

Viewpoint

Children During the Holocaust: Analysis of the Narrative Line of the Exhibition at the Jewish Museum Berlin

*Marcin Zaborski**

Abstract

How does the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) present the stories of the youngest participants in the Second World War? What role do children play in the narrative of the museum? Do the curators of the exhibition devote a separate space to them or are the children's fates 'inscribed' in the overall message about history? I set out to address these questions in the article by undertaking research to analyse the narrative approach of the JMB. I examine how the museum constructs the messages it presents to its audiences and explore the composition and content of the exhibition, the tangible and intangible heritage gathered within it, and the possible meanings of the various elements of the exhibition. This research reveals that the Holocaust story presented at the JMB is one centred on the interruption of life, loss, and suffering, with a strong focus on the perspectives of the civilian victims of genocide.

Keywords: Holocaust, Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB), children, childhood, museum communication

Introduction

Evidence in the public sphere suggests that the voices and perspectives of children can act as powerfully emotive and credible witnesses of the atrocities of the Second World War and Holocaust (Bubar 2023: 27). The experiences and artistic and literary works of children and young people – such as Anne Frank, the eminent German-born Jewish girl who wrote a diary documenting her life and experiences while hiding from the Nazis; the young boy photographed with his hands raised up in the air stood opposite a German soldier pointing a gun at him during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising; and the creative works produced by the young prisoners at the Theresienstadt concentration camp – are also often used to represent these horrors and have an important place in building a picture of these events. As real people with real lives these children are not merely symbols of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and their accounts and works help to centralise the lives and fates of the Jewish Community. However these examples do not fully capture the experience of childhood during the Holocaust (the youngest victims of the Holocaust were in different situations and faced different challenges, with not all of them being sent to camps, for example). The world created by the German Nazis had no previous known rules, and the perspective of the child – often naive and unencumbered by preconceptions – can reveal something in a way that an adult perspective cannot.

How does the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) present the fate of children affected by the violence of the Holocaust? What role do children play in the narrative approach of the Museum? Are the deaths of victims or the deaths of heroes at the centre of the exhibition message? Is the museum presentation dedicated to specific, individual figures or rather to communities of anonymous participants in wartime events? These questions about the youngest victims of the Holocaust will frame the reflections made in the article and in analysing the permanent exhibition presented at the JMB. Using the method of visual analysis, I will explore the composition and content of the exhibition, the tangible and intangible heritage gathered and presented in the show, alongside the intended meanings and consequences

of the various elements of the exhibition.¹ In analysing the informational structure of these elements, I will focus on their – as Marcus Banks (2009: 39) puts it – internal and external narrative. Banks describes this as the image and subject itself not only having meaning, but also its history and its accompanying context.

In my analysis, I was interested to know whether separate parts of the exhibition were devoted to children or whether the fate of the youngest victims of the Holocaust had been integrated into the overall message documented in the exhibition. I was also intrigued to understand whether the exhibition dealt with a collective character or with multiple individual characters as part of its methodological approach, and subsequently whether the exhibition presented anonymous members of the Jewish community or whether it depicted the fate of specific figures known by name. Of further interest was whether the curators of the exhibition focused on the tragic dimension of children's fates, or whether they attempted to show them through the perspective of heroic deeds and the individuals performing them. Additionally I wanted to examine whether room was made to present the survivors and their post-war fates.

Museum as a space for research

In this article I make the case that the museum is a medium. It is one of many actors in the space of public communication, whose purpose (amongst many other roles) is both to transmit and share information, and to generate and maintain social connections. This communication takes place, for example, through exhibitions, publications, cultural events, or various types of multimedia (Hooper-Greenhill 1995: 6; Dobek-Ostrowska 2007: 122-3). These elements help to build a specific relationship between the museum and its audiences and to involve these audiences in the process of interpreting the content presented through the various tools at the museum's disposal. In this sense, the museum becomes a kind of forum: a zone of contact and mediation between the sender and the audience (Ziębińska-Witek 2014: 249). A special role is undoubtedly played here by the exhibition itself, which can also be treated as a medium. It can be seen as a communication channel through which, amongst other things, we shape memory, organise public debate, or pursue educational goals. It is therefore not just a static presentation of the past, but about initiating specific processes. The information contained in the collections thus becomes a source of proactive action (Dean 2002: 5; Barnard and Loomis 1994: 14). These processes can also be seen in the space of Holocaust commemoration, where museum exhibitions have undeniably become an important medium of remembrance. As Rachel E. Perry and Agata Pietrasik (2023: 1) state: 'by collecting, representing, and transmitting information through images, texts, objects and technologies, they offered experiential and spatial narratives that forged new relationships between artworks, historical documents, and material artifacts, thus producing knowledge as well as framing individual memories'.

When we consider the field of 'memory culture', which encompasses all forms of conscious remembrance of historical events, figures, and processes (Cornelißen 2012: 2), it becomes clear just how important mass media have become in recent decades. They play an extremely important role in disseminating images of the past, creating narratives about past events, and forming memories. It could be argued that the media plays a 'memory-forming' role, and visual media have a special place here. They are not just a transmitter of memory as they are simultaneously involved in memory formation (Erll 2022: 205-10).

Placing the institution of the museum in this very context, I will analyse how the JMB constructs the messages it sends to its audiences and what the content of these messages are, in terms of the (partial) messages offered by individual artefacts, and how these messages relate to each other to influence the narrative line of the museum. Acknowledging that there is a need to take into account the different tools with which the specific language of the museum is created – not only in terms of words, but also images or sounds used to build a story and a historical reconstruction – I will explore the environment in which these elements are gathered through highlighting the space in which the exhibition of the JMB is presented. The museum building itself also projects an important message which becomes an element of the scenographic space and creates a specific interpretative context, with the exhibition space being determined by its architecture (Żygulski 1990: 4). Therefore, it is also critical to

pay attention to the architectural dimension of the museum under review.

It should also be stipulated that the subject of the study will be the content presented in the exhibition space, as well as the accompanying information made available to visitors via an audio guide application (which visitors can use to make their own choices about the content they want to experience and what they might want to skip). Alongside this, it must be acknowledged that each visitor brings their own experiences, knowledges, values, beliefs, sensitivities, and memories with them when visiting the exhibition, therefore creating a unique experience and generation of new meanings with each gallery interaction (Folga-Januszewska 2017: 52; Alberti 2005: 569). I am also mindful that the messages created by the museum – like other media messages – are ‘polysemous’, that is, they have multiple meanings, and when they are subjected to interpretation, the contexts and cultures of the audiences play a central role. This is why it is important to acknowledge my own positionality as the author of this text, and to acknowledge that I am unable to ever fully understand and reflect upon a complete catalogue of possible interpretations and conclusions relating to the fragments of the exhibition on the history of the Holocaust. The analyses carried out for this study are thus clearly tainted by my subjective view.

The Holocaust as a liminal experience

Between 5.1 and 5.8 million Jews – men, women, and children – lost their lives in the Holocaust (Szuchta and Trojański 2023: 455). Some 1.5 million Jewish children were among the victims of Nazi crimes in various European countries. Calculations of the demographic impact of the Second World War show that of the 1.6 million young Jews living before the war 175,000 survived until the age of 16, meaning that only 11 percent of Jewish children living in Europe in 1939 survived the war (Dwork 1994: 294). (Although according to some calculations this figure might be even lower, with only six percent of the pre-war population of Jewish children having survived.²)

Rainer Schulze (2004: 638) states that the ‘two German states which emerged after the end of the second world war developed quite different and often opposing ways of dealing with the memory of the Nazi past’. For the first decades after the War within the Federal Republic of Germany there was a social silence relating to the horrors caused by Nazi Germany (Wolff-Powęska 2011: 225-6, 278-80). In contrast, within East Germany this memory/past was used to help legitimise the German Democratic Republic (GDR), integrate society, and exclude ideological enemies. East Germany’s state propaganda explicitly identified the Federal Republic of Germany as the sole heir to the Third Reich, and thus in opposition to the anti-fascist ideology of the GDR. However, over time the memory of the War began to change, as was evident in the 1980s, for example, when the official GDR policy became more open towards commemorating the Holocaust (previously any mention of the Holocaust had been severely restricted) (Crowe 2022: 458). Within the West German state such changes had already begun to take place two decades earlier. As Martin Winstone (2010: 77) points out, ‘from the late 1960s, a younger generation of West Germans sought a more honest understanding of the Holocaust and proper commemoration of it, a process which has accelerated since unification’.

Schulze (2004: 638) points out that ‘Germany has faced the problem not only of bridging the *divided memory* of the Nazi past, but at the same time of incorporating the memory of the communist totalitarian past in the eastern part into an overriding national narrative’. This has broadened the field of discussion on the past, given new directions to the conversation about history. At the same time, however, some participants in the public debate (for example, some politicians) have begun to claim that since the post-war period is over and Germany has become a ‘normal country’, it no longer bears any special historical responsibility (Bachmann 2002: 14). Such voices, which tried to reorganise the social memory and to revise the image of the past, did not go unanswered. Thus, in this discussion, one could hear that German identity must include an awareness of one’s own mistakes and faults, because the remembrance of the victims avoids the danger of nationalism. Such opinions have emerged from debates among historians, politicians, and publicists (Assmann 2007: 11; Macdonald 2009).

As Zdzislaw Mach (2005: 23) put it – ‘the Holocaust is often and rightly described

as the most tragic moment in Europe's history, the culmination of what is worst in European civilization: intolerance, hatred of strangers, genocide.' The Holocaust was a liminal experience in history and its memory is an important part of German identity today. However, it must be remembered that this is the result of a process that developed over successive post-war decades.

The post-war revitalization of the culture of remembrance of German Jews included the restoration not only of pre-war collections of art, history and culture, but also the creation of new institutions, including small, regional ones that focus on the local dimension of history of the Jewish community. The goal of these institutions is to create a picture of history and deepen the understanding of Jewish identity and deconstruct false (often antisemitic) perceptions. This evidently has to do with combating racism and antisemitism in a multicultural society (Schulz 2024: 283-285).

The establishment of the Jewish Museum Berlin can be seen as part of this process of revitalization. A significant part of the JMB's activities is their educational initiatives which engage German school age children and college students. For example students are invited to participate in projects that involve collecting Holocaust-related items and materials, and have also helped create a library of content focusing on various dimensions of Jewish life. The Museum does not just focus on commemorating death, but also life; it seeks not only passive viewers, but also active creators of living memory culture (Oztig 2023: 11-15).

Jewish Museum Berlin: Overall narrative and interpretation approach

The JMB was officially opened in 2001 (although it had been open to the public since 1999, even before a permanent exhibition was created there). It was under construction for a little over a decade from 1989, when the German government launched a competition to develop its spatial vision. As a result of the competition, a proposal was selected and prepared by Daniel Libeskind commemorating the Jewish presence on German soil, which had lasted for centuries and was interrupted by the Holocaust (Dolegto 2019: 190).

We can describe the JMB as a memorial focused on emotions. It is a place that evidently affects visitors' emotions. Undoubtedly, this is influenced by the architectural solutions used, such as the form of the building, the use of space, the handling of light, the use of plants, and the importance of sound (Zhang, Lu, Zhang 2024: 8). The austere architecture of the building communicates the power of the negative stories that are documented in this space. The emptiness created in the halls and corridors of the museum is meant to make visitors aware of the unspeakable suffering of Holocaust victims, as Bert Olivier (2021: 27) states: 'entering this building initiates what, for many people, turns out to be an indescribably moving experience'.

The JMB is part of the trend of museums treated as a spectacle (Ghirardo 1999: 90), where visitors are expected to enjoy a variety of rich aesthetic and spatial experiences. Here we are dealing with a facility in which the architecture of the building plays a key role. Its character is intended to trigger an aesthetic experience in visitors: 'the architect's intention is that the very act of walking through the building should prompt the viewer to personally confront the history and the message of the museum' (Sztyma 2019: 58-9). The spatial structure here is rich in symbolic content and builds the theatre-like nature of the exhibition.

The Museum is housed in two buildings connected only by an underground space: one is a baroque palace constructed in 1735 (Fig. 1), the other a modern expressionist edifice erected nearby (Fig. 2).

This architectural clash of styles also has a symbolic dimension. The building from the time of Friedrich Wilhelm I, which once housed the courthouse, evokes the history and culture of Germany at a time when the Jewish community was granted civil status and Judaism enjoyed relative tolerance (Kamczycki 2007: 199). In contrast, the new edifice – created on the basis of Libeskind's design – clearly refers to the void left by Berlin's Jews. It is a mark of their absence and a response to the attempt to erase them from German history. As Andreas Huyssen (1997: 77) puts it – 'Libeskind's structure has often been described as a zigzag, as lightning, or, since it is to house a Jewish collection, as a fractured Star of David'. It is destroyed, just as Berlin was destroyed after the war. So here we have a clear reference to deconstruction.



Fig. 1. The Jewish Museum Berlin. The old baroque building. Image by the author.



Fig. 2. The Jewish Museum Berlin. "Between the Lines". Image by the author.

The curators and authors of the exhibition argue that the main organizing idea of the Museum is to tell stories using artefacts. In line with the Museum's establishment strategy, objects are the starting point in the construction of the Museum narrative: supporting the cultivation of memories and the initiation of debates around issues relating to Jewish culture and history. All objects 'are used to question, study, and present the diversity of Jewish experience' (*Jüdisches Museum Berlin*: 174). The curators emphasize that at the centre of the story they have created there are family collections entrusted to the Museum by German Jews and their descendants. Each is an invitation to discover very personal documents, photographs, or other objects that tell stories of centuries of Jewish experience. As the Museum shares: 'they illuminate historical events from an individual perspective – and bring history to life.'³ This collection includes significant artefacts that document the fate of Jewish children, some of whom perished and some of whom survived the Holocaust.

The curators of the Berlin exhibition assumed that the reading of German-Jewish history here was not to be done from the perspective of the Holocaust. They prepared an alternative narrative to engage visitors in the area of both past history and contemporary life of the Jewish community in Germany (Macdonald 2013: 284; Klein 2001: 34). Yet, despite this broad perspective, from the outset visitors of the exhibition are confronted with the tragic reality of the Holocaust. Before they encounter the actual exhibition which shows the richness of Jewish history and culture, museum visitors are led through underground, ascetic corridors that evoke the catastrophe of the Holocaust. It is the German-organised genocide that becomes the epilogue for the subsequent narrative of two millennia of Jewish presence on German soil. Visiting the Museum, 'the Holocaust is inescapable... since the building has a Holocaust tower and Libeskind's architecture has all kinds of suggestive issues' (Freudenheim 2000: 42). (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3. *The Holocaust Tower. The Jewish Museum Berlin. Image by the author.*

It is here in these corridors that personal items such as books, clothes or toys, are collected, becoming evidence of the murders committed by the Nazis and those who supported them.

The void they created with their crimes is symbolised by The Holocaust Tower, which may evoke associations with the chimney of a crematorium. As Amy Sodaro (2013: 85) points out – ‘perhaps more than any other space in the building, the Holocaust Tower experientially produces the nothingness that Libeskind desired his building to represent.’ It is a dark, completely empty space, delimited by concrete walls 24 metres high, topped by a small opening in the ceiling through which little light enters. ‘The design of the tower emphasises the tragic nature of the situation and at the same time offers a light of hope’ (Kamczycki 2007: 216). A similar idea is written into the space created right next to the museum building. This is The Garden of Exile, whose architectural design is reminiscent of Berlin’s Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Another significant reference to the Holocaust that visitors encounter before beginning their tour of the main exhibition is found in the space where the Fallen Leaves installation by Israeli sculptor Menashe Kadishman is presented. To create this design, he used more than ten thousand metal discs in which he cut holes to symbolise wide-open eyes and screaming mouths that give the impression of being twisted with pain and frozen in terror (Sodaro 2013: 85). The discs scattered on the ground – true to their name – are like fallen leaves symbolising the deaths of innocent victims of war crimes (not just the Holocaust) and evoking painful memories. (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5)



Fig. 4. *The installation Fallen Leaves (Shalkhet) by Menashe Kadishman. Image by the author.*

In the core exhibition presented at the JMB the Holocaust is not a dominant event – and certainly not dominant in terms of what part of the narrative it covers and how much space related themes occupy throughout the exhibition. The Holocaust section of the exhibition is titled ‘Catastrophe’ and shows events between 1933 and 1945. The story of the Holocaust is thus embedded here in the wider context of the Nazi period, which in the exhibition is divided into three chapters. As Cilly Kugelmann (2020: 39) puts it:

...the first runs from 1933 until the violence of *Kristallnacht* on 9 November 1938. These were years when many Jews still wondered whether they could

stay in Germany or should plan for a future abroad. The period from November 1938 to 1941 includes the outbreak of war, when the growing harshness of anti-Jewish measures escalated to unbearable proportions and attempts to leave Germany became a desperate gamble. The beginning of the war against the Soviet Union marks the start of the third chapter. From 1941, what we now call the Holocaust began to take shape: the systematic murder of all Jews wherever the Nazis took control.

The site's hosts claim that the JMB is indeed not a Holocaust museum, but as highlighted by a study conducted by Victoria Bishop Kendzia (2018), there are many visitors who experience it largely as a Holocaust memorial space.⁴



Fig. 5. "Faces". The installation Fallen Leaves. Image by the author.

Narratives of childhood: Fate of the child victims of the Holocaust

The Holocaust section of the exhibition at the JMB shows the fate of Jewish children in four basic dimensions:

- a happy childhood – as a pre-war experience, a safe period full of positive emotions shared in peer groups and within families;
- an arrested childhood – during the pre-war and wartime periods, a period of deprivation of various rights for the Jewish community, persecution, and being forced to emigrate;
- an exterminated childhood – as a wartime experience; the time when Jewish children were deprived of their lives as victims of Nazi crimes, including in concentration camps;
- a protected childhood – mainly through migration, which allowed some Jewish families (a distinct minority) to avoid death during the Holocaust.

These four dimensions of childhood are present in the main exhibition and create a linear narrative, as in many of the other sites that tell the Holocaust story. They clearly show the loss of happiness, security, decent living conditions, and finally life. The post-war opening – the beginning of a new life – is, of course, true for only a few young Jews. Childhood is not an aspect singled out as a separate theme in the exhibition of the JMB. I therefore looked for its traces among the individual pieces in the exhibition. There is no extensive catalogue of objects to provide an illustration or starting point for a narrative about childhood. However, we can find them among documents, photographs, film stills, books, illustrations, works of art, jewellery, musical instruments, sacred objects, and everyday objects – a variety of memorabilia that allow us to travel back in time and tell the stories of specific individuals. The children's fate is also noted in the exhibition in a symbolic way. A suggestive graphic ('The Murder of the Jews of Europe') is used on one wall of the exhibition, where the size of the pre-war Jewish population and the number of Jewish victims of crimes committed by the Nazis in each country is presented. (Fig. 6)

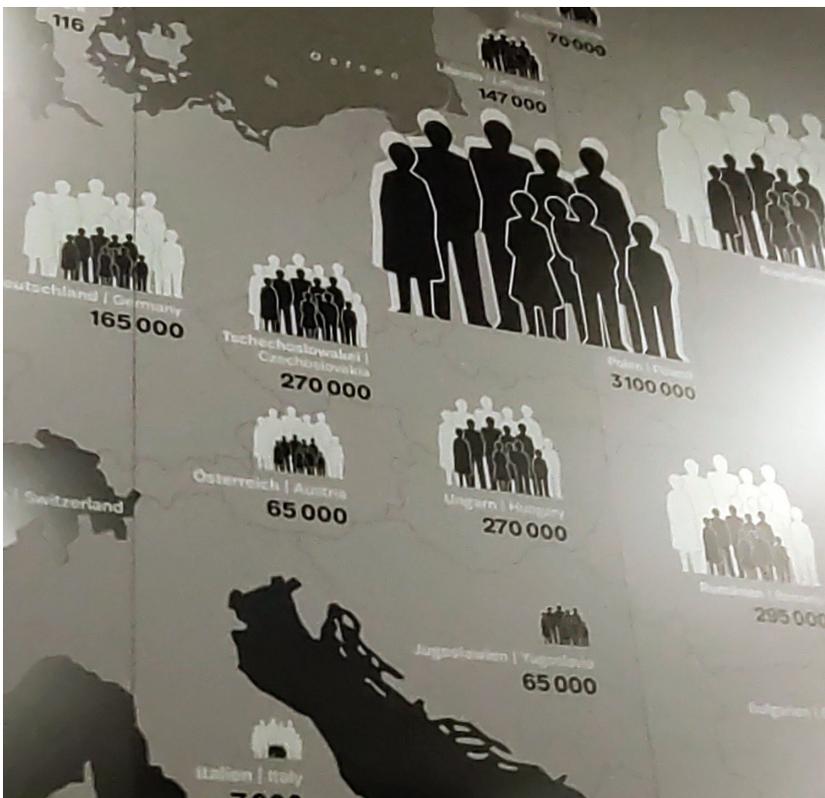


Fig. 6. *The Murder of the Jews of Europe. JMB – core exhibition. Image by the author*

Silhouettes of women, men and children – including the youngest, held in the arms of others – are presented here. This emphasises once again that children – alongside adults – were participants in wartime events and victims of the Holocaust. They lived with adults and died, just like them. They shared their fate.

Children's fates are clearly embedded in the three narrative areas of the exhibition at the JMB. We find them first in the description of the daily life of the Jewish community before the Holocaust. Later, the fate of the children becomes part of the story of the forced emigration of many Jewish families as a result of the policies of the Nazi regime. Finally children are

mentioned in the sections of the exhibition that present the history of the German Nazi camps to which they were sent and in which they perished – just like adult Jews.

Life before the Holocaust

There are many photographs of children in the exhibition among the images depicting Jewish life before the war. These include images from family photo albums, which confirm that children were an important part of the pre-war world. As well as forming their own community in which they matured and developed, children also took part in events of the adult world.

When the contribution of Jewish communities to German literature, cinema, art, philosophy, or sport is discussed, we see, among other things, pictures of children taking part in sports or scouting activities. Children also appear in film footage that describes the Weimar Republic as a happy time for Jews in Germany. Shown here are stills of children playing with each other or being around adults, for example in cafés or on a film set where they are young actors. There are also scenes from family life – recalling both important family events (e.g. a wedding, a marriage anniversary, the birth of a child) and everyday events. In the photographs we see smiling children in the care of their parents and grandparents, spending time with them and sharing a tenderness and closeness. Photographs taken in photographic studios have also been collected here, depicting an image of a peaceful, prosperous life (of course, we realise that the image of prosperity may in this case be merely a staging created for the purposes of photography). All this serves to show a time of peace, development, and prosperity. The images are captioned: 'Nature, Movement, Body, Freedom, Youth, Future'. Elsewhere, the exhibition text makes reference to 'the memory of happy days'.

Uhr	Montag	Dienstag	Mittwoch	Donnerstag	Freitag	Sonnabend
8 ⁰⁰ -9 ⁰⁰	Biologie	Englisch Grammatik	Hebräisch	Geschichte	Musik	Französische Lesektive
9 ⁰⁰ -9 ⁴⁵	Französische Grammatik	Deutsch	Englisch Lesektive	Hebräisch	Chemie	Englisch Lesektive
9 ⁴⁵ -10 ⁰⁰	Englisch Grammatik	Zeichnen	Französische Lesektive	Deutsch	Geometrie	Turnen
10 ⁰⁰ -12 ⁰⁰	Erkunde	16. 17. 18. Tage Geometrie Französisch Hebräisch Physik	Deutsch	Biologie	Geschichte	Religion
12 ⁰⁰ -13 ⁰⁰	Turnen	Physik	Geschichte	Geometrie	Erkunde	Deutsch
13 ⁰⁰ -14 ⁰⁰	Hebräisch	Physik	Physik	Englisch Grammatik	Turnen	
14 ⁰⁰ -14 ⁴⁵	Stundenanmeldung	Stundenanmeldung	Waldspaziergang	3 ⁰⁰ -4 ⁰⁰ Sport	Stundenanmeldung	
14 ⁴⁵ -15 ⁰⁰	Kaffee	Kaffee	Kaffee	Kaffee	Kaffee	
15 ⁰⁰ -16 ⁰⁰	16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. Tage Französisch Hebräisch Physik	Englisch Grammatik	Stundenanmeldung	Stundenanmeldung	Stundenanmeldung	

Fig. 7. Class schedule for the Kaliski School. JMB – core exhibition. Image by the author.

Pre-war everyday life is also shown in the works that photographers Abraham Pisarek and Herbert Sonnenfeld produced between 1933 and 1938. They created thousands of images of Jewish life increasingly constrained by the restrictive regulations imposed by the Nazi regime.

They documented everyday life – mainly in Berlin – showing schools, care facilities, holiday camps, cultural and sporting events, as well as preparations for emigration. In the photographs presented in the Museum we see, for example, a schoolroom filled with pupils listening to a teacher; we see another class during a lesson conducted outdoors; we see children bent over a board game. It should be noted that the overwhelming majority of the photographs are dynamic frames that show children in motion performing certain activities. These are not posed portrait photographs. The presence of these images in the exhibition helps to emphasise the vitality of the period. The life of Jewish children in pre-war Germany is portrayed as a time of their activity. The activity is also highlighted by the objects on display made by the children. These include, for example, a New Year's greetings drawing made by Judith Nagler in 1932 for her parents and a school timetable made by Lili Wronkner in 1938. (Fig. 7)



Fig. 8. Herta Silzer's teddy bear, which she took to England. JMB – core exhibition. Image by the author.

Forced emigration

Children – along with adults – are also one of the important protagonists of the forced emigration narrative. They are portrayed as victims of a policy that led to the expulsion of the Jewish community outside Germany. Children are both participants and victims of those events, as well as witnesses and observers of them. We read about this in the brief descriptions introducing the successive exhibition spaces and in the descriptions of the individual artefacts presented in the Museum, as revealed here:

By September 1939, almost 10,000 unaccompanied children and adolescents were sent to the United Kingdom under the *Kindertransport* program. After *Kristallnacht*, they were allowed to enter on group visas with guarantees of support, and were well received by the British public. A central committee organized the placement of the children in foster families or shelters. Many of them never saw their parents again.

This story was also shaped by the objects presented in the exhibition, which include photographs; documents for the brothers Kurt and Günter Treitel; Herta Silzer's teddy bear (Fig. 8), which she took to England; name tags and luggage tag used by Beate Rose and Lore Gutwillig; a Hebrew Lotto Game, which was intended to make it easier for Rudi Leavor and his sister to learn Hebrew. There is also a postcard (dated October 1939) sent from the Netherlands by Ulli Rosenfeld to her friend Gert Berliner in Sweden. The two friends had both emigrated on a children's transport. Ulli Rosenfeld wrote: 'although we're so far from each other, we'll always remain friends!'

Visitors can see the objects that German Jewish families took with them when they left Germany. These include toys, children's games, school supplies, and other memorabilia which are used to present brief stories showing the fate of specific individuals who decide to emigrate. Here, for example, we have a photograph of three siblings (Ruth, Eva, Julius Salinger), printed on a seashell: a fashionable souvenir of a summer trip to a Baltic resort at the time.

In presenting the effects of Nazi policies restricting the rights of the Jewish community and forcing German Jews to leave the country, the children's perspective is also incorporated into the Museum's narrative in other ways. Memories of specific individuals who were forced to leave Germany in the 1930s and 1940s appear here. One of them is Rudi Leavor, whose family left Berlin for the United Kingdom in 1937. He himself was 11 years old at the time. In the recording presented in the audio guide to the exhibition, he talks about the tangle of conflicting emotions involved in that journey and leaving the place where he grew up:

It was tinged with joy that we were leaving a country which didn't like Jews. On the other hand, it meant leaving very dear relatives behind and friends for that matter, whom we were not likely to see again. And thirdly, and looking forward to traveling.

When talking about the deportation of Jewish people during the war the exhibition presents a short account of a 10-year-old boy (Kurt Maier) who recounts the events of 1941, when his family left Germany and emigrated to the USA:

They're coming to get us. Grandma is the first to climb onto the truck, carrying her hat, bag, and umbrella. Grandpa follows. I'm carrying my schoolbag. Then comes father with two suitcases. Mother and Heinz (Kurt's brother) are already in the truck. The neighbours are watching.

The authors of the exhibition therefore include children's experiences relating to the deportation of Jewish families. They also do this through a board game – The Aliyah Game – created in 1935 by The Jewish National Fund with the aim of preparing young people to go to Palestine. The game is not only on display at the Museum, but also forms part of the exhibition encouraging visitors to get involved and be active. Audience groups can use it and play with a board, pawns and dice. In this way – if only symbolically – they can feel like the young people of a few decades ago facing the vision of emigration (*Jüdisches Museum Berlin*: 125). However, there is also a risk that the game could become just a trivial entertainment, lacking any deeper meaning. Without proper commentary and explanation, children may not fully understand the game in relation to the wider narrative and messages of the exhibition.

Jewish children in the camps

The exhibition on display at the JMB documents that children were among the Jews transported to concentration and extermination camps. This is confirmed, for example, by a letter displayed at the Museum that Norbert Bernheim, a teenager arrested in Paris, threw out of the train to Auschwitz:

My dear Franka, Fred, and the Isenbergs. Right now I am deep in the muck, that is, in a cattle car with space for 40 people. We are 50 with luggage. Hopefully you'll get this letter; I'm sending it off on the odd chance that I will arrive. The heat, the stench, the crying of the women, men, and children herded in here – it defies any description. ... It is a disgrace that such brutal treatment of innocent

people is still possible in the 20th century.

An important tool through which the history of the concentration camps is presented is the photo album with photographs of Holocaust victims – one of the most important visual proofs of the systematic murder carried out at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Among the photographs that are part of the exhibition, many depict children who were sent to a Nazi camp.

By looking at the photographs and reading their descriptions, museum visitors learn that transports organised by the Nazis brought Jews from all over Europe to Auschwitz-Birkenau. For example between April and August 1944 alone 450,000 Hungarian Jews were deported there. In the pictures we see children in the crowd of people getting off the trains that were reaching Auschwitz. Other photographs show children in the midst of adults – mainly women – standing along the carriages (children held by the hand, carried on their arms, or standing between adults). We see the stigmatising star symbol on the clothes of many children (as well as adults). The children's faces are tired and devoid of smiles. They are marked by anxiety or even fear, and uncertainty, ignorance, and distrust come through. The clothes we see in the photographs seem everyday – some of the children are wearing thick coats, hats and scarves, while at the same time these children are wearing short trousers, for example. From the description with which the photographs are accompanied we learn that some of the prisoners brought in were murdered shortly after their arrival to the camp. Children – along with women – were separated from men as unfit for work. On their way to the gas chambers mothers with their children passed the camp barracks and a stretch of electrified fence. When we look at these pictures of people who are 'still alive', we know what fate will befall them in the near future. However, at the time, they were unaware of what was in store for them. They did not know that in a moment they would be sent to the gas chambers.

The exhibition does not feature graphic photographs documenting the atrocities and crimes of the German Nazis. The photographs from Auschwitz included in the exhibition are images taken at the stage of unloading the victims from the train cars. So here we see the selection of prisoners. We are aware of what they may have experienced during transport and we know what they will witness and participate in moments later. The photographs depict people standing on the threshold of a camp world that will prove to be a hellish experience for them. However, the exhibition does not show us extremely exhausted or murdered prisoners – including children. (Photographs of victims of mass murder by the Nazis are part of many exhibitions – for example, the permanent exhibition presented at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe – Information Centre under the Field of Stelae). On the one hand, this can be seen as an attempt to preserve the dignity of the victims of the Holocaust and an expression of respect – both for the victims and for the emotions of the audience of the exhibition. Some of the curators of the exhibition renounce being literal, concluding that the experience of death in the gas chamber cannot be expressed in any way (Andrysiak 2019: 132). From the point of view of the accessibility of the exhibition for younger visitors, the avoidance of drastic images can be read as taking children's sensitivity into account. Such a strategy certainly lowers the age of the audience that can be reached with the Museum's message. On the other hand, however, the omission of images showing the full cruelty and consequences of Nazi crimes raises questions about the incompleteness of the vision of history presented at the JMB. The fact that this is an exhibition being shown to audiences in the very centre of the country of the perpetrators of the Holocaust is not insignificant. For some audiences, such handling of an 'unfinished' story on a visual level may be unreadable. The exhibition requires visitors to significantly supplement or acquire prior knowledge that builds a complete picture of the crimes committed by the German Nazis and their collaborators.

Unlike, for example, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, the JMB does not display piles of objects left behind by Holocaust victims. Instead, the curators reach for selected artefacts that belonged to specific individuals – both those who perished during the war and those who survived and decided to bear witness to the Holocaust. In this way, the collected memorabilia shows that the Holocaust is not the story of nameless victims but of concrete families: millions of parents and their children, husbands and wives, friends and colleagues coming from different countries. The objects collected in the exhibition are not only a symbolic bridge between the present and the former lives of Holocaust victims, they are also key to their

history. They support the construction of a narrative that refers to very specific experiences (Doleglo 2019: 202). Although it should be noted that in addition to individual biographical studies devoted to selected Jewish families, the curators – at the level of metanarrative – show how the devastating conditions created by the Nazi regime affected the life of the Jewish community (Kugelmann et al. 2020: 39).

The exhibition at the JMB refers to children's fate in yet another dimension. It recalls the stories of survivors either by experiencing the cruelty of the German Nazis, for example in camps and ghettos, or by fleeing it to other countries or continents. There are, for example, photographs of children who were former prisoners of the Buchenwald camp that were made at the end of the war and shortly afterwards. The children (as well as the adults) pose for photographs in the same clothing they wore at the camp. Some depict people smiling, which may create some dissonance in the viewers. It seems that by allowing themselves to be portrayed in this way the former camp prisoners attempted to confront the trauma they had experienced. For the exhibition curators 'the pictures may be interpreted as a symbolic form of revenge, varying between self-confidence, self-dramatization, and sarcasm'.⁵ This story is illustrated with photographs of people who survived the war as children and went on to live in different parts of the world for several decades. Their protected childhood becomes the gateway to the post-war rebuilding of Jewish community life. However, we are aware that their childhood experiences have become a scar in their lives, which is a permanent reminder of the trauma of the Holocaust.

Conclusions

Museums, through a poetics and language of representation, influence how we perceive and remember the Holocaust. They not only document historical events, but also build up ideas about them: 'they are the story, and they largely determine how we remember the past, and therefore, how we understand the present' (Oztig 2023: 4). As Susan Rasmussen (2002:125) argues, 'to remember something is not just to repeat it, but to reconstruct, even sometimes to create'.

How does this reconstruction of memory take place at the JMB? Visual messages dominate here, supported by storytelling through texts. Photographs showing participants or witnesses to the recalled events, accompanied by brief commentaries, are a key tool. The fate of children is also reconstructed through objects presented in physical or virtual form. Short messages focused on providing information on selected events discussed in the exhibition dominate. They are more of a pretext to signal certain themes than to address them comprehensively.

The Holocaust story presented in JMB focuses on the loss and suffering that resulted in interrupted lives. The perspective of the victims dominates the exhibition analysed. The civilian victims of occupation and Genocide are at the centre of the exhibition. They are therefore not 'heroic victims' (i.e. heroes who achieve a moral victory by dying in the fight for freedom or honour). Death becomes the key category present in the exhibition – even if not always explicitly expressed by the references to pre-war life. This way of telling the story of the Holocaust, putting the suffering of the victims at the centre, is a common reconstructive practice in institutions referring to the painful past and traumatic experiences. As Mattias Frihammar and Helaine Silverman (2018: 6) describe: 'the body/the grave/the memorial is a tangible reminder of what has been lost, a material trace that calls to be taken care of.'

The curators of the exhibition present both anonymous participants in the events in question (whole groups of children and young people) and specific individuals, presented through the documents collected and displayed within the Museum. They show that children were a vital part of the Jewish community and took an active part in its life.

In its depiction of the atrocities of the Nazi camps the exhibition does not shock with brutal images of executions, corpses, crematoria, or death pits. This is of particular importance in the context of planning and organising visits by young audiences whose sensitivity, perception, or emotional stability are obviously different from those of adults.

The child is often described as the hope of society, symbolising its future. Childhood is treated as a value that should be protected. As such, using the figure of the child to describe

the policies of Third Reich clearly shows the brutality of the system created by the Nazis. Presenting the youngest victims in representations of the Holocaust highlights the cruelty inflicted by Nazis and their collaborators and becomes an additional, extremely powerful impetus for reflection and reckoning. As Mallory Bubar (2020: 174) puts it – ‘the child figure in the museum space confronts the ultimate depravity of Nazi policy. The ultimate disregard of life. Seeing the child within the larger historical narrative illustrates how deep the hatred for the “other” went’. It is clear that all the crimes of genocide were definitely beyond the civilization framework, including those whose victims were adults. However, it is the artefacts that evoke the fate of the youngest victims of the Holocaust (such as shoes or clothing belonging to them) that show the special dimension of that atrocity. The tragic experience of Jewish children constitutes one of the most powerful and divisive allegations relating to Nazi crimes.

However, we must keep in mind that the use of the figure of the child in the creation of content relating to the Holocaust may carry certain risks. They are directly linked to the emotional dimension of such a message. This was pointed out by Mark K. Anderson. According to him, the figure of the child in the Holocaust story has an overwhelming power, the source of which is the innocence and vulnerability of the child. As Anderson (2007: 4) stated, these categories build a perspective that enables the creation of ‘a bridge of emphatic connection, even identification’ between the fate of Jewry and – in this case – visitors of a museum. A story in which the protagonist is a child contains a certain emotional power that stimulates sentiments in us. The figure of the stigmatized and brutally persecuted child evokes a strong emotional response. On the one hand, it supports the construction of a picture of the victims of genocide and the crime itself, but on the other hand, it can distort, personalize, and falsify the Holocaust, blurring its key aspects. This could be, for example, the result of simplified narrative, which does not necessarily develop in the exhibition audience a critical consciousness and deepen historical knowledge (Anderson 2007: 19). We need to ask ourselves about the boundary beyond which the instrumentalization of childhood suffering occurs. Doesn’t focusing on the youngest victims simplify and distort the history of the Holocaust? Is there a risk here of sentimentalizing historical events by over identifying with a child’s character? How might this affect the reading of the moral message contained within Holocaust exhibitions? Can focusing on children’s fates lead to rhetorical and ideological distortions? (This is certainly not a complete list of questions we should consider.) We must seek answers to these questions if we want to responsibly build memorials dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. This is both our task and our challenge.

Notes

- ¹ The analysis of the exhibition presented here is based on material collected during a study visit to the JMB in July 2023, and therefore refers to the version of the permanent exhibition presented at the institution from August 2020. The JMB also has a separate children’s museum, located in a separate building. The ANOHA (The Children’s World of the Jewish Museum Berlin) is a place opened to young visitors of preschool and grade-school. The activities of this site require separate investigation beyond the assumptions made in this paper (Anderson 2019).
- ² Jewish Virtual Library, ‘Jewish victims of the Holocaust: Hidden children’, Jewish Virtual Library. https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hidden-children-of-the-holocasut?utm_content=cmp-true, accessed 15 October 2023. See also: Dwork 1994; Heberer 2011; Keim 2003.
- ³ Exhibition text, Jewish Museum Berlin.
- ⁴ In this study Bishop Kendzia observed how Berlin high school students reacted to touring the JMB and asked them whether they considered the site to be a museum or a memorial.
- ⁵ Exhibition text, JMB.

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***Marcin Zaborski**, Ph.D., is a political scientist and communicologist. His research interests include social and political communication, as well as the politics of history and collective memory. He is particularly interested in how these topics are represented in memorial sites and museums. He analyses the messages conveyed by exhibitions depicting the history of the Holocaust. He also studies historical publications for children, including pre-Second World War magazines.

Marcin Zaborski, SWPS University, Institute of Social Sciences, Department of Journalism and Social Communication, Centre for Research on the Economics of Memorial Sites, Warsaw, Poland. mzaborski@swps.edu.pl