the narrative is a Polish story, boiled down to one single denominator, saying there is no place for otherness here” (Paziński & Datner, 2015). The Museum puts in the limelight assimilated Jews, desirably famous ones, and at the same time takes no notice of the much bigger part of the Jewish society, made up of people who wanted nothing but to remain themselves.

“The point was that the exhibition [...] was supposed to present a more elevating Jewish history, focusing on great things and famous names of primarily those Jews who contributed their share to the Polish culture. [...] The fundamental thought is that both on the cognitive and educational level, it is worth dealing with those Jews who were doing precisely the same things as we were. Jankiel fought for the independence of Poland, while yet another Jew formed the Polish Legions. This is something we may love the Jews for. [...] It is amazing that we still have to emphasize this, safeguard ourselves by stating that although something is Jewish, it is not anti-Polish” (Sobel & Datner, 2014).

According to Datner, the construction of the museum has been accompanied by “a fear of the [Polish] society” from the very beginning. “This was a fear of showing the depth of anti-Jewish prejudices, which are as deep as a well. There was certainly a fear that the Museum would make the society furious that so much money had been spent on the Jews” (Paziński & Datner, 2015). This fear resulted in eliminating from the exhibition something Datner described as “the Jewish point of view.” A similar term in cultural anthropology is the *native point of view*, introduced by Bronisław Malinowski. It started the process of empowering the excluded, and it is precisely in the context of this that it is worth looking somewhat closer at the reactions that this “Jewish point of view” triggered in the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. During one of the early presentations of the post-war exhibition, a representative of the Chancellory of the President of the Republic of Poland said that “if she had assumed that such an expression would have appeared in the exhibition, she would have never committed herself to the Museum”. Another representative of the Museum Council declared that as a historian he knows only one point of view – the scholarly one – and as a Pole he added that the “Jewish point of view” excludes him from the dialogue. Another person made an appeal not to use similar expressions, since “this turns the Museum into [something] essentially unreliable.”⁷

Rejecting the “Jewish point of view” by the Museum Council resulted in corrections made by reviewers of the *Postwar Years* gallery (Sobel & Datner, 2014), who demanded from Danter to remove from her text the expression “liberation,” which describes the coming of the Red Army. The correction, representing the anti-Communist point of view, erases the peculiar character of the language and experiences of those Jews who remained in hiding, for whom the end of the war meant literally the liberation from death. Analogous corrections were also demanded by a “historian [who] stated that you cannot

7 An e-mail from Helena Datner to the author of September 17, 2014.

use the expression 'a fair social system' even in the following sentence: 'many Jews who did not leave Poland right after the war hoped that the new system would be fair, in other words, that it would bring about actually equal rights for Jews'" (Sobel & Datner, 2014). Another sign of disregarding the language spoken by Jews was calling a fragment of the main exhibition *Paradisus Judaeorum* – "the Jewish paradise." The expression constituted a 17th-century polemic concept condemning the rampant prevalence of infidels. Framing this satirical expression as the title of a part of the exhibition implicitly puts it into the mouths of contented Jews (Kot 1937, 1957).⁸

I would like to understand how an ethnographer as eminent as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett could agree to such a subjection of the Jewish language to the categories of the dominant majority. The only thing that might justify her consent would be a pragmatism that concerns recognizing who this museum is actually intended for. Maybe we fail to understand something after all? Maybe the POLIN Museum is not intended for the Jews, even though it concerns historical Jews? Maybe it is meant to be the first **non-national** museum of Polish history told from the carefully sanitized point of view of an extinct nation which used to live here? In such case, Jews would constitute a mere pretext for Poles to speak about themselves again – and yet it would be thanks to Jews that something extremely important could be contributed to this story. The background perspective would deprive Polish history of grudge and martyrdom. Maybe the POLIN Museum *deemphasizes* Jewish martyrdom, because it recognizes it as the twin of Polish martyrdom? Maybe the reason behind all this is the hope for reaching a non-martyrological *middle ground* and stepping beyond the *dyadic pattern of mimetic rivalry* (Farneti, 2015)? This is something I would like to believe in.

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8 I have discovered a much earlier German usage of the ironic trope *Paradisus Judaeorum* in 14th-century Austria: "There is an interesting, if somewhat questionable, record of a persecution [of Jews] in the Habsburg territories of Styria and Carinthia in 1397, which is said to have caused many Jews to flee to Vienna. According to the source, the Austrian duke prevented an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in the city of Vienna in exchange for a promise by the Jewish refugees to pay him 16,000 marks for their protection. Also ist Osterreich der Juden verhaissen und gesegnet land' ('thus Austria is the promised and blessed land of the Jews'), the source concludes somewhat indignantly" (Resnick, 2013, p. 35).

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Abstrakt: Tekst stanowi krytykę projektu wystawy współczesnej Muzeum POLIN, tłumiącej – zdaniem autorki – najtrudniejsze, związane z przemocą pogromową, aspekty polsko-żydowskiej przeszłości, które zdecydowały o największych falach emigracji Żydów z Polski.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Muzeum POLIN w Warszawie; wymazywanie; demokracja performatywna; polityki historyczne.



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