A Theatre of History

12 Principles

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett


POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews was created from the inside out. Before there was a museum, before there was a building, before there was a collection, there was a plan for the exhibition. The story—the thousand-year history of Polish Jews—came first. All else followed. The museum and the story it tells in the core exhibition will be an agent of transformation. Polish visitors will encounter a history of Poland, but in a way they have never experienced. Jewish visitors will discover a history of what was once the largest Jewish community in the world and a center of the Jewish world—an estimated 70 percent of Jews today, more than 9 million people, are thought to descend from this territory. All visitors will encounter a Poland about which little is known and much is misunderstood, a country that was one of the most

Figure 1. Listening to the testimony of those who left Poland as a result of the antisemitic campaign of March 1968. (Photo by Magdalena Starowieyska and Darek Golik; courtesy of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw)
diverse and tolerant in early modern Europe, a place where a Jewish minority was able to create a distinctive civilization while being part of the larger society.

As a result of the Holocaust, 90 percent of Poland’s prewar Jewish population of 3.3 million was murdered, and the world they created in Poland was destroyed with them. Those who survived, whether in hiding, concentration camps, or the Soviet Union, returned to a Poland that lay in ruins. What had been the largest Jewish community in the world was now one of the smallest, and a country that had been one of the most diverse was now one of the most homogeneous.

Today, the hundreds of thousands of tombstones in more than one thousand Jewish cemeteries, and the many empty synagogues and other Jewish communal properties, testify not only to Jewish absence but also to a vibrant Jewish presence that had been a defining feature of Poland itself. That history—a thousand years of continuous Jewish presence in this part of the world—has faded from view, largely overshadowed, understandably, by the Holocaust.

All the more reason that it was important to bring the history of Polish Jews, all one thousand years of it, to life in Poland, the place where the story took place. In 1994, the City of Warsaw designated the location for the future museum—it would face the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes—in Muranów, Warsaw’s prewar Jewish neighborhood and the heart of the Warsaw ghetto. Until POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews opened its doors to the public in 2013, one honored those who perished by remembering how they died—at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes. Today, we can honor them, and those who came before and after, by remembering how they lived—at the museum. The museum completes the memorial complex.

While the chasm created by the Holocaust can never be repaired, the exhibition and the programs it inspires can build bridges across the rupture. Those bridges can reconnect Jews abroad to their own histories in Europe. They can reconnect people living in Poland today to the Jewish past of their own towns and cities—and to the descendants of the Jews who once lived there.

The dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 1993, inspired Grażyna Pawlak, Director of Development for the Association of the Jewish

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is University Professor Emerita and Professor Emerita of Performance Studies at New York University. She is Chief Curator of the Core Exhibition at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. Her books include Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage (University of California Press, 1998) and They Called Me Mayer July: Painted Memories of Jewish Childhood in Poland before the Holocaust (with Mayer Kirshenblatt; University of California Press, 2007). She currently serves on advisory boards for the Vienna Jewish Museum and the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow. brayndl@gmail.com
Historical Institute of Poland at the time, to propose an exhibition and then a museum that would present the thousand-year history of Polish Jews. The last thing that Poland needed was a Holocaust museum—in a sense, the whole country was already a Holocaust museum. The Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland inaugurated the museum project in 1996, with Jeshajahu Weinberg as chair of the team and Jerzy Halbersztadt as project director.

Event Communications, a design firm in London that specializes in multimedia narrative exhibitions, worked with a team of historians in Poland between 2000 and 2004 on the “Masterplan” for the exhibition. They based the “Masterplan” on the “Outline of the Historical Program,” and the vast database of objects, images, and documents that the Polish team had developed specifically for the exhibition.

It was not until 2005 that the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, and the City of Warsaw joined together to establish the museum—the first such public–private partnership for a cultural enterprise in Poland. According to the agreement, the public partners were to pay for the building and oversee its construction, while the private partner, the Association, would produce the exhibition and raise the money for it—this, too, was unprecedented in Poland.

The “Masterplan” for the exhibition was given to the architects who participated in 2005 in the first successful international competition for a public building in Poland. The winner, Rainer Mahlamäki, delivered a building that effectively accommodates the core exhibition and communicates the mission of the museum by offering a space of light, transparency, reflection, and openness. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is one of the largest museums dedicated to Jewish history in Europe—its interior is 16,000 square meters, with about 12,000 square meters of usable space, of which about 4,200 square meters are dedicated to the core exhibition.

Once the museum was founded and the architect selected, development of the exhibition moved forward under the inspired leadership of Jerzy Halbersztadt, who was director of the museum from 2005 until 2011. In 2006, he asked me to lead the development of the core
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exhibition, and together we created an academic team of scholars from Poland, Israel, and the United States— their fields included history, sociology, social psychology, literature, anthropology, and performance studies. A curatorial team of art historians, and also those trained in history and cultural studies, supported them. This team worked on the exhibition from beginning to end. The intellectual coherence of the result is to their credit. In 2011, when the time came to fabricate the exhibition, responsibility shifted from Event Communications to Nizio Design International, and responsibility for seeing the project through to its complete realization was placed in the hands of Piotr Wislicki, president of the board of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, and Marian Turski, chair of the Museum Council.

12 Principles

What is the story the exhibition should tell and how should that story be told? While the exhibition avoids a master narrative, it is guided by metahistorical principles—namely, concepts that underpin the story and our way of telling it.

Principle 1

I am often asked, “Which is the most important period in the history of Polish Jews?” The person asking usually already knows. For some it is the Holocaust. For others it is the postwar years, and for still others the interwar years. Our answer is always the same: the most important period in the history of Polish Jews is one thousand years—a millennium of continuous presence on Polish soil. This is not the story of Jews in Spain, England, France, Germany, Austria, or in many other places where they have lived.

Our approach to this thousand-year period is chronothematic. In other words, while the exhibition is divided into periods, the historical narration proceeds not only chronologically, but above all thematically. Thus, there is a historical timeline in the interwar years gallery, but the gallery as a whole is structured thematically around politics, culture, daily life, and growing up.

Principle 2

The history of Polish Jews is not a footnote to Polish history. Rather, the history of Polish Jews is an integral part of the history of Poland—and the history of Poland is not complete without a history of Polish Jews. We therefore avoided treating Polish history as a “context” for a separate Jewish story. Instead, we have constructed what could be called an integral rather than con-
textual history of Polish Jews, which is a way of saying that Polish Jews were of Poland and not only in Poland.

**Principle 3**

The exhibition presents a broad spectrum of relations, which visitors will experience as a story of coexistence and competition, conflict and cooperation, separation and integration—without reducing the history of Polish Jews to a history of Polish-Jewish relations (all too often treated as a history of antisemitism). Nor is a “common history” the same as a history “in common,” as the exhibition demonstrates by providing multiple perspectives on events (are they the same events if experienced so differently?). Above all, Jews are agents of history, and not only objects on which others projected their fantasies and fears.

**Principle 4**

It is precisely the interplay of separation and integration that made possible the creation of a civilization that was “categorically Jewish, distinctly Polish,” in the words of historian Moshe Rosman (2012). It was in 16th-century Kraków that Rabbi Moses Isserles, known by the acronym of his name as the Remu, adapted the *Shulhan Arukh*, a code of Jewish law, to reflect the practices of Polish Jews. This book, with the Remu’s notes, continues to guide the lives of Orthodox Jews to this day. A perfect expression of “categorically Jewish, distinctly Polish” are the magnificent wooden synagogues created during the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795).

**Principle 5**

We tell the story from the perspectives of those whose story we are telling, and we do so in the historical present—without foreshadowing and without back shadowing. Indeed, we ask visitors to “forget” what they already know about what happened later. We ask them to enter into the very moment of the events as they are unfolding. We do this by keeping the horizon in front of the visitor short, just as it was for those in the period, who could not see into the future. At the same time, the past gets longer with each step the visitor takes through the story.

This approach is especially powerful in the Holocaust gallery, which we base largely on the clandestine Oyneg Shabes archive organized by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto. Our approach is exceptional in basing the presentation of the Holocaust almost exclusively on documents that were created in the moment and on the spot. We do not use postwar survivor video testimony in the Holocaust gallery. Visitors will find thousands of survivor testimonies on video in POLIN Museum’s Resource Center, thanks to a partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation.
This narrative strategy is essential to the way the Holocaust figures in the thousand-year history of Polish Jews presented in the exhibition. Most Holocaust exhibitions situate the Holocaust within a history of hate. The logical endpoint—the telos of hate—is genocide. In contrast, the history of Polish Jews does not start with hate and does not end with genocide. Nor does our telling of the story drive to the Holocaust as the inevitable endpoint of this thousand-year history. Jews in the Second Polish Republic were not on the “edge of destruction,” as so often asserted—they did not see the Holocaust coming (Heller [1977] 1994). We try to help our visitors experience this state of mind by narrating the story in the historical present.

Whatever the “lessons” of the Holocaust, the thousand-year history of Polish Jews offers more than a case study in (in)tolerance. It would be a disservice to previous generations to reduce their lives to a prefiguration of genocide.

Principle 6

We avoid taking as our starting point misperceptions (whether antisemitic and philosemitic stereotypes or the stereotype of “Polish antisemitism”) in order to defend the history of Polish Jews and the history of Poland against such mistaken ideas. A proper historical account should of course correct the record, but not defensively. In other words, misconceptions should not set the agenda for what would become a defensive historical narration. Rather, our approach might be termed constructive engagement, with the intention to create a zone of trust for engaging difficult subjects: we must trust our visitors as people of good faith, and they must trust us to be intellectually honest. Controversies will no doubt arise. All histories are controversial. That said, the goal of the exhibition is not to create consensus, which is not possible in any case. The goal is, rather, to create an exhibition worthy of debates worth having.

Principle 7

The history of Polish Jews is the history of all Polish Jews, not just its heroes and elites. The exhibition does not take as its starting point the demonstration of Jewish worthiness, whether in collective or individual terms. An apologetic history would organize the exhibition around important people because they are important and showcase Jewish achievement—the contribution of Jews to the fields of politics, medicine, the arts, science, mathematics, and philosophy—for its own sake. That said, the leading roles of key individuals find their proper place in the exhibition’s historical narrative—Berek Joselewicz, Ludwik Zamenhof, Julian Tuwim, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Arthur Rubinstein, Bronisław Huberman, Jerzy Petersburski, Janusz Morgenstern, Marek Edelman, Alina Szapocznikow, and many others—without reducing the history of Polish Jews to the stories of great individuals as such and to their contributions to the world per se. Apologetic histories, which were popular in the 19th century, have their roots in debates dating from the 17th century on the prospect of Jewish integration and emancipation and in the fight against antisemitism.
Principle 8

Keep open questions that seem to beg for definition. Some said the exhibition should answer two questions even before visitors enter the poetic Forest gallery that begins the thousand-year journey: Who are the Jews? What is Judaism? Rather than providing a priori definitions, we ask our visitors to look for answers in the history of Polish Jews. There are many ways to be Jewish. Who is a Polish Jew remains an open question, and Polish Jews continue to be a work in progress.

There is no normative presentation of Judaism, no trans-historical displays of the Jewish life cycle or Jewish holidays, as are common in many Jewish museums. Instead, visitors to the exhibition will experience religious life as an integral part of Jewish life, not as a separate category in a section called “religion” or “Judaism.” They will discover transformations in Jewish religious life across the thousand-year history of Polish Jews—the rise of rabbinical authority and learning in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, exemplified by the great Polish rabbi Moses Isserles. They will encounter the Ba’al Shem Tov and Hasidism, the Gaon of Vilna and the modern yeshiva, the creation of the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street in the 19th century, and the religious political party Agudas Yisroel in the 20th century.

As for providing basic knowledge about Jewish religion, our visitors are on a “need-to-know basis”—they will build knowledge incrementally as they move through the story. Their first encounter with the prohibition of work on the Sabbath is in the medieval gallery, where we present a story of Jews on the road whose wheel broke on Friday just before sundown.

Figure 7. The interactive library in the Paradisus Iudaeorum gallery, featuring the earliest Hebrew and Yiddish books printed in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. (Photo by Magdalena Starowieyska and Darek Golik; courtesy of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw)
The question of what they should have done is the subject of rabbinical correspondence, which is how we know about this case. Should they have repaired the wheel and continued along their way even though that meant arriving at the nearest town after sundown and violating the prohibition of riding on the Sabbath? Or, should they have stayed on the road and waited until Saturday sundown, when the Sabbath was over, and only then repaired the wheel and traveled on? Staying on the road overnight was a dangerous proposition. Similarly, visitors will first encounter the Hebrew alphabet, also in the medieval gallery, in a presentation of bracteates, one-sided coins with Hebrew letters, evidence that Jews were involved in minting — visitors can “mint” their own bracteates at an interactive station.

Visitors will learn about the laws of ritual purity from a presentation of the Sha’arei dura, a handbook on the laws of kashrut printed in 1534 in Kraków — it was the first Hebrew book to be printed for Jews in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. An interactive presentation of this book is featured in a “library” in the Paradisus Iudaeorum gallery.

**Principle 9**

Bring the visitor face to face with those whose story we tell. This is history in the first person, which is why we lead the narration with quotations from primary sources. Our goal is to bring the visitor close to those who lived in the place and moment of the story. Featured are the words of Jan Zamoyski, who contracted his Jewish leaseholder Jakub Nossałowicz in 1595; Natan Hanover, who recorded the massacres during the Khmelnytsky uprising in 1648–1649; Paulina Wengeroff, who recalled the transformation of Jewish life in the 19th century; young Jews who responded to autobiography contests organized by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in the 1930s; and those surveyed by Sara Hurwic (later, Irena Nowakowska), a sociologist who sent questionnaires to Jews in Poland in 1948.

In this way, visitors come into direct contact with voices from the period — not one voice and not only the voice of the historian, but many voices. These voices form a chorus, sometimes in harmony, sometimes dissonant. These voices speak in many languages. This is a sign of the historic diversity of Poland, which we make visible by presenting major quotations in their original languages — Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, Czech, Polish, Yiddish, German, French, and Russian, among others — and in Hebrew and Latin fonts specific to the period.
Principle 10

Our goal is to be authoritative without being authoritarian, to create an open narrative in multiple voices, and to invite visitors to add their voices to the conversation. Visiting museums and exhibitions is generally a social experience. The conversations that arise during and after the visit are a critical part of the experience. Our commentary, what we as scholars have written, appears in its own font and on its own panel. That commentary supports the quotations from primary sources and helps to fill gaps and connect the texts, images, iconography, scenography, objects, documents, films, and sounds that together carry the story.

Principle 11

Materialize history in the absence of original objects. If we had more objects, if other institutions had been willing to loan us more objects, we would have shown them, but for the medieval period, almost 600 years, we can point to only two objects that Jews in Poland made or were involved in manufacturing: tombstones and coins. Tombstones, the oldest of which dates from 1203, are immovable, and coins, no matter how beautiful they are with their Hebrew inscriptions, are tiny, and the story we must tell is deep and wide. What we do have is intangible heritage, materialized in texts — the most important sources in the medieval period come from rabbis in German lands who responded to questions from rabbis who were passing through or living in Poland. These questions often take the form of a story that describes the problem. Necessity is the mother of invention. We asked two of Poland’s most celebrated comic book artists to illustrate these stories in the style of medieval illuminated manuscripts, both Jewish and Christian. We then commissioned specialists in the conservation of the painted interiors of Polish churches to paint and guild the walls of the gallery using traditional materials and techniques. As a result, visitors to the medieval gallery will find themselves in a three-dimensional illuminated manuscript. The entire gallery has been hand-painted and hand-gilded.

Similarly, for the modern yeshiva in the 19th century, there is virtually no visual material, but there are vivid memoirs and autobiographies. On the basis of those texts, we created a painted animation — 24 hours, from dawn to dawn, in the great yeshiva in Volozhin, narrated with quotations from memoirs of the period.

Perhaps the most dramatic examples are the magnificent wooden synagogues, created in the 17th and 18th centuries, none of which exist today. While we can never recover the original synagogues, in the sense of their original material, we can do something else, something of great value — we can recover the knowledge of how to build one by actually building it, and that is precisely what we did in Poland. We collaborated with Handshouse Studio, an educational nonprofit organization based in Massachusetts. Hundreds of volunteers and experts from
Poland and abroad reconstructed the painted ceiling and timber-frame roof of the 17th-century synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec. We chose this synagogue, which was destroyed during the First World War, because it is the best documented of all the wooden synagogues. The result is a new kind of object, one whose value is exponentially greater because of how it was created, and because of the knowledge that was recovered and discovered in the process. Today, this element is a centerpiece not only of the 18th-century gallery, but also of the core exhibition — indeed, of POLIN Museum itself.

**Principle 12**

Enter a theatre of history, a story told in four dimensions — time is the fourth dimension. Only as the visitor moves does the story unfold. Younger visitors, whose natural inclination is to learn by trial and error (rather than to read the manual), will intuitively find their way through the story. Experienced museum-goers may expect a more explicit road map. They may not be used to making their way through a continuous visual narrative that is organized in acts and scenes, much like a play. They may be surprised to find themselves on the stage and in the scenography, not on the other side of the proscenium. That said, the museum offers group tours, self-guided tours, curatorial tours, highlight tours, audio-guides, and proposals for various other ways to visit the exhibition.
POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is part of the very history that it presents. It is an agent in that history, not simply a mirrored reflection of it. Our goal has been to create an exhibition that is memorable. To be memorable, the experience must be emotional; but to be worth remembering, it must be thought-provoking. There is no end to the debates provoked by any history of Polish Jews, not least the one presented in the core exhibition. Our challenge is to create an exhibition worthy of debates worth having, including those that will surely arise from the exhibition itself.

References


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