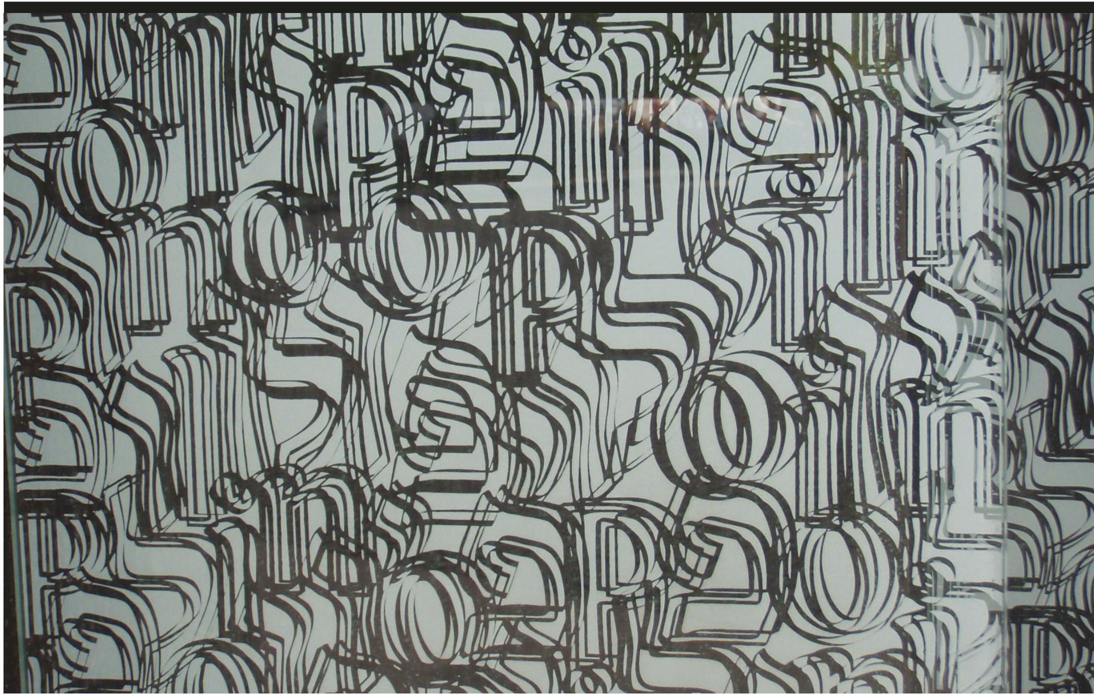

Section of the facade of Polin Museum. Photo: Konrad Matyjaszek

History's history: Polish-Jewish studies

Konrad Matyjaszek, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir

Keywords: Jewish history; history of Jews in Poland; studies on antisemitism; museum exhibition design.

The time when history is being politically constituted is one of the few moments when history can actually be seen. Once it becomes established, historical narratives that have not been fully utilized earlier acquire the coherence and usability of a well-designed tool, whose components, however, remain concealed. The history of the Jews in Poland has always been instrumentalized, but such process intensified particularly after 2005, when a group of Polish authors who looked to a German model but misunderstood it published their manifesto, entitled *Memory and responsibility* and swiftly nicknamed "Oblivion and irresponsibility"[1] (Kostro & Merta, 2005). The history of the Jews ultimately became a tool of Polish politics of history in 2014, when the main exhibition was opened at the Warsaw's Polin Museum, formerly known as the Museum of

1 For a polemic with the intellectual standpoint expressed by one of the signatories of this manifesto, see: J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Bez wroga ani rusz* (Tokarska-Bakir, 2007).

the History of Polish Jews.[2] Its opening made it possible to identify the components of a historical narrative that since then were to become tools of power and hegemony, hegemony which, as Henri Lefebvre claimed, "implies more than an influence, more even than the permanent use of repressive violence. It is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge included" (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 10). From then on, the narratives on Jewish history are to remain covered by the glass structure that envelops the Museum, a surface anchored in the rubbles of the Warsaw ghetto and printed over its surface with thousands of inscriptions in the Latin and Hebrew alphabets, saying "Poland," "Poland," "Poland."[3]

The sixth issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* is dedicated to the history of the verbal, linguistic and narrative envelope designed to enclose the history of the Jews in Poland and to define its borders, marked with obsessively repeated incantation. The Polin Museum's Program Director, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claimed that under this protective envelope, the dominant Polish majority's narrative about the Jews becomes "the theatre of history" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015). If this is the case, then the texts published in the sixth issue of SLH address such theatre's non-theatrical spaces – its backstage, technical areas and emergency exits. They address the narratives, knowledge and images which have not been encompassed by the borders marked with the word "Poland" and which therefore have no right to enter the stage of the "thousand years of the history of Polish Jews."[4] Playing perpetually on this stage is a performance about a millennium of Polish tolerance, pluralism and multiculturality[5] – about all that is overtly contradicted by the obscene language of the Polish national community, aimed against Jews, Muslims, non-whites and refugees from countries torn by the war which Poland itself helped to instigate.[6] The subject of this issue of SLH concerns the boundaries of the narrative field that is the history of Polish Jews, a field which has been scholarly defined since the early 1980s as Polish-Jewish studies.

2 Before the core exhibition of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews was opened in October 2014, the name of the Museum was changed to the "Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews." In the years that followed, the management of the Museum most frequently used the short form "Polin Museum." Director Dariusz Stola explained that the purpose of such change is to make sure "that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews instantly embeds itself in people's mind as the Polin Museum" (Gliński, 2014b). "Polin" means "Poland" in Hebrew.

3 The facades of the museum are covered with panes of opaque, green-tinted glass, etched on entire surface with Latin and Hebrew letters spelling "Polin."

4 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett wrote on the Jewish history in Poland: "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" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015). The reference to the one thousand years of Jewish presence in Poland is in fact neither true nor historically justified. Permanent Jewish communities have resided in Poland since the late 12th century, therefore in 2014 we can refer to "eight hundred and thirty years of Jewish presence in Poland" at most, rather than "one thousand years."

5 According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the narrative in question is about "Poland about which little is known and much is misunderstood, a country that was one of the most diverse and tolerant in early modern Europe" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015).

6 One of the fundamental causes of the political instability of Syria and Iraq, and the ongoing civil war there, was the 2003 military invasion of Iraq, carried out by a US-led coalition of countries, including Poland. Approximately 200 Polish soldiers took part in the "Iraqi Freedom" military operations. Between 2003 and 2011, up to 2,500 soldiers were deployed to Iraq in the Polish Military Contingent, taking part in combat missions, and stabilization, training and logistical operations. 28 soldiers from the Polish Contingent died in combat and over 150 were wounded ("10 lat od inwazji na Irak," 2013). The death toll in the Iraqi war amounts to ca. 500,000 casualties in the 2003–2011 period (Hagopian et al., 2013).

This issue of SLH opens with an interview with Antony Polonsky, who gives an account of the political history of this research field, from its beginnings to 2014. Antony Polonsky is the lead historian of the main exhibition of the Polin Museum and the editor-in-chief of the academic yearly *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, published in Oxford. He was also one of the initiators of the first centers for Polish-Jewish studies, and a co-organizer of the first academic conferences on the same topic. In the interview, he talks about the meeting held in 1979 at Orchard Lake, Michigan, which brought together representatives of American Jewish associations and the Polish American Congress. During this meeting it was proposed for the first time to define the Polish-Jewish "golden mean": [7] namely, to overcome the mutual "misunderstanding [...] over the situation of the Jewish people in Poland," in particular as concerns Poles taking part in the Holocaust of the Jews, and to generate an "objective joint Polish-Jewish history"[8] (*Orchard Lake Statement*, 1979). Polonsky talks about the definitions of the "Jewish issue" developed at that time by the circles of political opposition in Poland, and about the conference on Polish-Jewish relations organized, for the first time in post-war Europe, at Oxford University on September 17–21, 1984.

Polonsky's account turns out to be inappropriate for the stage: it fits neither the stage of the "theatre of history," nor the confines of what this theatre might be conceived to encompass. The backstage area of the contemporary version of this "theatre of history" is decorated in an equally censorable way. Polonsky's account of the pressure the Polish Ministry of Culture exerted on the historians designing the Polin Museum's exhibition is accompanied by the historian's conclusion that in order to "build [the Museum] for the future," it is necessary to emphasize those themes of the Polish identity narrative that are otherwise known as antisemitic. In Polonsky's relation, the Ministry officers are urging the Museum designers to stress, in contradiction to the facts, the narrative of German Nazi "activity" and "encouragement" with reference to the Polish perpetration of the massacres of Jews, including the one in Jedwabne. They also demand that references are made to the myth of the Jewish responsibility for communism. At the same time, the lead historian of the Museum recalls the necessity of consultations with the politicians of the Law and Justice (PiS) political party, who were about to take power at the time.

This issue of SLH also features a revised translation of an article by Scott Ury, a historian from Tel Aviv University, in which he analyzes the historiographic images and fantasies concerning Polish Jews. The original version of this paper was published in English

7 The issue of "the golden mean" employed to introduce order to the historical narrative of the "Polish-Jewish relations" is addressed by Piotr Forecki and Anna Zawadzka (Forecki & Zawadzka, 2016).

8 The authors of the *Orchard Lake Statement* stipulated the following: "Both groups [Polish and Jewish] acknowledged that there has been considerable misunderstanding in both the Polish and Jewish communities in the United States and elsewhere over the situation of the Jewish people in Poland, climaxed by the ineffable tragedy of the Nazi holocaust. It was candidly acknowledged that selective traditions of writing the history of Polish-Jewish relations have developed that have perpetrated misunderstanding and antagonisms, rather than increase understanding." Further on, the document states that: "sharing the conviction that 'history must not become a hitching post to the past, but rather a guiding post to a more humane future,' the Polish and Jewish leaders agreed to organize a project of Polish and Jewish scholars who would seek to write and publish together an objective joint Polish-Jewish history" (*Orchard Lake Statement*, 1979).

in the journal *Jewish Social Studies* in 2000 (Ury, 2000), i.e., before the founding acts of Polish politics of history were written down, before the construction work on the Polin Museum commenced, and just moments before the debate on the *Neighbors* by Jan Tomasz Gross (Gross, 2001) revealed the fact that the inviolable boundaries of the possible studies on the "common Polish-Jewish history" are analogous to the boundaries that protect Polish ethnic national identity. Ury writes about how the historical narrative about "Polish Jews" is politically and academically employed and used in Israel, Poland and the United States. His analysis is a source of essential knowledge on the changes that since the first publication of his text have occurred in the discussed research field and within the scope of the collective fantasies this field is delimited by.

In the above-quoted text about the museum as a "theatre," Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes the necessity to write a "common [Polish-Jewish] history," most likely in the vein proposed by the politicians and historians gathered in Orchard Lake in 1979. In her opinion, the establishing of such "common history" counters "reducing the history of Polish Jews to a history of Polish-Jewish relations (all too often treated as a history of antisemitism)." Kirshenblatt-Gimblett believes that once Jewish history is separated from knowledge about the inequality and violence stemming from the activities of the majority, the historical narrative will make it possible to transform the Jews into the "agents of history, and not only objects on which others projected their fantasies and fears"[9] (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015). A similar approach seems to emerge in the text by Kamil Kijek, a historian and sociologist from Wrocław University, also published in the current issue of SLH. Kijek's text refers to the boundaries of Jewish studies and constitutes a polemic with the critical analyses of the Polin Museum. Kijek seems not to subscribe completely to the categorical assessment of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who sees a hypothetical museum which would contextualize the Jewish Holocaust as "the last thing that Poland needed" and who believes in the presence of the "stereotype of 'Polish antisemitism,'" seen as harmful equally to the antisemitism itself.[10] Kijek notes critically that the exhibition significantly ignores the subject of racist pressures exerted on the Jews in 18th and 19th century Poland. At the same time, however, he is able to find a considerable common ground with the Museum Director when he chooses to see the Polin Museum as a narrative boundary separating the field of "Jewish studies" (which focus on the "reflection on the autonomy, subjectivity and uniqueness of Jews in the history of Poland") from critical studies of Polish-Jewish relations, which remain outside the museum's narrative. Kijek

9 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that "The [Polin museum] 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" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015).

10 In her text about the "theatre of history," Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that "the last thing that Poland needed was a Holocaust museum – in a sense, the whole country was already a Holocaust museum." On behalf of the design team of the Polin Museum she notes that "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" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015).

believes that the latter are necessary to facilitate a broad academic debate, although they are inherently in danger of a cognitive fallacy, whereby historic Jewish communities are reduced to a mere "object, evidence and measure of Polish xenophobia."

The text by Kamil Kijek is accompanied by a polemical commentary by Katrin Stoll, a historian from the German Historical Institute in Warsaw. The matter she touches upon is essential for Kijek's argumentation and concerns the (im)possibility to approach the history of a minority viewed as the subject of history without analyzing the exclusion aimed against this group. Stoll goes on to analyze the academic consequences brought about by the essential gaps in the exhibition in the Polin Museum. In doing so, she refers to the limitations of the potential of the "dialogue" that Kijek proposes between critical cultural studies and the historical studies whose critical reflection is constrained by the category of identity. Originally, Stoll's text was intended as a part of the peer review process for Kijek's article. However, lacking the legal capacity to publish reviews (which often feature analyses at least as thorough as the texts they address) and being legally obliged to protect the anonymity of the review process, the Editors had to exclude Stoll's commentary from the pool of reviews, a decision approved by the author herself. In these circumstances, one feels obliged to refer back to the introduction to the first issue of SLH, where Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and Anna Zawadzka postulated the need for transparency of peer reviews and for expanding academic debate by including the discussions and disputes which are presently concealed by a legal demand of confidentiality (Tokarska-Bakir & Zawadzka, 2012).

The controversy brought about by Kijek's article offers an opportunity to explain a recurring misunderstanding related to the classification of antisemitism studies.[11] If the objects of antisemitism are assumed to be constituted by those who suffer its outcomes most often, it will be natural to place antisemitism studies in the framework of Jewish studies. Yet this would not bode well for the topic of these studies. Following Salo W. Baron's postulate to put an end to the "lachrymose narrative" of Jewish history (Baron, 1928), which is a popular approach in Jewish studies, would foster the normalization of antisemitism.

However, if the assumption is made that the object of antisemitism is not the Jews but "overlearned cognitive habits" towards minorities,[12] which are historically changeable and result in aggression, it will no longer be necessary to limit the scope of antisemitism studies to Jewish studies. The "Jewish question" was aimed against Jews, but was never actually about them. David Nirenberg writes that the Jewish question was as much about criticizing one's own culture as it was "about the basic tools and concepts through which individuals in a society relate to the world and to each other"[13] (Nirenberg, 2013, p. 3).

11 Cf. the discussion in the introduction to *Antisemitism in times of crisis* by Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz (Gilman & Katz, 1991).

12 Cf. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir's text *The Polish underground organization Wolność i Niezawisłość and anti-Jewish pogroms, 1945–6* (Tokarska-Bakir, 2017).

13 "The Jewish question is as much about the basic tools and concepts through which individuals in a society relate to the world and to each other, as it is about the presence of 'real' Judaism and living Jews in that society" (Nirenberg, 2013, p. 3).

Some things, such as money and property, were thought of in Christian culture as "Jewish" and believed to produce "Jewishness" whether their users were Jewish or not (Nirenberg, 2013, p. 3).

The antisemitic "empty signifier" was filled with content as contradictory, as the one listed by Konstanty Kot-Jeleński:

> Poles have never come out against Jews "because they are Jews" but because Jews are dirty, greedy, mendacious, because they wear ear-locks, speak jargon, do not want to assimilate, and *also* because they *do* assimilate, cease using their jargon, are nattily dressed, and want to be regarded as Poles. Because they lack culture and because they are overly cultured. Because they are superstitious, backward and ignorant, and because they are damnably capable, progressive, and ambitious. Because they have long, hooked noses, and because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them from "pure Poles." Because they crucified Christ and practice ritual murder and pore over the Talmud, and because they disdain their own religion and are atheists. Because they look wretched and sickly, and because they are tough and have their own fighting units and are full of *Khutspah*. Because they are bankers and capitalists and because they are Communists and agitators. But in *no* case because they are Jews (Brumberg, 1983 [Jeleński, 1968, p. 52]).

For all the above reasons, antisemitism studies had better not be conducted on behalf of Jews, but rather on behalf of societies practicing antisemitism. Hannah Arendt writes that "Jews will no longer be discriminated against only when every act of antisemitism is considered an attack on society as a whole"(Arendt, 2007, p. 112, footnote 5).

The final text concerning the main topic of this issue is Anna Zawadzka's discussion of *Represent and destroy: Rationalizing violence in a new racial capitalism* by Jodi Melamed. The analyzed book is a study of the narratives about multiculturalism promoted by the American state. These narratives, as Melamed demonstrates, served not so much combating racism as disciplining the public debate on racism, and consequently – normalizing racialized violence.

This issue of *Studia Litteraria et Historica* features also a special section entitled *Bourdieu's traces: Inspirations, continuations, revisions*, edited by Michał Kozłowski and Anna Zawadzka. The texts in this section are the product of a conference organized in Warsaw in 2013 by the Center of French Culture; Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology (University of Warsaw), the Institute of Polish Slavic Studies (Polish Academy of Sciences) and the University of Warsaw (UW) – École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS, Paris) Interdisciplinary Collaboration Team.

Translated by Katarzyna Matschi

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Historia historii: studia polsko-żydowskie

Wyrażenia kluczowe: historia Żydów; historia Żydów w Polsce; badania nad antysemityzmem; projektowanie wystaw muzealnych.

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