
For whom and about what? The Polin Museum, Jewish historiography, and Jews as a “Polish cause”

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Abstract: The article presents main threads of the ongoing debate around the permanent exhibition of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. Analyzing differences between two fields of research, Jewish studies and studies on Polish-Jewish relations, the article makes the case that many of the critical voices in this debate stem from a lack of understanding of the differences between these two fields of research; these in their turn arise from the current state of affairs in Poland, and the pressure of nationalism and ethnocentrism, exerted also on Polish historical debates. If the telling of the 1,000 years of the history of Jewish life in Poland were to concentrate on the attitudes of the majority population towards Jews, as the critics seem to suggest should be the case, the Museum’s narrative would run the risk of falling into a teleological fallacy, whereby all previous events and processes are interpreted as mechanically leading to the Holocaust, and of omitting all of these elements of Jewish history which are not relevant from the perspective of the Holocaust and of antisemitism studies. Making anti-Jewish hatred or the attitudes of the general majority towards Jews into the central axis of Jewish history could deprive Jews of their own historical subjectivity. At the same time, the article points out where and how the narrative of the Polin Museum indeed insufficiently includes the subject of antisemitism as an important factor of Jewish experience and of Jewish history in Poland. Renewing the dialogue between representatives of Jewish studies and Polish-Jewish relations studies is crucial from the standpoint of the current situation in Poland, in which the Polin Museum can be used by various actors in their attempts to build highly biased, politicized and uncritical versions of the history of Poland generally and of Polish attitudes towards the Jews specifically. This kind of understanding between the fields of Jewish studies and Polish-Jewish relations studies and their representatives’ common struggle against such attempts require an understanding of the autonomy of and differences between these two fields of research.

Keywords: Polin; Museum of the History of Polish Jews; Jewish studies; Polish-Jewish relations; metahistory; Jewish historiography; antisemitism.

Introduction

The opening of the Polin Museum and its core exhibition in October 2014 was, without doubt, the most prominent event signifying the revival of interest in Jewish issues in Poland after 1989, and one which resonated most widely among the public. This event may also be viewed as a certain turning point, marking the completion of the pioneering stage in the formation of the research fields of Polish-Jewish studies (understood as the exploration of Polish-Jewish relations) and Jewish studies (history, ethnography and anthropology of Jews; studies on Jewish literature, religion, and so on). From the moment

the premises of the Museum's core exhibition were presented to external experts and the public, and even more so after it was inaugurated, the exhibition stirred a tumultuous discussion and aroused numerous controversies. The discussion continues to be very lively, even two years later. One of the reasons for that is the current attack by an extremely politicized, monoethnic and ideologized vision of history, and, as a matter of principle, lacking empathy towards "the other," that is being implemented by the current authorities and their "fellow travelers." This extremely nationalistic vision of the history of Poland, which reduces it to the realm of narrowly understood politics, employs the old models of marginalizing everything that is not in line with an ideologized and limited vision of Polishness, and does not even consider recognizing the subjectivity and equal role of "non-Poles" in the history of Poland.

Yet I would not like to discuss the proponents of this vision of history and their attitude to the core exhibition in the Polin Museum¹ in this text. I find much more interesting the debate on this topic ongoing in the circles of the advocates of critical history. I am referring to the discussion between the representatives of Polish-Jewish studies and Jewish studies, who naturally are those most interested in the Museum. This debate is of significance also given the above-mentioned attack. I will try to demonstrate that the nationalistic discourse, which is dominant in the public space and which reduces the whole history of Jews in Poland to the problem of "the Jews and the Polish cause," has a considerable impact on the discussions conducted within these two research fields and on certain misunderstandings between those two fields.

Another reason for those misunderstandings is related to the "childhood phase" of Jewish studies and Polish-Jewish studies in Poland. These research fields are only now being formed (cf. Wodziński, 2012). Additionally, many research participants find the undeniable difference between the research field of Jewish studies and Polish-Jewish relations to be blurred, the more so as the latter boil down in Poland mainly to the issues of the attitude of (non-Jewish) Poles to Jews, and of antisemitism, as well as to studies of the myth (or – for some – the reality) of so-called "Judeo-communism." The narrative of a museum dedicated to the thousand years of the history of Jews in Polish lands inevitably has to address primarily the former research field. At the same time, Jewish studies enjoy a significantly smaller public interest in Poland (including academic circles) than the issues related to the attitudes of Poles to Jews, in particular in the most dramatic moments of the 20th century. This has profound consequences for how the Polin core exhibition is received.

What follows is a discussion, by necessity very brief, of the principal narrative themes of the core exhibition and of some of the crucial metahistorical premises that laid their foundations, and a critical appraisal of some of the Polin's themes and how they are presented. This will allow me to problematize some trends in the criticism directed against the Polin core exhibition and argue with them in the further part of the article.

1 The text by Grzegorz Braun *Owijanie w bibułkę* (Braun, 2015) is an extreme example.

I believe that virtually all the most important narrative themes of the exhibition have disappeared from the discussion, which has failed to present this narrative adequately. Additionally, the debate is narrowed down to a single problem of whether there is “too much” or “too little” antisemitism in the exhibition, which ironically makes this debate ethnocentric, objectifying the Jews and their history. In Poland, it is always only about Poles and their “heroic history” and/or its “debunking,” about “pride” versus “contrition,” or about the “pedagogy of shame” versus “criticism.” Obviously, critical historiography cannot be equaled with nationalistic history serving ideological fantasies. Yet even the former should be divided into that which deals with Jews viewed as an object towards which the majority developed different attitudes, and historiography interested in Jews themselves as a historical subject. Neither of these research fields is better or more valuable than the other. The point is that the Polin core exhibition presents a tale based on the research conducted within the latter field.² It is worth bringing the most important elements of this tale back into the debate, even if very briefly.

Autonomy, connection, pluralism – the core exhibition at the Polin Museum

As is discussed further on, the way the exhibition is narrated is characterized by the fact that it is not in line with any of the currently dominant national historical narratives. I believe that a number of Polish visitors, who are accustomed to an extremely narrowed political view of Polish history, may be amazed by what they see in the gallery dedicated to the partitioning and the end of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. On the one hand, the response of the representatives of the Jewish elite to the partitioning comes to the fore; the section dealing with the Kościuszko uprising shows the involvement of the Jewish poor in the defense of Praga. On the other hand, also presented are things which are much more important from the point of view of the history of the entire Jewish community (most of whose members hardly knew of or understood the abovementioned uprising). These things include the ambivalent reforms of the “Jewish people” launched by all three partitioning powers and the first Jewish experience of a modern state emerging in these territories (this is also true of the Duchy of Warsaw and the Kingdom of Poland). The majority of the Jewish community interpreted these reforms and operations of the officials in terms of an attack against their tradition, lifestyle and autonomy, but these actions actually laid the foundations for the advancing process of emancipation and formation of the modern forms of individual and collective Jewish identity. For instance, this part of the exhibition shows how the conservative yet

² Out of necessity, I can only refer to a few of the most important elements of this narrative and to the final 200 years it talks about. I do not refer to the abundant historical literature on the basis of which this narrative was designed, either. Otherwise, this text would transform into an extensive bibliographical essay. For the sake of the argument, I make only one exception, when I talk about the interwar period, in order to illustrate how the discussion on the narrative told by the Polin core exhibition ignores the findings of Jewish studies in Poland and abroad. I also do not quote all the opinions and arguments voiced in the discussion on the core exhibition.

modern religious movement of Hasidism that sprang up around this time could develop as a voluntary socio-religious movement thanks to the weakening of traditional Jewish communities. One can also learn how the “defensive modernization” of religious circles, taking the form of modern yeshivas, to take just one more example, gradually produced modern Jewish orthodox ideology. Contrary to the present stereotype, in the 19th and 20th centuries, these orthodox circles did not live “as they did in the Middle Ages.” This alteration of the political history that the Polish visitors are familiar with and the deeper and less obvious socio-cultural history constitutes a highly important and positive aspect of the exhibition. This section of the exhibition features the topic of the so-called Jewish debate during the Polish Enlightenment, a debate which turned out to be seminal for the future of Polish Jews in Poland. The authors of the gallery had no doubts whether or not to show the less popular and more aggressive side of the debate, and the origins of so-called progressive antisemitism. Not only ultra-conservative circles, but also those associated with the Enlightenment shared the conviction about the traditional Jewish mentality, which allegedly was always directed against Christianity, and the fears that Jews would use their own emancipation for evil purposes, thereby threatening all their neighbors. The keynotes of this discourse played a crucial role in the future events and processes in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As we walk down the “Encounters with Modernity” gallery, we can see how Jewish customs changed, for example, with reference to weddings. Entering the railway station, we can witness the influence that the developing transportation and social mobility had on every layer of Jewish society. Here, we can read the memoirs of Puah Rakovsky, a Zionist activist and one of the pioneers of Zionist feminism, and learn how the opportunity of breaking out of a small conservative community and coming to Warsaw emancipated her from patriarchal domination. We can learn the story of Dawid Grün (the future first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion), who left Płońsk for Warsaw, and see how a new railway connection between Góra Kalwaria and Warsaw contributed to the development of Hasidism. Through the pictures and stories from Łódź and Borysław, we learn the history, character and peculiarities of the industrial revolution in the peripheries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is characteristic of this exhibition that we are constantly exposed to a universal narrative about important processes in social history, history of culture and industrial civilization much more than about the history of political events.

In the second part of the 19th century gallery we become acquainted with the theme of Jewish acculturation in the different dominant cultures that surrounded the Jews. The case of S. Ansky is an excellent example that, east of Congress Poland, the integration into Russian rather than Polish culture was an obvious, or rather the only, option. In other locations, it was natural to integrate into German culture. The exhibition shows that, in many cases, the Jewish elites could still “return” to the masses by way of adopting a modern nationalist or revolutionary identity, or both, as exemplified by Ansky. The exhibition accommodates many different identities, including a folk identity, based on the Yiddish language. It is a great merit of this exhibition that it neither appropriates nor “Polonizes”

the Jews who lived in Polish lands, but rather expresses their right to be “German,” “Russian” or some variety of “Jewish Jews.” Finally, the exhibition also presents the part of the story which has been marginalized by nationalist Jewish historiography. This concerns religious reform, Polish integrationism and their spectacular manifestations, such as the Tłomackie Street Synagogue in Warsaw and the New Synagogue in Łódź, the phenomenon of “Poles of Mosaic faith” and their flagship periodical *Izraelita* and, last but not least, the Polish-Jewish “brotherhood” just before and during the 1863 uprising (the January Uprising). In the narrative of the exhibition, none of these potential Jewish identity choices in the 19th century overshadows the other, all of them deserve attention.

As the Museum visitors continue, they enter a small, dark section of the gallery, dedicated to the development of political antisemitism in the closing decades of the 19th century. They learn about the pogrom in Chojnice in 1900, and can witness how the myth of ritual murder, which they had come across in the galleries dedicated to medieval and early modern history, continued to be present in a new form in modern times. A particularly fascinating exhibit here is the antisemitic caricature depicting Jews committing a murder, some wearing traditional attire, others dressed in the “European” fashion. A similar message is conveyed by the exhibition section pertaining to Jan Jeleński and the periodical *Rola* founded by him in 1883. This shows that the so-called modern antisemitism made use of older convictions, including those of religious origin. Jews were shown as an ever-present danger regardless of what they did, whether they were religious conservatives or joined the ranks of the modern revolutionary movements that emerged about that time. *The protocols of the Elders of Zion* are exhibited here. Although fabricated by the Russian security service (Okhrana) and originally issued in Russian, they also had an enormous impact on Polish reality. Next to the wave of pogroms in the so-called Pale of Settlement in 1881–1882 and 1903–1905, the 1882 pogrom of the Jews in Warsaw is likewise shown.

The next, most interesting part of the exhibition is named “Auto-emancipation,” an expression borrowed from an essay by Leon Pinsker. The origins of the most important modern socio-political Jewish movements are shown here: Zionism, Territorialism, Socialism (both the version that stressed Jewish rights to maintain their separate cultural and national identity, and the internationalist version, which denied the importance of this identity), and numerous liberal projects, such as integration into other nations, on the one hand, and universalism, as exemplified by Ludwik Zamenhof and his Esperanto, on the other. In an adjoining section, another phenomenon of key importance for “Jewish modernity” is also presented, namely the migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the US and the much smaller wave of migration to Palestine. The so-called Jewish Kulturkampf is also discussed – the struggle of the proponents of Yiddish with the advocates of Hebrew as the national language binding Jews all over the world – and all the controversies this struggle involved, exemplified by the biographies and oeuvre of the authors of national Jewish literature written in these two languages: Isaac Leib Peretz and Haim Nahman Bialik. The revival and evolution of modern Jewish culture in the early 20th century is

presented in much broader terms than from the perspective of narrowly understood nationalism. Finally, this part of the gallery also accommodates the 1905 revolution, which had an enormous impact on the emergence of mass Jewish politics.

Further on, visitors are presented with the horror of the First World War and the extent of destruction it brought to Central and Eastern European Jewish communities. From the 1920 report on Ansky's ethnographic explorations, titled *Der yidisher khurbn fun Poyln, Galitsye un Bukovine*, more perceptive visitors will realize what enormous impact the Great War had on such traditional forms of Jewish life as the shtetl, which began to disappear, what damage it brought to religious communities and, most importantly, the death toll it generated. The exhibition designers did not overlook the fact that the First World War was also a key stage in the development of modern Jewish transnationalism. This was probably most prominently manifested by the establishment of the US Joint Distribution Committee and the aid it supplied to the Jewish masses in war-torn Europe. As far as 1918 and the establishment of the Second Polish Republic are concerned, the exhibition presents the activity of Szymon Aszkenazy, a representative of Poland in the League of Nations, and the response of the National Democrats, who could not imagine a Jew holding state office. The formation of the modern state of Poland is also shown by the first election for the Legislative Sejm in 1919, and the national patriotism of Polish Jews, including a Zionist, Icchak Grünbaum, who nevertheless spoke in harsh terms about Poland's independence bringing numerous acts of antisemitic violence, and who appealed to Poles and the Polish state "not to reject three million of its citizens." The exhibition also features the camp in Jabłonna, where over a dozen thousand Jewish volunteers to the Polish army, who wanted to fight the Bolshevik troops which were approaching Warsaw, were interned in 1920 as potential traitors.

The gallery dedicated to the interwar years ("The Jewish Street") is divided into three sections. On the right, there is a room presenting the broadly understood political history of Jewish community in the Second Polish Republic. Due to its exceptionally strong plurality in terms of political parties and their manifestos, Jewish politics is shown through the three strongest movements: Zionism, the Orthodox movement and Bundism. The exhibition gives an accurate account of the characteristic features of their programs and symbolisms, while the respective apogees of their success are presented somewhat schematically: in the case of Zionism the exhibition points to the period between 1918 and 1926; identifying the peak of the Orthodox Jewry and its most important movement, Agudat Yisrael – to the period between 1926 and 1935; in the case of Bundism – to the final years of the Second Polish Republic. The timeline of political developments in the interwar period briefly mentions the assassination of Polish President Gabriel Narutowicz, the surge of antisemitic sentiments in the 1930s, the activity of Rev. Trzeciak, Cardinal Hlond's segregation statements, the ghetto benches, Jews being beaten up at universities and, last but not least, the pogroms of 1935–1937.

In the section to the right of the corridor, the exhibition discusses the exceptionally diverse Jewish culture in the interwar years in Poland. It is worth mentioning that

the exhibition features Julian Tuwim, the periodical *Wiadomości Literackie* and its circles, which were frequently excluded from the context of Jewish history by the Jewish historiographies leaning more to nationalism. Alongside the Jewish press printed in Polish, visitors can see the abundance of Yiddish periodicals, as well as literature and movies in Yiddish. The specific character of Vilnius is presented, including the special status Yiddish enjoyed there, the famous YIVO (Institute for Jewish Research), as well as Vilnius's unique literary circles and exceptional forms of Orthodox Judaism.

The mezzanine located over the main part of "The Jewish Street" gallery accommodates further highly important and characteristic themes related to the history of Jews in Poland in the interwar years. They encompass, for instance, the very varied Jewish schooling system, the educational paths of Jewish youth and a mosaic of local Jewish communities. The section downstairs is dedicated primarily to "collective history," whereas upstairs, we encounter dozens of individual stories. You can also see the last moments of the history of the Central and Eastern European shtetl and the enormous Jewish migration, for the most part to Palestine. Last but not least, the peak of modern Jewish transnationalism before the Holocaust is presented, the Gemilas Chesed lending associations (financed primarily from US resources), private Jewish schools, orphanages, health services and – in the non-material sphere – the attention given by the Polish Jewry to the fate of German Jews under Nazi rule, the situation of Jews in the Soviet Union and the Palestinian "Yishuv."

The exhibition dedicated to the Holocaust starts with the radio announcement of the outbreak of war. It then discusses the AB-Aktion, the liquidation of Poland's ruling elites and the first stage of the persecution of Jewish population ("humiliation," "labeling," "forced labor," "separation" and "plunder"). It shows the activities of Soviet authorities aimed against the Polish and Jewish elites after the USSR annexed the eastern territories of Poland. The process of the formation of ghettos is presented, the establishment of Judenrats, and social and cultural activities in the ghettos. The lead narrator is Emanuel Ringelblum, who organized the underground archives of the Warsaw ghetto. The exhibition stresses, among other things, the social and psychological aspects of segregation and its devastating influence on Jewish society. The passive resistance of Jews against the first stage of the Holocaust is illustrated, including the attitudes of religious individuals, which are so frequently ignored. Powerful emotions are generated by a reconstruction of the footbridge between the so-called "large" and "small" ghettos, from which Jewish passers-by could see what from their perspective was "normal life" on the "Aryan side." Further on, the so-called Grossaktion of the summer of 1942 is shown, and the mass extermination in the death camps, Jews hiding inside and outside the ghetto, and the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto, which is presented in a most poignant way.

The "Holocaust" gallery clearly breaks the chronology: only after it discusses the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising does it return to the eastern regions of the Second Polish Republic to tell about the 1940 Soviet deportations, Katyń (where many Jews also died) and about the fact that many neighbors of Jews blamed them collectively for the collaboration of

parts of the local populations (encompassing all ethnic groups) with the new regime. Then, the exhibition moves on to the outbreak of the Russian-German war and points, among other things, to the order issued by Reinhard Heydrich for the Einsatzgruppen which was a milestone in the Holocaust in the territories annexed by the USSR in 1939 and in the Soviet interior. The exhibition shows the few survivors from the Warsaw ghetto taking part in the Warsaw Uprising, the efforts of Żegota³ and numerous individuals trying to save the Jews, as well as the massacre of the Jews by their Polish neighbors in Jedwabne. Museum visitors can learn about the Wannsee conference held in January 1942, examine the map of Jewish deportations from across Europe to the death camps located in Poland, and learn about the mission of Jan Karski.

The last proper historical gallery within the core exhibition opens with a quotation from Władysław Szpilman: “Tomorrow I must begin a new life. How could I do it, with nothing but death behind me?” and a dramatic photograph depicting the rubble of Warsaw. It shows how empty and funereal Poland was at that time for the few Jewish survivors, and explains their consequent powerful migration sentiments. By the same token, it also explains the reasons why the Zionist movement became so popular, clearly prevailing among Polish Jews in the first years after the Holocaust. The narrative in this section of the exhibition stresses the power of transnational Jewish ties in the new, postwar world, the aid supplied by the West, the interest Polish Jews had in the developments in other Jewish communities and their reinforced sense of national identity. The latter did not contradict, and frequently accompanied, the ongoing acculturation and collapse of Yiddish culture after the Holocaust (although this became a fact only after 1950). It is therefore justified that the exhibition addresses not only the events in Poland, but also in the DP (Displaced Persons) camps in Germany, Austria and Italy, where tens of thousands of Polish Jews found refuge, including those who left Poland after the war ended. Also shown are the heroic attempts at revival of Jewish life in Poland by means of socio-political and cultural activities, through literature, press, theater and education; and, lastly, the reasons why Jews supported the newly installed political system. The exhibition presents the unique structure and nature of Jewry in Lower Silesia, where Jews accounted for several dozen percent of population in several towns in the first few years after the Holocaust.

The designers of the post-war gallery clearly demonstrated the scale of attacks and murders committed on Jews after the war. This concerns the most infamous and tragic pogrom in Kielce and other, less known events, such as those in Parczew and Kraków. References are made to the accusations of Jews for committing ritual murders and a whole array of accusations related to “Judeo-communism,” which blamed Jews for the worst aspects of the new political system. The peak of Stalinism is then shown, and the resulting end of the plurality of Jewish life in Poland; followed by the 1956 “thaw” which, on the one hand, brought a certain political relaxation and welcomed a new generation to the Socio-Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (Towarzystwo Społeczno-Kulturalne

³ “Żegota,” also known as the “Konrad Żegota Committee,” was a codename for the Council to Aid Jews (Rada Pomocy Żydom), an underground organization in German-occupied Poland from 1942 to 1945 [translator’s note].

Żydów w Polsce, TSKŻ) and, on the other, saw another outbreak of antisemitic sentiments and another migration of many thousands of Jews from Poland. The gallery ends with the presentation of March 1968, the attempts at revival and maintenance of Jewish identity in Poland in the 1970s and 1980s; the “Solidarity” revolution, and 1989. The entire core exhibition is concluded with an apparently makeshift presentation of Jewish life in Poland after 1989.

Weaknesses of the narrative and narrative weaknesses

The main objection liberal critics (both in social and political terms) voiced about the Polin core exhibition pertained to the fact that by developing the metanarrative of Poland being a paradise for Jews, it did not sufficiently face up to the issue of antisemitism. One can actually identify elements of the exhibition which fail to sufficiently emphasize that problem. However, an important reservation should be made here. It is neither feasible nor appropriate to present an exhaustive history of antisemitism in Poland, its evolution and most significant elements, in a museum of the history of Jews. The history of antisemitism is primarily a history of a stereotype, an obsession, ideas and the state of mind of non-Jewish societies. Antisemitism should, of course, be present in a museum of the history of Jews, but as an element that had an impact on their situation and living conditions. The shortcomings in the core exhibition that are indicated further on in this text pertain to this problem – antisemitism as a Jewish experience.

The fundamental problem of the Polin core exhibition narrative is that it does not present antisemitism as a permanent element of the life and experience of Polish Jews. Concerning the section of the exhibition spanning the period from the end of the 18th century to 1989, it is true that museum visitors learn about the fears related to the emancipation and integration of Jews in the Enlightenment; but without prior knowledge, they will not understand how this issue will recur in every decade to come, or how it will influence the fact that Jews would be refused the right to live in Polish lands on the same conditions as Poles. Towards the end of the “Encounters with Modernity” gallery, we come across the story of how modern antisemitism developed in the late 19th century, told in a little walk-through room, which encourages the visitors to speed up rather than compelling them to stop. Those who do stop, however, will not learn that the fear of Jews was the outcome of a broader social crisis ensuing from chaotic modernization, nor will they learn how Jews were turned into a negative symptom of this modernization. In the room, the Warsaw pogrom in 1881 is mentioned only by the voice coming from the loudspeakers, and only in Polish. Regardless, the voice is so quiet that it takes a considerable effort to understand what is being said. The First World War is not presented as a time when integral and xenophobic nationalisms erupted, inexorably resulting in violence. Without realizing this, it is impossible to understand the role and power of antisemitism in the next period, in the Second Polish Republic. The internment camp

for Jewish soldiers at Jabłonna is shown in such a manner that if I had not known that I should be looking for it, I probably would not have found it. The assassination of President Gabriel Narutowicz, as the one “elected by the Jews,” was not ignored, but, again, the connection to all the other manifestations of antisemitism in interwar Poland is not made explicit. The same holds true for the statement made by Cardinal August Hlond on February 29, 1936. Its more significant part undoubtedly consisted not in the cautious condemnation of physical antisemitic violence but in the moral support of the Cardinal for ideological violence, boycotts, and attempts at segregation and forcing Jews to leave Poland.⁴ The connection between prewar antisemitism and the history of the Holocaust is likewise not demonstrated in the core exhibition of the Polin Museum, as is in fact the case in the whole historiography of Jews in Poland in the 20th century. For many people, the absolute division into “Poles” and “Jews” and the chasm between the two was mentally created before the Holocaust, in the interwar period. The main narrator in the gallery dedicated to the Holocaust is Emanuel Ringelblum, but dozens of pages of his bitter reflections on this very topic go unmentioned. As regards the attitude of Polish society to the Holocaust, sympathetic and empathic voices clearly prevail in the exhibition, accompanied by the examples of active aid to Jews. In this context, the information about other sentiments fades away, even that about the denunciation of Ringelblum and the Jews hiding with him, about shmaltsovniks or tram conversations praising the Nazi policy of annihilation. It is true that Jedwabne features in the exhibition but, once again, it is somewhat hidden among other elements. The map of similar events is displayed in a way that does not attract attention and leads many visitors to pass it by. Another thing we will not learn from the exhibition concerns the extent to which German policy in the General Government relied on the disastrous Polish-Jewish relations formed in the prewar period and the importance that the discrimination of non-Poles on the eastern frontier (so-called Kresy) had for the developments that took place there after the Red Army entered in September 1939. The authors of the “Postwar Years” gallery have indeed shown determination and demonstrated the intention to show the scale and importance of antisemitism in Poland in 1945 and 1946. Yet in order to find this part of the exhibition, once again visitors have to change direction, turn around and walk around the whole room, which many of them, tired by then, will probably fail to do.

One of the chief accusations that keep recurring in different critical reviews of the Polin core exhibition addresses the mode of narration adopted in the Museum. The most important messages are conveyed by citations rather than original commentary of the experts who have designed the exhibition. The curating team, head historians of particular galleries, alongside a host of assistants who worked following their guidelines (including the writer of these words) were all enthralled by the innovative idea, whereby

⁴ Elżbieta Janicka has compiled a much longer convincing enumeration of the elements of interwar antisemitism absent from the core exhibition (Janicka, 2016, in particular pp. 144–146). Nevertheless, I disagree with the main premise and argument in her text that the only metanarrative of the core exhibition is the vision of Poland as a paradise for Polish Jews.

the citations were to be so accurately selected and so suggestive that reading them while looking at the visual exhibits would suffice for every visitor to understand the key elements of the Museum's narrative. This intention has undoubtedly failed. The Polin core exhibition demands from visitors considerable cultural and intellectual competence, many hours of intense attention and – in many cases – also the assistance of the guides. Katarzyna Szaniawska is unfortunately right in saying that, left to themselves, visitors may frequently leave the Museum with an impression of chaos and a sense of having failed to understand what they have seen.⁵ And, in many cases, Konrad Matyjaszek is right in saying that the narrative of the core exhibition, told by means of source texts, is not easy to comprehend, and it may indeed fail to provide the tools sufficient to “interpret history on one's own” (Matyjaszek, 2015).

Weaknesses of criticism

It is, however, not true that the Museum “is hiding behind citations,” that it is marked by “the cowardice of citing,”⁶ and that by this token the authors of the core exhibition tried to avoid taking a stand when speaking about the controversies of the history of Jews in Poland. The very selection of citations is an interpretation in itself; it does entail taking a stand and manifesting the outlooks of the exhibition's authors on specific events and processes. What seems to be the problem is therefore not cowardice but rather the different outlooks of the authors and their critics. Apart from the exhibition reviewers who were not involved in designing the exhibition, Helena Datner, the author of the “Postwar Years” gallery, also expressed regret about the exhibition's ultimate form. In her opinion, the visitors to the Polin Museum cannot see a single “coherent story.”⁷ It is difficult not to agree with David Roskies (Roskies, 2015), who wrote in his review of the core exhibition in the *Jewish Review of Books*, that it is simply impossible to tell a single coherent story about the one thousand of years of Jewish history to visitors from all over the world. It would be ahistorical, too.

Virtually all the critical opinions about the Polin exhibition voiced in Poland accuse it of failing to homogenously interpret the history of Jews in Poland. Another characteristic feature is that all these opinions were penned or voiced by researchers into Polish-Jewish relations or the “post-Jewish” memory in the 20th century, rather than by the historians of Jewry. These critical opinions demand a kind of teleology, an interpretation of the history of Jews not only in the last century, but of all history through the prism of the Holocaust. Konrad Matyjaszek wrote:

5 Transcript of a conversation of Katarzyna Szaniawska with Dariusz Stola (Szaniawska & Stola, 2015).

6 Katarzyna Szaniawska voiced her opinion about “hiding behind citations” in a conversation with the Director of the Polin Museum (Szaniawska & Stola, 2015). Joanna Krakowska (Krakowska, n.d.) talked about “the cowardice of citing.”

7 Transcript of a conversation of Katarzyna Szaniawska with Helena Datner (Szaniawska & Datner, 2015).

“Renouncing the central role of the Holocaust” and “leaving the topic of antisemitism to antisemites” does not relieve the Museum designers from the obligation to address those issues, and it simultaneously places the MHPJ narrative in opposition to seminal modern historical studies (Matyjaszek, 2015).⁸

What Matyjaszek is referring to are studies of Polish-Jewish relations or, to be more precise, of Polish attitudes to Jews during the Second World War as well as before and after the Holocaust. As stated above, this criticism should be deemed only partly justified. In every case it should be discussed where antisemitism is not accurately captured as an important factor of Jewish existence in Polish lands. At the same time, formulated in this manner, the accusation that the authors of the Polin exhibition have not taken into account “modern historical studies,” ignores the immense research findings and the latest achievements of Jewish historiography, both in Poland and, primarily, abroad. Virtually no reference is made in the discussion to any key academic publications and debates concerning the history of Jews, whether in the 20th century or earlier, which are interested in more than just antisemitism and showing Jews as its victims. Emblematic here is the criticism against one of the most distinguished experts on the history of Jews in Poland in the modern period, Moshe Rosman. He was accused of “Polinizng” the history of Jews in Poland by promoting a false and ideologized version of it with the myth of Poland as a “paradise of tolerance.” The criticism pertaining to the somewhat unfortunate name of the gallery dedicated to the history of Jews in the 16th and 17th centuries (until Khmelnytsky Uprising), “Paradisus Judeorum,” is justified. The name “Paradise for Jews” is given without quotation marks there. Visitors to the Museum do not have an opportunity to learn from the exhibition that its title is taken from an anti-Jewish text, which claims that the good living conditions Jews enjoyed in Poland were something that should change (Tokarska-Bakir, 2016, pp. 49–58). It is, however, not true that it is only this late in the exhibition that anti-Jewish attitudes and anti-Judaism are mentioned for the first time (such mentions appear earlier, for instance when speaking about the anti-Jewish tumults in medieval Kraków and other cities of the Polish Kingdom, and about the anti-Jewish recommendations made at the 1267 synod in Wrocław). The above-mentioned accusation utterly ignores the entire academic oeuvre of Rosman and his long-lasting studies on the ambivalent demographic, institutional and cultural development of Jewish civilization in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, on the economic symbiosis of the Jewish elite and parts of the State political elite (including the Church) on the one hand, and the constant mistrust towards Jews, their stereotypization, recurrent acts of violence committed against them and the persistent ideological paradigm whereby Jews are viewed as evil (in social, economic and religious terms), on the other (see, e.g., Rosman, 1986, pp. 19–27, 2002, pp. 519–570, 1990). This accusation also ignores the opinion voiced by Rosman himself on the topic of the exhibition and the role of antisemitism in the history of Polish Jewry (Rosman, 2012, pp. 376–377). Characteristically, the Polin

⁸ Joanna Tokarska-Bakir makes the same accusation and claims that the “Jewish voice” is entirely subjected to the dominant “Polish narrative,” which is unjustified, in my opinion (Tokarska-Bakir, 2016, pp. 49–58).

core exhibition was not perceived as apologetically stifling the issue of the Holocaust, or as avoiding the most difficult themes in modern Polish-Jewish debates as well as the problems of antisemitism even by the probably most prominent researcher into Jewish literature of the Holocaust, David Roskies (Roskies, 2015).

What a part of the exhibition critics coming from the above-outlined academic field said about “The Jewish Street” gallery and the history of Jews in interwar Poland is an excellent example. According to their criticisms, this period is presented as “the second golden age of Polish Jews” (Matyjaszek, 2015). I have said above that this is not quite the case, that the poverty of the majority of Polish Jews is illustrated, as are the social conflicts that divided them, and the antisemitism that threatened their existence (albeit it is true that the exhibition does not emphasize that antisemitism actually peaked in the interwar period). In order to justify Matyjaszek’s claim and deprecate how the interwar period is shown, one would have to refute the general consensus of Jewish historiography dealing with interwar Poland, a consensus which is utterly omitted by the critics of the Polin core exhibition. According to this consensus, well documented by numerous publications, the period of the Second Polish Republic was a specific laboratory of Jewish modernity, it marked the peak of the development of so-called modern Jewish politics in Eastern Europe, of schooling organized by proponents of all possible ideologies, of press, mutual social aid, Hasidic yeshivas and other institutions of modern Orthodox Judaism (see, e.g., Mendelsohn, 1992, 1993; Bacon, 1996; Kassow, 1989; Stampfer, 1998, pp. 3–24). As mentioned earlier, Elżbieta Janicka, Konrad Matyjaszek and Helena Datner, among others, are right when they talk about the insufficient accounts of antisemitism in the everyday, political, cultural and social life of Jewry in interwar Poland. Nevertheless, the extent to which this issue is present in the core exhibition of the Polin Museum must not be the only criterion of its assessment.

The plurality, rich culture, social diversity and vitality of the so-called Jewish street are a historic fact equally significant as antisemitism, but they have not merited mention by virtually any of the parties to the Polish debate on the Polin core exhibition. Precisely the same happened to the achievements of such historians of Jewish modernity in Central and Eastern Europe as Jonathan Frankel, Elie Lederhandler and many others, who emphasize the strong Jewish ties with the local context, the influence of their surroundings on Jewish culture (including political culture) and, on the other hand, the cross-border (transnational) ties between Jewish communities, as well as, most importantly, Jewish subjectivity. It goes without saying that none of these historians ignored, let alone played down, the importance of antisemitism in the lives of Jews in this part of Europe. None of them reduced Jewish history to this problem alone, however. Critics of the Polin core exhibition who are so meticulous, and indeed correct, in seeking the a priori premises that guided its authors, should also give consideration to their own metapremises about the history of Jews in Poland.

Is it truly “Polinization”? If so – of what kind?

The version of the history of Jews in Poland that the above-mentioned critics would welcome in the Polin Museum poses a threat of presenting a narrative dominated by the history of antisemitism and its teleological climax in the Holocaust. Ironically, it is highly reminiscent of an old metahistory represented by the Zionist historiography that Salo Baron dubs a “lachrymose” version of Jewish history, where the experience of the Diaspora eventually always boils down to the persecutions and harms inflicted on Jews by their neighbors.⁹ The focal point of Zionist-nationalist historiography is the Jews, and demonstrating that the turning point in their history is marked by the Jewish settlements in Palestine and the establishment of the Israeli State, where they liberated themselves from persecution and finally regained their own subjectivity. The outcome of the vision of the history of Jews that Polish critics propose, irrespective of their good intentions, would mean reducing the history of the Jews in Poland to the history of the attitude their neighbors had towards them. In this version, the subjectivity of Jews would be ignored and the role they played in co-forming their own history would not be sufficiently taken into account. Additionally, the above-mentioned critical opinions about the Museum show blatantly that Jewish culture, the internal and autonomous life of Jews, its transnational contexts and, last but not least, the connections and interactions with the surroundings that go beyond the issue of antisemitism are of no interest whatsoever to Polish critics.¹⁰ The authors of the core exhibition have been blamed for “Polinizing” the history of Jews in Poland, for presenting a mawkish version of it, aiming to reinforce an untrue self-stereotype among modern Poles. Another accusation pertained to the presentism of the exhibition: in order to promote an open and democratic image of Poland, a similar vision of all its history has been imposed.¹¹ Earlier, I tried to exemplify that this vision is not homogeneous at all. We could talk about presentism (and criticize it equally) if the modern Polish-Polish debates over Jedwabne, the pogrom in Kielce and the Polish attitudes to Jews during the Holocaust and immediately afterwards were imposed on the entire history of Jews.¹² Such criticism of the exhibition lacks guidelines as to how a more thorough presentation of antisemitism as an important element of Jewish history in Poland could be integrated with other aspects of this history.

9 For more on this and other Jewish metahistories see primarily Rosman, 2007.

10 An extreme example of the outcome of such a lack of interest is an accusation made by one of the reviewers, who stated that the Polin Museum presents the “myth” of the influx of Western Jews to the territories of Poland, instead of indicating the Khazar Khaganate as the true place of their origin. In the opinion of Jarosław Pietrzak, Polin presents a Zionist (!) narrative (see Pietrzak, 2015). For more about the status of the “Khazar hypothesis” in the modern Jewish historiography, see, e.g., Stampfer, 2014.

11 Katarzyna Szaniawska repeats this accusation on several occasions talking to Dariusz Stola. Characteristically, her only point of interest in the entire exhibition is the Holocaust and the period that immediately follows it (see Szaniawska & Stola, 2015).

12 The context of this problem is related to the fact that the Polish public is actually familiar only with modern history, the history of the 20th century. Everything that is older, and cannot be used for the purposes of the contemporary political and identity struggle, is consistently pushed to the background in Polish discourse. For more on this topic, see Wodziński, 2014, pp. 64–66.

Critics of the exhibition dedicated to the history of Jews in Poland, instead of the history of antisemitism, should endeavor to answer the question of how to avoid making the followers of Judaism only an object, evidence and measure of Polish xenophobia. If this question is ignored, we run the risk of “Polinizing” the history of Jews in another manner, where they become a mere element of Polish-Polish conflict, rather than an inherently interesting subject that deserves reflection as such.

Unfortunately, the Polish debate over the Polin Museum demonstrates that historical debates in Poland still continue to be both provincial and ethnocentric, regardless of the intentions of their participants. Right-wing reviewers went to the Museum with hearts in their mouths, consciously or subconsciously expecting to encounter primarily the presentation of antisemitism. Some of them found less of that than they had expected and left the Museum relieved and with a bizarre conviction that the claim that “Jews have disappeared from Poland because they were clearly not welcome there” is only a false stereotype, and the Museum, which is a state-owned institution, should serve the purpose of defying this stereotype (Ferfecki, 2014). This conviction is false and dangerous, it is increasingly reinforced by state policy and the above-mentioned authors have been right to subject it to crushing criticism. However, even they have to be cautious not to subjugate the history of Jews exclusively to the debate over the history of Poles. Konrad Matyjaszek is right when he postulates to observe the “necessary unceasing mourning in the land of Jewish genocide” which requires “renouncing the national [Polish] mythology” (Matyjaszek, 2015).¹³ However, this mourning cannot occupy the central and primary position in the museum of the history of Jews if this were to mean that the subjects of its narrative would be deprived of the key elements of their history or that their significance would be downplayed. Unfortunately, the problems of the history of Jews that are not directly related to the history of antisemitism are in no way reflected in the debate presented here.

One of the crucial aspects of modern Polish debates that has been omitted so far is the fact that Jews feature in them only in a negative context – as a measure of Polish attitudes, or in terms of assessing their “Polishness,” “Polish patriotism” or “treachery.” This has a devastating impact on the associations that average viewers of these debates develop: they typically associate Jews either with “treachery” or remorse. If the emancipatory circles are fighting to make the public discussion of history address more than an infantilized version of political history, and to include the history of women, different social classes and strata, and other ethnic groups, then Jews should also have their place in this history. They must not be treated solely as a litmus test of Polish attitudes. A history that is practiced in public has to teach that the “others” are as diverse, and their history is as interesting and abundant as the “ethnically Polish” history. Their history should also be demythologized and told critically.

¹³ Editor’s commentary: these phrases, taken from Konrad Matyjaszek’s article, are actually a quote from an essay by Maria Janion, titled *Polonia powielona* (Janion, 2007, p. 289).

Dangers

The numerous dangers that the critics of the Polin Museum indicate, however, are real. Admittedly, I do not believe that the “original sin” of the Museum is its location on the main deportation route from the Warsaw ghetto and in the immediate vicinity of the Umschlagplatz, from which Jews were sent to their deaths. This location apparently suppresses the memory of the murdered and conceals it with the images of a happy life.¹⁴ If the Muranów district stands on the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto, all the more can a museum stand there that commemorates its past citizens, whose history encompasses not only the Holocaust, but 150 years before that. The whole of Warsaw living its own life is a constant suppression, omission and detachment from the trauma of the Second World War, and it will remain so forever.

Konrad Matyjaszek and some other voices, however, are right saying that there is a threat of employing the exhibition for the purpose of building misrepresented and ideologized visions of the history of Poland and of Jews. The problem, nevertheless, lies not in the Museum and not in its exhibition. The problem is that the explorers of the darkest moments in the history of Polish-Jewish relations are being intimidated, also by means of invoking legal consequences in case the results of their research defy the official version. Another problem is the advancing ideologization of history handbooks, which are returning to the most ethnocentric clichés and discourage sensitivity towards “others,” whoever they might be. Finally, alongside Elżbieta Janicka, Helena Datner and Bożena Keff, one should definitely oppose the attempts to cover up the history of the Holocaust, and primarily the cases when Poles were party to it, with the stories of the Righteous who saved the Jews. This type of harmful politics of memory is exemplified by the attempts made by some representatives of Jewish circles in Poland (to the protests of others), and eagerly supported by a variety of political circles, to build a Monument to the Righteous which is to be located next to the Polin Museum and the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs (Janicka, Datner, & Keff, 2014). The issue of the spatial relation of the planned Monument to the Righteous and the Polin Museum is also addressed by Genevieve Zubrzycki (Zubrzycki, 2016, p. 177), who stresses the potential to build an apologetic vision of the Polish nation that first “hosted” Jews for one thousand years and then risked its life for them during the Second World War. The greatest problem, however, is not posed by the highly unfortunate location planned for the monument, but the discourse and educational policy of the Polish elite.

Helena Datner, who co-authored the “Postwar Years” gallery, stresses the fact that the postwar narrative of the Jews who stayed in Poland and who could build their future only on the basis, and with the support, of the then existing political system defies the current dominant vision of the history of Poland. Within the framework of this history, it would be right for the Museum to show the Communists of Jewish origin who

14 Matyjaszek (2016, pp. 59–97) presents this standpoint probably in the most exhaustive way.

contributed to the system of Stalinist terror – yet it would be reprehensible to present the much more numerous members of the PPR and PZPR parties, who never publicly renounced their Jewish identity and tirelessly reconstructed Jewish existence in New Poland, as this would disturb the simple, black-and-white picture of the past (Szaniawska & Datner, 2015).

“Cutting to shape” the history of Jews so that it fits the simplified and politicized vision of the “history of the Polish nation” which erases all the difficult topics clearly poses a serious threat that needs to be handled by historians of the Jews and Polish-Jewish relations, as well as the whole democratic and pluralist intelligentsia. This intention to “cut to shape” was expressed by the then opposition politician Jarosław Sellin, currently Deputy Minister of Culture. Voicing his reservations about the Polin core exhibition, he stated that “the Museum is primarily funded by Polish taxpayers. Therefore, it should express the goals of the historical policy of the Polish state” (Matyjaszek, 2015). What appeared to be a poor joke at the time is much more serious now. It seems that what Sellin meant “Polishness” is best expressed by paraphrasing a classic slogan: “the museum is Polish so it has Polish responsibilities.”¹⁵ Similar intentions for, or rather the state’s designs on the Museum, were voiced also by the then Minister of Culture in the Civic Platform (PO) government (Matyjaszek, 2015). The core exhibition at the Polin Museum, however, is not a representation of this primitive, not just monoethnic, but also monoideological vision of history. Apart from a single, albeit crucial exception, the exhibition is so abundant, pluralist and independent of any nationalist visions of history that it can successfully be employed to resist this kind of threat.

While I reject many of Helena Datner’s reservations about the exhibition, I completely subscribe to that concerning the final section, “Post-1989.” Its concept was altered towards the end of the design work on the exhibition and, contrary to the original version, it does not give a serious and thorough account of all the debates held in free Poland on the subject of the attitudes of Poles to Jews across the whole 20th century, and of the antisemitism which is still present in Poland. Another clear absurdity concerns the claim that the modern Jewish world in Poland (being rather “post-Jewish” much more than Jewish, as justifiably noted by critics) is a continuation of that which existed before the Holocaust and was ultimately destroyed several decades later (Szaniawska & Datner, 2015).

The Polin Museum should provide a working area both for historians of Jewry and scholars who deal with Polish-Jewish issues during the Second World War, in Communist Poland and at present. It is beyond doubt that this section of the core exhibition should take into account the enormous merits of this group of scholars, which it does not, thereby posing yet another threat in the context of the current political situation in Poland. This threat is even greater, given that the research field of Polish-Jewish relations runs

15 An allusion to the famous aphorism by Roman Dmowski (the main ideologist of Polish radical nationalism and antisemitism): “I am a Pole so I have Polish responsibilities.”

the greatest risk of being attacked by the proponents of the current “historical policy.” As long as Jewish studies do not deal with “controversial” topics, they do not appear to be threatened, if only due to their potential role as a fig leaf for the official “historical policy.”

Conclusion – a dialogue of fields

The Polin core exhibition is a clear manifestation of an original, subjectivized history of Jews in Poland, which goes beyond the narrow context of Polish history and is not subjected to any of its dominant narratives. Becoming acquainted with such history is a great value in itself. This type of pluralist vision of the past, which is sensitive to the ethnically “other” as well as to the history of women and lower classes continues to be rare in Polish public space. The exhibition should therefore be defended, if only for this one reason. It combines respect for and reflection on the autonomy, subjectivity and uniqueness of Jews in the history of Poland, and the ties of Polish Jewry with other Jewish communities, on the one hand, with an acknowledgment that the histories of Poland and the Jews are intertwined in a powerful and profound manner, and that the two communities continue to exert a mutual impact, on the other. This narrative is not nationalistic; rather, it grants Jews the right to their national identity and a collective subjectivity; it is not a Polish-centered tale but one that emphasizes the profound ties binding Jews and their non-Jewish neighbors. It is worth emphasizing here that telling the history of Jews in Poland, and the history of Poland in general, in this way is neither obvious nor understandable for many participants in Polish historical debates, for Museum visitors as well as for many of its patrons. Let me mention a very characteristic anecdote about an objection one of the initiators of the Polin Museum voiced in the fall of 2011, during a discussion of the core exhibition design team. The objection was: “Where is Berek Joselewicz? Why isn’t he in the foreground of this part of the exhibition?” The commander of a unit of several thousand Jewish volunteers who fought first alongside Kościuszko and later Prince Poniatowski, turned out to be more important than the social and cultural history of many hundreds of thousands of Jews; the response of a narrow group of the Jewish elite to the partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was more important than the history of the masses who were not even aware that the partitioning had taken place and were only influenced by it when the legal status of Jews changed in its wake. Fortunately, the narrative of the Polin exhibition has successfully resisted a majority of such attempts.

Paradoxically, the power of the Polin Museum core exhibition lies in its “social weakness,” in the fact that it does not reflect the ideological vision of any easily identifiable social or political group. It presents a “hybrid” version of history, devoid of a clear message that would facilitate an equivocal interpretation, and reconciles different Jewish metahistories (Rosman, 2012, p. 362). It is a non-conclusive product of a dialogue between numerous Polish and foreign historians, and this is precisely what it should be. Thereby,

the Polin Museum exhibition offers enormous educational potential for those willing to teach a pluralist rather than essentializing vision of the history of both Jews and the countries they have inhabited. It stands a chance of becoming a space for dialogue between representatives of Jewish studies and researchers of Polish-Jewish relations, a dialogue which is in high demand. The former should beware of the temptation to practice a “safe” history of Jews which avoids topics seen as difficult in the context of modern debates in Poland, a temptation which contemporary state policy is making even stronger, and they should make more extensive use of the outcomes of the research of the other group of scholar. Representatives of research into Polish-Jewish relations, or simply into the historical and contemporary aspects of the attitudes of Poles to Jews, should bear in mind how abundant and multidimensional the two respective histories have been. The matter is not made easier by the fact that only “Polish-Jewish” debates, rather than the history of Jews in Poland, attract public interest and are discussed by the media. Whether or not the dialogue between “Jewish studies” and “Polish-Jewish relations studies” takes place, and whether or not the core exhibition is used by politicians against what it tries to illustrate, depends to a large extent on further autonomous development of these two research fields. The stakes here, and the justification that such a dialogue is necessary, concern the further policy of the Museum. It is of the utmost significance how its guides will be trained, what conferences and public meetings the Museum will host and what academic initiatives the Polin Museum will foster. It is a space that both historians of Jewry and researchers into Polish attitudes to Jews should jointly fight for.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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Dla kogo i o czym? Muzeum Polin, historiografia Żydów a Żydzi jako „sprawa polska”

Abstrakt: Artykuł ten przedstawia najważniejsze wątki krytycznej debaty wokół treści wystawy stałej Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin. Analizując różnice między dwoma polami badawczymi – studiami żydowskimi i studiami nad relacjami polsko-żydowskimi – autor broni tezy, że wiele krytycznych głosów w debacie wynika z niezrozumienia różnic między przedmiotem badań tych dwóch pól, po części wynikającego z obecnej sytuacji – panującego nacjonalizmu i etnocentryzmu, wywierających wpływ również na polskie debaty historyczne. Domaganie się od wystawy opowiadającej tysiącletnią historię Żydów na ziemiach polskich, aby koncentrowała się głównie na stosunku społeczeństwa większościowego do Żydów, grozi popełnieniem błędu teleologii, to jest interpretowaniem wcześniejszych wydarzeń i procesów jako nieuchronnie prowadzących do Zagłady, a także pomijaniem wszystkich tych elementów dziejów żydowskich, które z perspektywy Holokaustu i badań nad antysemityzmem nie mają znaczenia. Tego rodzaju postulaty i stojące za nimi metahistoryczne założenia grożą pozbawieniem Żydów roli podmiotów w ich własnej historii. Z drugiej strony autor tekstu wskazuje na elementy narracji wystawy stałej Muzeum Polin, w których rzeczywiście w niedostateczny sposób uwzględniona została problematyka antysemityzmu jako ważnego elementu żydowskiego doświadczenia i kluczowego czynnika dziejów Żydów w Polsce. Przywrócenie rzeczywistego dialogu i komunikacji pomiędzy przedstawicielami studiów żydowskich i badaczami relacji polsko-żydowskich, przy zachowaniu autonomii tych dwóch pól i zrozumieniu różnic pomiędzy nimi, jest też istotne z punktu widzenia niewątpliwych zagrożeń w postaci prób wykorzystania Muzeum Polin w budowie upolitycznionych, bezkrytycznych wizji historii Polski i stosunku Polaków do Żydów.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Polin; Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich; studia żydowskie; stosunki polsko-żydowskie; metahistoria; historiografia żydowska; antysemityzm.



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