

# The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw—Part 2

## From the Holocaust to present-day Poland

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11 January 2017

*This is the second and concluding part of a series. Part 1 was posted January 9.*

The largest single part of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, and perhaps also its strongest one, is devoted to the Holocaust in Poland. Poland was not only home to the world's largest Jewish population, but it also became the main site of the killing of European Jewry by the Nazi regime. It is here that the six death camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Sobibór, Treblinka, Bełżec and Chełmno) were established in which a total of some 2.5 million Jews were murdered.

In the conception of this part of the exhibition, emphasis is laid on conveying the horrors that the Jews in Poland went through during the German occupation. The historians supervising this gallery chose to focus on the Warsaw Ghetto, in which some 400,000 Jews were kept. Of those, some 100,000 died of hunger and disease in the first one-and-a-half years of the ghetto's existence. Most of the remaining 300,000 Jews were gassed in Treblinka.

The story of the Warsaw Ghetto is told through the diaries and documents of two of its key figures, Adam Czerniaków, the head of the ghetto's Jewish Council, and Emanuel Ringelblum, a socialist Zionist and head of the ghetto's archive Oyneg Shabes. (See *Samuel Kassow's Who Will Write Our History?*) Separate small rooms show artefacts from this period such as food stamps. Valuable video footage includes explanations on the impact of starvation and epidemics, as well as the efforts of the population to hold on to some of its cultural traditions to find a way to escape from the horrors of the ghetto.

The rooms of the gallery, connected by a long, jagged corridor, have uneven walls and are extremely small, trying to convey the impression of being trapped in tiny, overcrowded conditions like the inhabitants of the ghetto. One particularly well-done element of the exhibition is the reconstruction of the bridge that united the large and the small ghettos of Warsaw, which were divided by a large street that formed part of the "Aryan" side of the city. Crossing the bridge, visitors can look down on pictures from the life in occupied Warsaw outside of the Ghetto walls.

The question of Polish anti-Semitism, which continues to be hotly debated in Poland, is raised in passing but not highlighted. On one wall, three quotes from different eyewitnesses seek to portray different ways of reacting within Polish society to the Holocaust. Whereas one expresses horror at what is going on, another betrays indifference, while a third speaks to the views of some Polish nationalists that Hitler was to be congratulated upon finally doing away with the Polish Jews.

Addressing the example of Jedwabne, a town in northeastern Poland where sections of the local population murdered dozens of Jews in the summer of 1941, a small wall also raises the question of Polish pogroms against Jews following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the

German occupation of Eastern Poland. Another section of the gallery portrays the difficult life of Jews who tried to survive on the "Aryan side." Those who went into hiding often had to pay their saviors, some of whom eventually handed the Jews over to the Gestapo or killed them themselves. (The hiding of Jews was punished with execution by the Nazi occupiers.)

### The post-war period

The section on the post-war period has been by far the most controversial and is also the weakest. Many of the problems of the exhibition find their most concentrated expression here, even though the authors of the gallery no doubt tried to be as objective as possible in their presentation.

Having all but ignored the impact of the Russian Revolution on inter-war Poland and its relation to the Jewish question, the exhibition not only cannot provide an answer to the seeming paradox of Stalinist anti-Semitism, which was particularly strong in Poland, but prevents it from even being raised as an issue.

Indeed, the fate of Polish Jews in the Polish People's Republic was perhaps the most difficult issue for the historians to tackle. Poland after World War II was not only economically and socially devastated, but also presumably the largest cemetery in the world. Over 4 million European Jews had met their violent deaths on Polish soil, in addition to an estimated 800,000 Soviet prisoners of war and some 6 million Poles.

Following the advance of the Red Army to Eastern Poland, Stalin, who was responsible for the murder of thousands of Polish Communists in the 1930s and the dissolution of the Polish Communist Party in 1938, created the so-called Lublin Committee to take over power in Poland. The aim was both to control the country, which had formed a buffer of imperialism against the USSR in the inter-war period, and at the same time to prevent a growing movement of the working class from taking revolutionary dimensions.

In the summer of 1944, the committee issued the so-called Lublin Manifesto. It proclaimed a number of social reforms, including a land reform, but at the same time insisted on the reinstitution of parliamentary democracy and made clear that there was no intent on the part of Moscow to abolish capitalism in Poland. Until the late 1940s nearly civil war conditions prevailed in the country, as nationalists from the Polish underground were fighting military units organized by the Polish People's Party.

In the first part of this gallery, the main emphasis is laid on the void left

by the extermination of Polish Jews and the major difficulties confronting the survivors. A wall with search formulas, which surviving Jews used to try to find other surviving members of their families, seeks to demonstrate the scale of the genocide. A quote by the Holocaust survivor and pianist, Władysław Szpilman, sums up the difficulties of the surviving Jews in starting a new life after all the horrors they had been through: "How does one start a new life when all that's behind is just death?" (1946).

The disturbing phenomenon of numerous pogroms and terrorist attacks against Holocaust survivors in the immediate post-war period is addressed by the example of the notorious Kielce pogrom on July 4, 1946. Some 42 Jews were killed in this pogrom, the largest in post-war Poland. The exhibition introduces the names of the victims of the pogrom, shows a contemporary government-sponsored movie on the funeral, and quotes numerous reactions and interpretations of the pogrom—by the official press, representatives of the Catholic Church, and other contemporaries. (A section of the 1946 film is available on YouTube with English subtitles).

In a statement characteristic of the role of the Catholic Church, the Bishop of Kielce stated in a letter to the US ambassador to Poland of the time: "Jews themselves must take the lion's share of responsibility for the hatred surrounding them." The Kielce pogrom sparked a mass wave of emigration by the horrified Jewish community. Within months, thousands left the country. However, it was difficult to emigrate since, as the exhibition notes, "the post-war world did not open its doors to refugees." Immigration quotas had been reduced by most countries, including Britain and the United States, which left many Jews with no other option but to emigrate to Israel.

The exhibition addresses the little known chapter of a relative flourishing of the surviving Jewish community in Poland in the immediate post-war period. Until around 1948 the Stalinist government allowed for a certain amount of political and cultural autonomy for the Jews through the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, which included representatives from the Bund, Zionist organizations and the United Polish Workers' Party.

One of the main achievements of the committee was its formation of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, which undertook an enormous effort to safeguard critical documents on the extermination of Polish Jews. It uncovered the remnants of the Ringelblum Archive that had been gathered in the Warsaw Ghetto, and created one of the most significant libraries on Jewish history in Europe, that of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. To this day, research on the history of Polish Jews relies significantly on these early efforts at historical documentation.

In a brief film, the exhibition deals with the anti-Semitic stereotype of the *Żydokomuna*, "the Jewish commune," i.e., the threat of Communism allegedly represented by the Jews. It explains that the Lublin Manifesto for the first time in Polish history guaranteed full civil rights to the Jews, and made it possible for them to get whatever job they wanted without any restrictions. While this explanation is not wrong in and of itself, it begs the question of how the Stalinist government could then itself become a major force in the fostering of anti-Semitism throughout the post-war period. The exhibition fails to explain or even openly address this question. Fundamentally, the anti-Semitic tendencies in the Stalinist bureaucracy, which emerged as early as the 1920s, were a result of its nationalist orientation and social base in a privileged caste and layers of the middle class.

This becomes clear by the extent to which anti-Semitism was used by the Stalinist faction in the USSR in its struggle against the Left Opposition under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, which defended the internationalist program of the October Revolution against its nationalist betrayal by Stalinism. [1] In the purges of the 1930s, anti-Semitic stereotypes were used in the persecution of Left Oppositionists, real or alleged, and in particular in the campaign against Leon Trotsky himself. [2]

In the post-war period, the Kremlin bureaucracy actively tried to appease nationalist forces in Poland and other satellite states by adopting parts of their program. The building of the Polish People's Republic took place on the basis of borders that had been envisaged by Poland's ethnic nationalists before World War II. The Polish Stalinists also engaged in the ethnic cleansing of southern Poland of the substantial Ukrainian population. Thus, the Polish People's Republic was largely ethnically homogeneous.

Around 1955, the new Gomułka government in Poland started initiating a "thaw," a short time before the Soviet government under the leadership of Khrushchev did so. The thaw included not only, as the exhibition notes, more artistic and political freedoms, but also pro-market policies and the promotion of anti-Semitism in the official press. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, a small-scale anti-Semitic purge of the party apparatus took place, with many Jewish party members being removed from important positions. As it became possible for the first time since the 1940s to leave the country, some 50,000 Polish Jews chose to emigrate between 1956 and 1960, mostly to Israel or the United States.

The next major wave of anti-Semitism occurred within the context of the 1968 student protest movement in Poland. Unfortunately, like most events of the post-war period, this is treated in the exhibition outside of the broader international context. However, it was precisely the international wave of workers' struggles and student protests that accounted for the extremely aggressive reaction of the United Polish Workers' Party (PZPR) to the March 1968 student protests in Warsaw.

The protesters were subject to a witch-hunt in the official press, which published the alleged names of the protest leaders—all of which sounded Jewish. In a notorious televised speech that is also shown in the museum, the incumbent general secretary of the ruling PZPR, Władysław Gomułka, suggested that the protests were provoked by "Zionists" (i.e., Jews) and encouraged the Jewish population of Poland to leave the country. (A section from the original speech in Polish is available on YouTube.)

In the following two years, many Jews were forced to emigrate and deprived of their Polish citizenship. Those who remained in the country often lost their jobs. The people purged included more than one former fighter of the Communist underground in the ghettos under Nazi occupation. This wave of forced emigration, involving some 13,000 people, left Poland with a Jewish community of only a few thousand who were careful not to display their Jewish origins.

For the Stalinist bureaucracy—which recruited not least of all from backward layers of the middle class and peasantry, where anti-Semitism had a certain tradition—the whipping-up of anti-Semitic sentiments was a vehicle to both mobilize nationalist and far-right elements against the working class and student protests, and at the same time promote nationalism to divide the working class.

In light of developments in France, where student protests had prompted a revolutionary movement of the working class, the Stalinist bureaucracy was horrified at the prospect of an internationally unified struggle of workers that would be directed both against imperialism and the rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was this prospect more than anything else that animated its viciously nationalistic and reactionary anti-Semitic purge.

The leading force behind the anti-Semitic witch-hunt was the Interior Ministry, headed by Mieczysław Moczar. Moczar, formerly an agent of the Soviet secret service NKVD in the 1930s and 1940s, was a long-time ally but later rival of Gomułka. He was notorious for his anti-Semitism and Polish ethnic nationalism. In the witch-hunt of 1968, he worked closely together with Bolesław Piasecki, a former member of the fascist organization Falange in the 1930s. From 1945, Piasecki had maintained ties with Gomułka, who had encouraged him to publish a newspaper in the early People's Republic. Piasecki's right-wing, Catholic *Stowarzyszenie "Pax"* (Pax Union) was tolerated, if not encouraged, by

the Stalinist bureaucracy for decades.

In its concluding section, the exhibition points to a growing interest in Jewish history and the Holocaust within the political opposition. The trade union movement Solidarity, which at its peak had, with 10 million people, more members than the PZPR, included both an anti-Semitic wing and one that fostered political discussion of and historical research into the history of Polish Jews. The gallery ends somewhat abruptly with two films about people in contemporary Poland and their association and identification with being Jewish.

## The political context

Despite some weaknesses outlined above, the museum's core exhibition provides a remarkably objective account of the life and fate of Jews in Poland. It is the result of the efforts of Polish and international scholars to come to grips at this point with this complex and tragic history.

The core exhibit was developed by a team of internationally renowned scholars, headed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor of performance art at New York University. This team included the Polish expert on the history of the Warsaw Ghetto, Barbara Engelking; Samuel Kassow, an American professor of history who specializes in the history of Yiddish culture and politics in Poland during the first half of the 20th century; and Hanna Zaremska, a leading expert on the history of Polish Jewry in the Middle Ages. The museum was founded by both the Polish state and a number of private donors from various countries.

The head of the core exhibition, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, has emphasized that POLIN is a "museum of life" and that the makers of the exhibition wanted to avoid the impression that all of Polish-Jewish history was inevitably leading to its horrible conclusion, the Holocaust. The exhibition's main message is that the Jews were an intrinsic and important part of Polish society for a thousand years and that the extinction of this life constitutes an extraordinary loss for Polish and European civilization. The museum thus seeks to form a certain counterpoint to the existing memorial sites in Poland, which are almost exclusively devoted to the Holocaust. The name of the museum, POLIN, is symbolic of this aim. In its original meaning in Hebrew, Polin signifies "stay here" (in contemporary Hebrew, it designates the country Poland.)

The museum faced numerous attacks from various sides, both from Zionists, who felt that Jewish life in Poland was painted in too rosy a light, and from right-wing political tendencies in Poland. To this day, it is common for Polish politicians, not only from the official far-right, to voice anti-Semitic sentiments and ridicule the Holocaust.

In particular, the bogeyman of the *Żydokomuna* still plays a role in Polish politics and historiography, with many pseudo-intellectuals still blaming "the Jews" (or "American Jews") for the rule of Stalinism in Poland and denying or justifying Polish participation in anti-Semitic pogroms. These tendencies have been actively encouraged more recently under the government of the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS). To this day, the history of the Holocaust has not been made an obligatory part of history lessons in Polish schools.

The political pressures bearing down on the project of the POLIN Museum are apparently reflected in that it carefully avoids addressing the major impact of the Russian Revolution on Jewish life and Poland more generally in the inter-war period. Unfortunately, on this crucial question it seems that the makers of the exhibition adapted to the political climate of virulent anti-communism in Poland, where any objective, let alone positive reference to the October Revolution and the Communist movement in Poland or elsewhere is considered a taboo. Nevertheless, there is no question that the museum will contribute significantly to the

education of youth, intellectuals and workers about this history.

The intellectual efforts of leading scholars that went into creating the POLIN exhibit, and the fact that the Polish government felt compelled to eventually support the museum, can only be explained by the emergence of a broader, healthy desire among sections of the working class and intelligentsia to remember Jewish life in Poland and uncover the truth about the horrendous crimes that were committed in World War II and its aftermath.

Since the 1990s, and even more so during the 2000s, numerous grassroots projects, initiated by workers and intellectuals in Polish cities, have sought to raise awareness about the fate of Polish Jews in the 20th century and their contribution to Polish society and culture. Thus, in Kielce—which had a substantial Jewish population before the war and became the site of one of the most atrocious and notorious post-war pogroms after the war—posters of Jewish inhabitants from the inter-war period were put up in the street where the pogrom of June 1946 was committed. Numerous book projects, chief among them a multi-volume Polish edition of the Ringelblum archives, have also been launched.

The growing interest in this history was reflected in the museum's remarkable success in reaching broad layers of the population. The museum indicates that within the first year of its work, in 2014-2015, some 2.5 million people participated in its educational programs. This included some 430,000 school students who participated in educational activities at the museum or online, 1,500 workshops, walking tours, meetings with witnesses of history for schools, and 80,000 visitors to the Museum on Wheels travelling exhibit. Some 2 million people used the Virtual Shtetl web site that was launched by the museum.

*Concluded*

### Notes:

[1] William Corey noted in an essay on the subject: "In early 1926, during the bitter intraparty warfare, N. Uglanov, then a Stalin aide in charge of the Moscow party organization, sent out agitators to party cells to incite workers against both the Zinoviev Opposition and the Trotsky Opposition. The agitators hinted at the Jewish origin of the leaders of the two oppositions and suggested that the struggle was between native Russian socialism and 'aliens' who sought to pervert it. Trotsky wrote to Bukharin on March 4 expressing shock that 'anti-Semitic agitation should be carried on with impunity.'" See: William Corey: *The Origins and Development of Soviet Anti-Semitism: An Analysis*, in: *Slavic Review*, vol. 31, no. 1 (March 1972), p. 115.

[2] For an exploration of anti-Semitism in the Stalinist purges see the chapter: "The Anti-Semitic Subtext of the Moscow Trials," in: Vadim Rogovin: *1937. Stalin's Year of Terror*, Mehring Books 1998, pp. 154-178.



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