
Wall and Window

The rubble of the Warsaw Ghetto as the narrative space of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews*

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Abstract: Opened in 2013, the Warsaw-based POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is situated in the center of the former Nazi Warsaw ghetto, which was destroyed during its liquidation in 1943. The museum is also located opposite to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs, built in 1948, as well as in between of the area of the former 19th-century Jewish district, and of the post-war modernist residential district of Muranów, designed as a district-memorial for the destroyed ghetto. Constructed on such site, the Museum was however narrated as a “museum of life”, telling the “thousand-year-old history” of Polish Jews, and not focused directly on the history of the Holocaust or the history of Polish antisemitism.

The paper offers a critical analysis of the curatorial and architectural strategies assumed by the Museum’s designers in the process of employing the urban location of the Museum in the narratives communicated by the building and its core exhibition. In this analysis, two key architectural interiors are examined in detail in terms of their correspondence with the context of the site: the Museum’s entrance lobby and the space of the “Jewish street,” incorporated into the core exhibition’s sub-galleries presenting the interwar period of Polish-Jewish history and the history of the Holocaust. The analysis of the design structure of these two interiors allows to raise the research question about the physical and symbolic role of the material substance of the destroyed ghetto in construction of a historical narrative that is separated from the history of the destruction, as well as one about the designers’ responsibilities arising from the decision to present a given history on the physical site where it took place.

Keywords: Museum Studies; Warsaw; Holocaust museums; Warsaw ghetto; nostalgia; nationalism; urban modernization.

Introducing the project of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in a 2011 lecture, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the director of the Museum’s design team, declared while presenting an archival photographic image:

“This is the site of the Warsaw Ghetto after it was completely destroyed, and it is here that we are building this museum. What it means is that we don’t have a great collection, we don’t have historic buildings, we don’t have the historical fabric of where Jews once lived. We are really, truly building on the rubble” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2011).

This statement, pronounced while the process of constructing the Museum’s building was still underway, establishes a point of departure for the Museum’s design in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. Its building certainly does stand directly on the crushed fabric of what was once the largest Jewish space in Europe, “the Jewish Metropolis,” as it was recently proclaimed (Dyner & Guesnet, 2015, pp. 2–4). The modern glass sur-

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faces of the Museum's facades contrast not only with the complete nonexistence of the prewar city's built environment, but even with the residential architecture of the post-war district of Muranów, where it is located. "Building on the rubble" indeed constitutes an act of spatial and temporal separation. The emergence of this Museum was seen by its managers as a chance to mark a break from the metaphorical "rubble" left by the destruction, a chance to clear the discursive and visual remnants that define the semantics of Holocaust commemoration. Historian Dariusz Stola, the director of the Museum, has represented it as "a museum of life" – neither a museum of the Holocaust nor an institution preoccupied with a critical reflection on the history of antisemitism.¹ But does the materiality of the site – the rubble of Warsaw's Jewish district and ghetto – constitute merely a mute foundation for the spaces of today's "life," a commemorative annex to the landscape of contemporary Poland? Does the action of "building on the rubble," of necessity involving interaction with destroyed materiality, establish the rubble's quality of "a historical fabric," contrary to the words of its curator – and if so, how?

This essay offers a critical examination of the curatorial and architectural strategies assumed by the Museum's creators in the process of employing the urban location of the Museum in the narratives communicated by the building and its core exhibition. In this analysis, two key architectural interiors will be examined in detail in terms of their correspondence with the context of the site: the Museum's entrance lobby and the space of the "Jewish street," incorporated into the core exhibition's sub-galleries presenting the interwar period of Polish-Jewish history and the history of the Holocaust. In discussing the conceptual backgrounds of these two environments' design, I intend to raise questions on the role of urban and architectural space as a museum exhibit, and on the responsibilities arising from the decision to present a given history on the physical site where it took place.

The ruin of modernity²

Writing about the modern uses of ruinous environments, Andreas Huyssen named the rubble left by the catastrophes of the 20th century as "the ruin of modernity," and

1 In an interview given to the Polish Press Agency, Dariusz Stola commented: "It is very important that young people from Tel Aviv or Be'er Sheva learn about the entire history of their nation, which perhaps became hidden in the great, dark shadow of the Holocaust. It is also important for the Poles. I do not want my country to be associated by someone only with a cemetery and a gas chamber. Poland is a beautiful country, where for a thousand years Jews lived and created a unique culture, one that 70 years ago disappeared in a terrible way. But we cannot continuously talk only about this dramatic end. Life is no less important than death, and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is the museum of life" (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2014b). In another interview he also declared, referring to the question of the presence of the subject of the Jedwabne massacre in the Museum's core exhibition: "We present it too. But I see that you are asking me about antisemitism, so I will say clearly: the Museum of the History of Polish Jews is not a museum of antisemitism. The antisemites would need to build one themselves!" (Kolesnyczenko & Stola, 2014, p. 39).

2 As Bruno Latour comments, the numerous definitions of modernity and modernization point to the passage of time: "The adjective 'modern' designates a new regime, an acceleration, a rupture, a revolution in time. When the word 'modern,' 'modernization,' or 'modernity' appears, we are defining, by contrast, an archaic and stable past. Furthermore, the word is always being thrown into the middle of a fight, in a quarrel where there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns. 'Modern' is thus doubly asymmetrical: it designates a break in the regular passage of time, and it designates a combat in which there are victors and vanquished" (Latour, 1993, p. 10).

stated that while such environments differ significantly from illustrative, “authentic” ruins invented and utilized by Western cultures to exemplify earlier struggles of building the modern world, the materiality of the rubble still contains these old ruins’ political potential (Huysen, 2006, pp. 7–8). The ruin of modernity, as Huysen argues, is not an innocent or impartial milieu. These shattered structures continue to radiate political potential, triggering “a nostalgia for an earlier age that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures.”³ As he claims, “at stake is a nostalgia for modernity that dare not speak its name after acknowledging the catastrophes of the twentieth century” (Huysen, 2006, p. 7). This nostalgia, discursively encoded into the modern ruin, offers the promise to re-create and re-live collective dreams – of a social, political, and national nature – that were interrupted and cancelled by the destruction wrought by modernity itself (see: Bauman, 2000, pp. 85–88). In contrast to the “classic” ruin of early modernity, intended to embody the struggle between the imagined realms of “culture” and “nature” that preoccupied earlier imaginaries of progress, the nostalgia evoked by the rubble of modern cities is structured by the struggle against history and memory, namely against the memories of those historical events that stand between the nostalgic subject and “a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future” (Huysen, 2006, p. 8).

In the case of the Museum, what “stands between” and – in the eyes of its contemporary architects – appears to block the access to the interrupted political dream of prewar Polish modernity, is the rubble that remains on the site of the Museum and the memory of the catastrophe it carries: the Holocaust and, specifically, the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto. During the postwar decades, historical knowledge of these events was – at best – segregated from Polish narratives of modernization or – more often – appropriated, universalized, or silenced; similarly, only isolated cases of historical debate allowed for a critical reflection on the consequences of this knowledge for visions of Polish postwar modernity and modernization and for Polish society’s self-image. Despite the emergence of these debates, externally initiated in the 1980s by the release of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and expanded by the publication of Jan Błoński’s *Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto* [‘Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto’] (Błoński, 1987, 1994; English version: Błoński, 1998), the history of the Holocaust remains a “difficult subject” in Polish history, one that ceases to threaten the self-image of the Polish majority only if it is seen as a matter between Germans and Jews, and not as an event that is integral to the history of Poland, with all the consequences such an integration carries.⁴ Reactivated in 2000

3 Huysen’s theory displays certain similarities to Svetlana Boym’s concept of nostalgia as a twofold phenomenon, identifiable as a restorative or reflexive nostalgic feeling. See: Boym, 2001, pp. 49–51.

4 Elżbieta Janicka formulates the question whether “the history of the Holocaust as a crime committed against the Jews constitutes a threat to a martyrological-heroic narrative about the past, communicated by the contemporary Polish dominant majority? It does, and it does not. The narrative remains safe as long as the Holocaust is defined as a German state crime perpetrated on the occupied territories of Europe. It is threatened in a fundamental way once – following Jan T. Gross’ thought – it is taken under consideration that the Holocaust was ‘a mosaic composed of discrete episodes, improvised by local decision-makers, and hinging on unforced behavior, rooted in God-knows-what motivations, of all those who were near the murder scene at the time’” (Janicka, 2014, pp. 209–210; Gross, 2001, p. 125).

by the publication of the Polish version of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Gross, 2001), the public debate on Polish-Jewish history and Polish complicity in the Holocaust to date has stopped short of reaching any substantial conclusions.⁵ It is equally far from permitting reflection on the hitherto untouched "difficult subject" of modernity's "dark side" – Polish visions of social and urban modernization grounded in ethnic segregation and supported by the ideology of political nationalism. The absence of a critical reflection on these visions, together with their increasing political usefulness, allows today for a revival of nostalgia rooted in idealized imageries of pre-Holocaust Polish history which, coupled with the urgency of creating post-Communist Polish national identities, leaves the modern ruin, "the cipher for nostalgia" (Huysen, 2006, p. 7), in an ambivalent and highly problematic position.

The interrupted dream of Polish modernity resurfaced shortly before the fall of communism, shrouded in a politicized aura and triggering a largely uncritical nostalgic revival. This revival carried with it an immediately useful historical narrative, which had a bearing on the narrative of the Museum. This bearing was accurately captured by Moshe Rosman, a historian who participated in the creation of the Museum's exhibition:

"liberated at last from Communism, but still heirs (albeit reluctant ones) to its legacy, Polish historians searching for the historical roots of a non-Communist, liberal, independent, democratic, genuinely 'Polish' Poland found them in the multiethnic, multicultural, multi-religious Poland of the past. The early modern period⁶ [...] has come to be viewed as Poland's golden era" (Rosman, 2012, p. 366).

Such discursive idealization is by no means limited to the period of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. According to the Museum's creators, "the golden era" is an almost infinitely flexible term that can be extended from the 17th century to the interwar decades of the 20th century, a period labeled "'the second Golden Age' in the history of Polish Jews."⁷ In light of the creation of these nostalgic imageries, the "ruin

5 As Tomasz Żukowski writes, the Polish debates on the Holocaust "invariably follow one scenario: a step forward – and immediately a step back, toward continually entrenching ourselves in defense of the Nation. When in 1987 Jan Błoński openly discussed the transgressions of the Polish Catholic majority towards the Jews during the war, he immediately closed the subject with the formula of 'indifference,' which prevented the articulation of any substantial conclusion. The publication of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors* was followed by a series of accusations of 'unjustified generalizations' and 'historical fiction,' categories that arrest the debate to this day" (Żukowski, 2012, p. 1).

6 Rosman defines the early modern period of the history of Poland as the time "from the Union of Lublin in 1569, that officially created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, until the period of the Partitions of Poland, 1772-1795" (Rosman, 2012, p. 366).

7 Cf. "POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews," 2015b; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015b, p. 268. As the Museum's website informs, "Due to the enormous wealth of Jewish life it witnessed, this period [the 1920s and 1930s – K. M.] is also sometimes referred to as the second 'Golden Age' in the history of Polish Jews." The authors add that "the Second Republic, however, was not heaven on earth for Jews. New waves of pogroms, erupting already in November 1918, growing antisemitism and the economic crisis which went on for several years, forced many Jews to leave Poland in search of a better life"; all this does not stop the authors from maintaining that "Golden Age" is an appropriate term ("POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews," 2015b). This claim is supported by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who comments that "some historians view this short period as a 'second golden age,' despite economic hardship and rising antisemitism during the late 1930s" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015b, p. 268). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett does not mention the authors of this concept. It is possible that she is referring to Ezra Mendelsohn who, in commenting on anti-Jewish trade regulations introduced in Poland in the 1920s and on the subsequent reactions of Jewish leaders, who accused the Polish government of "economic extermination," stated that "extermination' was certainly far too strong a word to use, at least in the 1920s, but even in this first

of modernity” of the Museum’s site, simultaneously materializing the lost Jewish district and the destroyed ghetto, receives a crucial but ambiguous discursive location. This ruinous space communicates at least two discursive images that continue to stand in opposition to and contrast with each other in the context of the aforementioned nostalgic revival. First, the rubble of the ghetto remains a space of its own commemoration, a witness to the violent interruption of its existence; it also bears witness to the social and political factors that contributed to its destruction, including the political dreams of modernity, national unity and progress – ideologies whose exclusivist and destructive characteristics were never fully confronted in Polish historical debates. Second, this space is increasingly being perceived today as a key to historical nostalgia, a “cipher” that contains the promise of materializing a “genuinely ‘Polish’ Poland,” a modern and politically powerful state that, while remaining an heir to the mythical tolerance and openness of the old days, rescues its equally mythical innocence. This second image holds a key nostalgic potential, giving access to interrupted futures, and simultaneously allowing the bypassing of critical reflection arising from knowledge of the catastrophe, a reflection that questions the very model of modernization that is being assumed.

As representatives of the Museum’s Polish institutional architects explain and establish the hegemonic position of the nostalgic discourse, they construct and further emphasize the dialectic correspondence between commemoration and nostalgia. Shortly after the Museum’s opening, Waldemar Dąbrowski, a former Minister of Culture and the government’s ministerial plenipotentiary for the Museum, explained that he saw its construction as “a part of the decades-long project of rebuilding Warsaw to its pre-1939 state,” while Bogdan Zdrojewski, the Minister of Culture, expressed his certainty that the Museum “will add to Poland’s strength and its good standing in international relations” (Hoffman, 2013; Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2014a). As these repeated efforts to revive and recreate national and political dreams take place, the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto achieves more than ever the quality of an active physical substance containing two conflicting qualities. The more it becomes employed as the construction material of Polish modernity, the more its “witnessing location” becomes exposed. The architectural and curatorial project of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews (MHPJ) strongly exemplifies a struggle with the indelible two-sidedness of the Museum’s physical location, a space that seems to offer a key to a “genuinely ‘Polish’ Poland” – the more so the more the historical knowledge its Polish institutional designers remain unwilling to confront is exposed.

decade of Polish independence, which later appeared to many Jews as a kind of golden age of Polish democracy and tolerance, it was clear that the Jewish condition was tragic. The triumph of Polish nationalism meant the unleashing of latent antisemitism which struck at all Jews, assimilated and unassimilated, Orthodox and secular” (Mendelsohn, 1983, p. 43). If the concept of “the Second Golden Age” was derived from this quotation, then even if such a gradual transformation of its meaning may not be regarded as a direct misuse of a source text, it cannot be read otherwise than as an intentional removal of the dark irony evident in Mendelsohn’s description.

The narrative history museum

The strategy of locating the site's materiality within the architectural space of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews was derived in the earliest stage of the design work from the masterplan of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C., an institution that at the time of its creation defined new approaches to the location of a material exhibit. During the opening of the USHMM in 1993, Grażyna Pawlak, then an employee of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (JHI) and, together with Jerzy Halbersztadt, the originator of the MHPJ, invited Jeshajahu Weinberg, the director of the USHMM design team since 1988, to coordinate the creation of the Warsaw exhibition.

During five years of designing the Holocaust Memorial Museum, Weinberg worked on implementing his concept of a "narrative history museum," an idea built on the principle of abandoning the established model of a collection-based exhibition alongside the traditionally central location of a contextualized authentic exhibit, and embedding a historical narrative as a key component of museum design, in a role previously given to the physical artifact (Weinberg, 1994). The USHMM was intended to commemorate the Holocaust and to educate about its history, focusing primarily on the American public. The exhibition space, free of the curatorial gestures associated with a traditional collection, like contextualization and legitimization, was instead designed to induce strong emotional involvement by means of visual media structured by the language of theatre and the film industry. Weinberg saw the decision to attribute the central narrative function to visual technologies as a means of facilitating the visitors' identification with the victims and enabling the "internalization of the moral lessons" embedded in Holocaust history (Weinberg, 1994, pp. 231–233). The curator decided to couple his own experience in theatre production (Weinberg had worked as a theatre director for 15 years) with the technical expertise introduced by Martin Smith, a British documentary film director, whom he employed as exhibition director. The "narrative history museum" was intended to become "an exercise in visual historiography," maximizing the visitors' emotional involvement through the use of dozens of video screens and digital displays, while still maintaining "historical objectivity" and restricting itself to a dispassionate communication of knowledge (Linenthal, 1995, p. 142; Weinberg, 1994, pp. 232, 235).

Weinberg's decision to entrust the requirement of objectivity to the conceptual structure of the historical narrative conveyed by digital technology created a series of design problems, which were then exposed in the debate that followed the opening of the USHMM. Reliance on the visual language of cinema caused worries about the risk of fostering a "Disneyfication" of Holocaust history and of obtaining "a straightforward narrative" by discouraging the visitor from adopting a critical approach (Linenthal, 1995, pp. 145, 216). The disappearance of the traditional construction of objectivity, previously provided through the authority of the curators' contextualizing actions and

by the concept of exhibit authenticity, raised substantial concerns about the risk of exposing Holocaust history to contemporary political uses. Such a threat, arising from the de-contextualization of this history from its topographical and social locations and its ensuing “Americanization,” was seen as located primarily in an emphasis on the liberation of Europe by American soldiers and on the role of the American state.⁸ The designers responded to these concerns – many of which they had been aware of before the opening – by presenting the USHMM’s universalizing impact on the historiography of the Holocaust as morally beneficial and self-conscious.⁹ Their line of defense also gravitated toward a partial reversal of the legitimizing power of the “real” exhibit: Weinberg argued that while the USHMM was not a collection-based museum, “it [had] the world’s largest collection of Holocaust artifacts” that structured the Museum’s objectivity through their witnessing status (Weinberg, 1994, p. 231).

The construction of the USHMM as a “narrative history museum” required establishing a (curatorial) narrative about the (exhibition) narrative, one that would support the decision to make this institution “an American museum, a museum demonstrating an overwhelming importance of the democratic foundations of American society” (Weinberg, 1994, p. 239). It also needed a discursive defense of the decision to establish a collection of physical exhibits related to a historical event that “had not taken place on American soil” (Weinberg, 1994, p. 238), to counter the risk of what Rob Baum bitterly defined as “suggesting that Jewish victimization is a European phenomenon, while Jewish liberation is an American one”, and the political risk of “physically mythologiz[ing] American participation” (Baum, 2011, p. 45).

An exchange

If the debate triggered by the opening of USHMM allowed for the articulation of these doubts and consequently for the delineation of a boundary between the opportunities to deconstruct the collection-based exhibition model and the risks of exposing the Museum’s narrative to a threat of political appropriation, then Weinberg’s decision to accept the invitation to Warsaw and to proceed with the transatlantic export of the “narrative

8 See, for example: Young, 1999. Rob Baum writes that in the American historical narrative “the saviors of World War II Europe are not only American, but also white. Yet, an African-American platoon liberated a Polish camp. Liberation of Dachau by Japanese-Americans of the 442nd army battalion is another suppressed story. For political purposes, American heroes were uncomplicatedly Anglo, white, Christian and enfranchised. They would not return to internment camps on the West Coast, or segregated water fountains in the South, would not wash bloody crosses or swastikas from their front doors. [...] The difference between savior and the saved adds dramatic effect to an already pathetic vision. I suggest that the appearance of Jews – like Romani and Sinti, representative of a dark, arcane other – is to a great extent partly responsible for the whitening of the liberators: problematic people can only be saved – or solved – by an unproblematic hero. Thus was born the myth of the white American liberator” (Baum, 2011, pp. 26–46).

9 In the words of Michael Berenbaum, the USHMM’s project director: “Millions of Americans make pilgrimages to Washington; the Holocaust Museum must take them back in time, transport them to another continent, and inform their current reality. The Americanization of the Holocaust is an honorable task, provided that the story told is faithful to the historical event. Each culture inevitably leaves its stamp on a past it remembers” (Berenbaum, 1990, p. 20).

history museum” resulted in the re-opening of these design problems by casting their mirror image onto their new Polish location. The design process of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw was initiated in 1993, the year of the completion of the USHMM in Washington D.C., but also just four years after the fall of communism in Poland, and precisely ten years since the first symptoms of the abovementioned nostalgia for the prewar modernity appeared. That nostalgia, initiated simultaneously but separately by the communist government and anticommunist opposition circles on the 40th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1983, by 1993 had begun to take full shape.¹⁰ The location of Jewish history within the Polish cultural context was by then defined equally by the post-communist re-establishment of the institutional centers of Jewish social and religious life;¹¹ by the emergent nostalgia for modernity described by Michael Steinlauf as a “fashion for Jews,” “a nostalgic return to an idealized prewar youth” of Polish society (Steinlauf, 1997, p. 103); and by the post-communist rise of religious Polish nationalism that had already silenced the first stage of public debate on Polish-Jewish history and Polish complicity in the Holocaust, triggered in the 1980s by the release of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and the publication of Jan Błóński’s *Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto*.¹²

The first concept of the MHPJ emerged within this very cultural scenery. Retrospectively narrating the emergence of the idea for the Museum’s creation, its curators suggest today that the inspiration came to Grażyna Pawlak during the opening ceremony of the USHMM, scheduled to take place in April 1993, on the 50th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The curators inform us that Pawlak’s experience of “a modern narrative museum, retelling the history of the Holocaust, gave her the idea for a museum in Warsaw that would extend that narrative by including the story of Jewish life before the Shoah.”¹³ The concept of “extending” Polish-Jewish history from the Holocaust narrative, symbolically relocated to the capital of the United States, appears to follow the dialectic correspondence between commemoration and nostalgia, together with its crucial but ambiguous positioning of the material “historical fabric.” The action of “extending” can be seen as a symbolic exchange: a synchronized export of the Polish memory of the Holocaust in its “raw,” repressed form, and a return acquisition of the

10 Michael Meng comments on the simultaneous unofficial and official celebrations of the 1983 anniversary and the emergent revival of interest in Jewish history: “Some Poles had become interested in the Jewish past as a way to imagine a different Poland, but this did not necessarily involve thinking deeply about the traumatic, dark parts of the history... What is more, it is not clear how broadly Polish interest in the Jewish past stretched. Outside the capital, the condition of Jewish sites quickly deteriorated and interest in them declined. Warsaw was exceptional” (Meng, 2011, p. 181).

11 The Union of Jewish Communities in Poland was officially registered in 1993; some other community initiatives, such as those funded by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, were initiated in late 1980s.

12 In the early 1990s, the debate on Jewish history in Poland was equally preoccupied with the sudden popularity of the Festival of Jewish Culture in Cracow and the planned “revitalization” of the former Jewish district of Kazimierz, as it was overshadowed by the culmination of the conflict over the Carmelite convent in the former Auschwitz camp, or by yet another surge in Polish antisemitism, which reached a level of over 50 percent of the general population by 1993 (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 7; Gebert & Datner, 2011, p. 10).

13 “Jak zrobić muzeum? How to make a museum? [exhibition]” (“POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews”, 2014).

end product, the design of the “narrative history museum,” sanitized of “difficult subjects” and employable in the process of the production of nostalgia.

In the Polish context, such a transatlantic exchange appeared to be at work on both ends of the commemoration–nostalgia dichotomy. On the side of the production of nostalgia, it provided the narrative of a “thousand years of Jewish life in Poland” with the imported conceptual structure of the “narrative history museum,” thus allowing for a discursive reduction of the impact of the destroyed materiality by structuring the objectivism of the narrative of nostalgia and giving it priority over the narratives carried by a physical object. The symbolic transferral of the burden of Holocaust commemoration to the ownership of an American institution may have seemed to allow the Polish curators to consider the obligation of “memory work” implied by the Holocaust history of the Museum’s site to already be fulfilled. Such transferral might also have given the impression of providing a means of symbolic control over the materiality of the Warsaw ghetto, a perceived obstacle to the nostalgic project, as such control became observable in the cases of Holocaust objects donated by Polish institutions to the USHMM in the late 1980s.

Authentic power

The USHMM’s collection team obtained a series of artifacts and sections of urban fabric from the spaces of the former Warsaw ghetto, including a sewer cover, two thousand square feet of historical cobblestones, and two bricks from the surviving section of ghetto wall located at number 55 Sienna Street, together with an exact replica of that wall section (Linenthal, 1995, pp. 151–152). Acquiring these artifacts had a two-sided effect. While their presence in Washington was clearly intended to contribute to the USHMM’s discursive construction of objectivity, in the Polish context the action of obtaining them became a curatorial gesture establishing control over the ruined materiality of the ghetto and the knowledge it carries¹⁴ – about the cultural and spatial location of the Holocaust “at the surface and in the centre of [the Polish] culture and society” (Janicka & Wilczyk, 2013, p. 9).

Two wall sections at 55 Sienna Street and the neighboring 62 Złota Street were maintained from the 1980s on by Mieczysław Jędruszcak, a local resident since the 1950s and private caretaker of the site. The official ceremony donating two bricks from the Sienna Street section to the USHMM allowed Polish state institutions for the first time to officially recognize the surviving ghetto wall sections as sites of commemora-

14 Some of these curatorial side-effects were observed by the members of the collections team; a USHMM employee commented that in Poland “the artifacts carried a terrible immediacy. They were ‘at home’ in these places,” recalling his observation of “authenticating” the impact of the artifacts’ material context, while another remembered feeling shock when, during a walk through Warsaw, “he glanced at an area excavated for phone lines and saw, clearly, a layer of rubble of the ghetto” (Linenthal, 1995, pp. 162, 146).

tion. The ceremony itself was commemorated by a plaque installed in the wall; signed by the USHMM and decorated with the United States' coat of arms, the plaque informs in Polish and English that "a casting and two original bricks of this wall erected by the Nazis to enclose the Warsaw ghetto, were taken to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington to give authentic power to its permanent exhibition."

The ghetto wall on Sienna Street is not authentic. While it is likely located in the exact place of the structure built by the Nazis in late 1940, the original ghetto wall was demolished shortly after the end of the war.¹⁵ In this respect, the Sienna Street wall is different from the nearby section on Złota Street, which is the external wall of a school building that was not part of the ghetto and has survived until today. The wall on Sienna Street was reconstructed by Mieczysław Jędruszczak, most likely in the early 1980s, with the intention of establishing a private place of memory, maybe in relation to the broader wave of interest in Jewish history that emerged as a part of the increasing nostalgia after 1983. Nonetheless, it was only the ceremony in 1989 and the interest from an American memory institution that allowed the Polish administration to convert Jędruszczak's private memorial object into a physical resource of authentic artifacts and a symbolic source of historical authenticity. In many ways the "discovery" of the Sienna Street wall exemplifies the structure of transatlantic exchange described above. While the text inscribed on the plaque informs openly of the logic behind the USHMM's acquisition, the very fact of the plaque's existence attests to Polish difficulties in establishing a commemorative frame for witnessing materiality.¹⁶ Such materiality not only communicates knowledge about the central cultural and spatial location of the Holocaust within the Polish social and topographical context, but also deconstructs the mythologies of the ghetto wall as an impenetrable physical separation between Jewish and non-Jewish Poles during the Nazi occupation, alongside the myth of the Polish "bystander-witness"¹⁷ – physically unable to react to the Nazi crimes because of the spatial separation, yet otherwise sympathetic and willing to help.

If not framed by the externally acquired commemoration strategy, the very fact of the ghetto wall's existence within the tenement's backyard, its spatial privatization and domestication, suggest different historical scenarios. Integration of the wall with the tenement's interior space during the Nazi occupation allowed for the employment of the exclusion of Jews from the Polish majority group as a device of extermination and

15 As MHJP's "Virtual Shtetl" website informs: "The Ghetto wall at 55 Sienna St. collapsed after the war and was subsequently reconstructed" (Bielawski, 2014). The fact of the postwar reconstruction of the ghetto wall on Sienna Street was most likely discussed for the first time in Damien Monnier's French-language documentary movie "Six sides of a brick" (Monnier, 2012). The documentary contains an interview with Mieczysław Jędruszczak, in which he recalls brick-laying during the wall's reconstruction: "And I added it over there, I have a photo of me handing up a brick" (*ja tam domurowałem, mam zdjęcie, jak podaję cegłę*), alongside conversations with other residents who remember the courtyard without the wall from the side of Sienna Street. I thank Elżbieta Janicka for the information on Monnier's documentary.

16 This effect is even more strongly visible in the case of the section of surviving ghetto wall located at 62 Złota Street, where another 3 plaques inform that the bricks from there were sent to the Holocaust Museum in Houston, to Yad Vashem, and to the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, Australia.

17 For a discussion of the figure of the Polish bystander-witness, see: Tokarska-Bakir, 2015.

for the “domestication” of the violence. Such an architectural design, as Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski point out, did not leave much space for any form of “indifference” or “bystanding” (Janicka & Żukowski, 2011, p. 20). The Polish curators’ readiness to acquire a “foreign” framework of historical reflection from an American institution of memory allows, in turn, to re-establish and legitimize the myth of the “Polish witness” and to give symbolic structure to the ghetto wall – firstly by authenticating a replica of the wall with a plaque bearing the U.S. coat of arms, and secondly by allowing for the replication of the replica in the Washington museum as a “source of authentic power.”¹⁸ Consequently, the exchange allows for the conversion of a problematic architectural space into “a safe place” of Polish memory,¹⁹ “where Poles and Jews – radically separated by the external power – only look at themselves” (Janicka & Żukowski, 2011, p. 21).

The Polinization of Jewish history

Robin Ostow saw the design framework of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews as “a late result of what has been called the ‘Americanization of the Holocaust,’” referring to the Museum’s dependency on the narrative model developed by its Washington counterpart, and to the reliance of the MHPJ’s masterplan on a principle of “externally imposed nation (re)building” that may desensitize the MHPJ toward local issues that a European Jewish museum would be expected to address (Ostow, 2008, pp. 158, 174). She describes Poland as “an exporter of original Jewish artifacts and an importer of images, sounds, voices, smells and special effects developed in the West,” and this view is by all means accurate (Ostow, 2008, p. 174). Yet, as the conflicting concepts of authenticity indicate, a depiction of the Polish context in exclusively (post)colonial terms misses a uniquely local political process that, while reliant on the Polish-American transatlantic exchange, serves to fulfill quite independent local goals and projects. Referring to the Museum’s most recent name,²⁰ this process can be termed the “Polinization” of Jewish history – a political principle of harnessing Polish Jewish historical narratives to the nostalgic project of constructing a modern “genuinely ‘Polish’ Poland,” of materializing a political dream built on the phantasmic Polish “golden era” of pre-Holocaust modernity. Since this dream is invariably founded on the collective self-image of the Polish majority as a powerful Western society that nevertheless remains a haven of freedom and tolerance, the principle of Polinization is simultaneously constructed

18 Elżbieta Janicka comments: “Extraction [of the bricks] clearly did not reduce the local amount of *authentic power*. Besides, it does not rely on bricks. In so many other places the wall was demolished, and it stands firmly anyway. Actually, the *authentic power* could be exported. By us, the Polish state. In absence of soft power. In small quantities and wholesale” (Janicka, 2011, p. 36).

19 Joanna Tokarska-Bakir writes that pre-modern antisemitism “located Jews in a truly ‘unsafe place,’ continually able to disappear from the surface of earth” (Tokarska-Bakir, 2004, p. 66).

20 In October 2014, shortly before the opening of the core exhibition, The Museum of the History of Polish Jews was renamed the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews; its logotype was also changed. As Dariusz Stola explained, the rebranding was done “so that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews instantly embeds itself in people’s mind as the Polin Museum” (Gliński, 2014b).

through an open refusal to confront the histories and memories that may call this self-image into question, or even subject it to some form of critical reflection. Confronting these histories – with the history of Polish violence against Jews during the Holocaust in first place – would require a deep revision of the Polish dreams of modernity with respect to their antisemitic and exclusivist backgrounds, the most likely side-effect being a discovery of the roots of Polish intolerance and anti-Jewish violence at the heart of the “golden eras” now being rebuilt.

The materiality of the district of Muranów, where the Museum was set to be built, stands directly on the conflict line between the curators’ decision to proceed with the nostalgic recourse to the imagined past, and the decision to neutralize the historical narratives questioning the majority’s self-image. The line of conflict can be precisely – and physically – located. It lies two to three meters below the surface of the present-day Muranów terrain, under the mass of ghetto rubble that postwar Polish architects decided should be left on site and used as a source of reclaimed construction material for the new city, or as a means of giving the postwar residential district a picturesque, hilly landscape. The geological stratum of rubble physically separates the surface layer of the postwar, contemporary city from the foundations, basements, and relics of the pre-Holocaust Jewish district. If seen in the context of Polinization’s ultimate aim, the nostalgic reconstruction of prewar modernity, the rubble becomes a modern ruin in Huysen’s understanding of the term: a section of materiality that conceals “a promise of alternative futures,” yet at the same time materializes the fact that these collective dreams were cancelled by the same modern project and reduced to a formless substance that can no longer be employed as a source of authenticity or authentication. The efforts undertaken by the designers and curators of the MHPJ to access hard ground that would give support to the project of Polinization, analyzed in the following paragraphs of this essay, indeed became performatively similar to geological work as an attempt to secure some stability for a highly uncritical project of Polish national nostalgia.

The site

The MHPJ’s development process began with the constitution of the Museum’s design team in 1996 and Jeshajahu Weinberg’s appointment as its chairman,²¹ followed by the donation of land by the Warsaw municipality for the purpose of the Museum’s construction. The property measured nearly 3000 square meters and occupied a section of park area located in the district of Muranów. It was located directly in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs, designed by Natan Rapoport in 1948 in the midst of the rubble of the ghetto.²² The urban layout of this site was radically transformed in

21 Weinberg directed the team for another four years until 2000, when he died at the age of 81.

22 The donated land, constituting a section of a maintained green area divided between two plots, numbered 27/2 and 28/2 and measuring 2929 sq. m., historically overlapped with the layout of the building of the Crown Artillery barracks, which served as the headquarters of the Judenrat after the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto in

the process of the postwar reconstruction of Warsaw. Before the Nazi occupation and the creation of the ghetto, the area constituted a busy intersection of Zamenhofa and Gęsia streets, shaped by the compositional dominant of the 18th-century Crown Artillery barracks building, with the surrounding street blocks densely developed with late-19th-century tenement housing. The barracks building served as a military jail from the second half of the 19th century; inside the Warsaw ghetto, it housed a post office, and after the so-called Gross-Aktion, which led to the decimation and considerable reduction in size of the Warsaw ghetto in 1942, it was used as the headquarters of the Judenrat. The building was one of the few to survive the destruction of the district, although it was substantially damaged. The plot designated for the construction of the Museum occupies a large part of this building's former layout, alongside a section of the prewar Zamenhofa Street, and a section of a plot formerly occupied by a tenement located on the opposite side of the historical Zamenhofa Street, at number 38.

The Ghetto Heroes' monument was constructed in 1948 on the compositional axis of the Judenrat building. The choice of this location resulted largely from Rapoport's insistence on constructing the monument at the central point of the ruined ghetto,²³ in the place previously chosen by Leon Marek Suzin, the monument's co-creator, as the location of the first memorial plaque, installed in 1946.²⁴ For Suzin, the choice resulted from the proximity of the remains of the Jewish Combat Organization's bunker at 18 Miła Street and of the intersection of Zamenhofa and Miła streets where the ghetto uprising started.²⁵ At the moment of the monument's dedication in 1948, it directly faced

1942. The building survived the destruction of the ghetto but was substantially damaged, was not reconstructed after the war, and was finally demolished in 1965. The plot also occupies a section of the prewar Zamenhofa Street and a section of a tenement layout on the opposite side of the street. The donation of the plot was formalized as "a grant of a perpetual lease of land properties" and dated April 17, 1997. It is not known whether the signing date was intended to commemorate another anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising ("POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews", 2014, *Notary Act – Perpetual Lease of Land Properties Agreement, 17 April 1997*), but it seemed important to the donors that, contrary to Robin Ostow's statement, the majority of the land was not owned by Jewish public institutions or private owners before the Nazi invasion of Poland (Ostow, 2008, p. 170).

- 23 According to James E. Young, the members of the Jewish Committee "asked whether the sculptor had a location in mind. Rapoport was adamant here; the only possible site would be that of the uprising itself, where the first shots were fired, where the leader of the rebellion, Mordechai Anielewicz, had died in his bunker. In fact, the committee had already marked the site of the bunker in 1946 with a large red sandstone placed in a flower bed, inscribed to the Jewish Fighting Organization, and so they agreed to build the Ghetto Monument nearby" (Young, 1989, p. 81).
- 24 Young writes that Suzin "was commissioned to design and construct the base of the monument in Warsaw. Suzin planned at first to clear the mountain of rubble from the monument's site at the corner of Zamenhof and Gęsia Streets, the latter already renamed M. Anielewicz Street, to anchor the monument solidly in the ground. With no mechanical equipment at his disposal, however, architect and assistants undertook this clearing by hand, a broken stone at a time. After two weeks' work without discernible effect, he abandoned this approach and decided to incorporate the ruins themselves into the monument's base by pouring tons of concrete and reinforcement over them" (Young, 1989, p. 82).
- 25 The decision as to the location followed the vision expressed by Julian Tuwim in a poem published in 1944, a year after the destruction of the ghetto. The text was certainly known to Rapoport after its publication: "And there shall be in Warsaw and in every other Polish city some fragment of the ghetto left standing and preserved in its present form in all its horror of ruin and destruction. We shall surround that monument to the ignominy of our foes and to the glory of our tortured heroes with chains wrought from captured Hitler's guns. [...] Thus a new monument will be added to the national shrine. There we will lead our children, and tell them of the most monstrous martyrdom of people known to the history of mankind. And in the center of this monument, its tragedy enhanced by the rebuilt magnificence of the surrounding city, there will burn an eternal fire" ("We Polish Jews," Tuwim, 1944b, p. 54). The translation of Tuwim's poem by R. Langer, first published in the New York literary monthly *Free World*, alters the original version of the quoted verses. Apart from removing Tuwim's reference to God, the translator transformed a mention of "houses of glass," a literary image of idealized architectural modernity, originating from a 1925 novel by Stefan Żeromski. The motif of "houses of glass" became a significant reference point for visions of Polish interwar statehood and for Polish imageries of urban and architectural modernity. As Martin Kohlrausch points out, "The way that the metaphor 'houses of glass' was used in Poland

the front of the damaged Judenrat building and was surrounded by a field of rubble. The postwar reconstruction of Warsaw transformed the location entirely. Zamenhofa Street was moved eastwards, parallel to the face of the monument; Gęsia Street, renamed Anielewicza, was also relocated. Between 1949 and 1963, the modernist residential district of Muranów was constructed around the site according to a design by Bohdan Lachert, who initially planned the estate as a memorial district; but the commemorative architectural approach was eventually abandoned (Uchowicz, 2014b). The residential block that now faces the back of the monument, a design by Waclaw Eytner, was built in 1959. Lachert planned to convert the former Judenrat building into a “Museum of Struggle against Fascism” but the plan was not implemented (Zieliński, 2009, p. 332). For another 20 years it stood as a ruin before it was eventually demolished in 1965; its former space was converted into a green square with park walkways and groups of trees.

While the choice of this site as the Museum’s location was already decided in 1996, because of a shortage of funds the design work on the exhibition project did not fully begin until 2001, when the exhibition masterplan was commissioned from Event Communications, a London-based exhibition design company. The exhibition masterplan, structured around the framework of the “narrative history museum,” was completed in 2003, still in the absence of an architectural design for the museum building. For a few years, the design committee hoped to commission the building design from Frank Gehry, the author of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (1997), but the architect left the project in 2003. In January 2005, the Museum’s financial and institutional frameworks were finally established: the Polish government, together with the municipality of Warsaw and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute, established the Museum as a legal entity; financial support was also secured from Polish state institutions and foreign sponsors. Two weeks later, in February 2005, an open architectural competition was announced, and another 5 months later the competition entry by Rainer Mahlamäki from the Finnish company Lahdelma & Mahlamäki Architects was chosen out of 11 shortlisted designs. Simultaneously, in April 2006, a design team was appointed to prepare a detailed design of the main exhibition, with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a professor of Performance Studies at New York University, designated as its director.

The entrance lobby

Rainer Mahlamäki’s building is planned as a regular rectangular structure. Its front facade is positioned opposite to the front face of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs, perpendicular to its axis; its back elevation faces a green square. The building is

refers to the discourses on hygiene, planning, and reform of society in general and reform of community in particular” (Kohlrausch, 2012, p. 93). The Polish version of Tuwim’s poem reads as follows: “*W centrum tego pomnika, którego tragizm uwydatnił otaczające go nowoczesne, da Bóg, Szklane Domy odbudowanego miasta, płonąć będzie nigdy nie gasnący ogień*”, which translates into English as: “And in the center of this monument, its tragedy enhanced, with God’s help, by the modern Glass Houses of the rebuilt city, there will burn an eternal fire” (Tuwim, 1944a, pp. 491–494, 1944b, p. 54).

clad in vertical, semi-translucent glass panels. Their surface conceals the reinforced concrete structure that supports the building; the panels cover the entirety of the facades with the exception of two asymmetrical and organic openings on both the front and back of the building, which are covered in plain glass surfaces. These openings constitute the large-scale windows of the Museum's entrance lobby, a space that Mahlamäki identified as the functional and compositional heart of the building (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).

The lobby is an organic architectural interior enclosed on both sides by two curvilinear concrete walls that cut through the entire height of the building. It is narrow near the building's front, where the main entrance is located, and widens toward the back facade, where a window opens onto a view of the park area behind the building. Visitor access routes are organized along the lobby, from the front door towards the back of the building, where, near the large-scale window with a view of the park, a stairway leads down to the core exhibition, located in the basement. Proceeding from the front entrance, visitors cross an internal bridge constructed over a section of exhibition space on the underground floor, while another bridge is visible above, crossing the lobby perpendicularly on the first floor level and connecting two curved walls. With its organic, geological shape and linear structure of access, the lobby is a space to walk. The curved walls covered with sandstone-like, warm-colored concrete provide a path to follow; the spectacular, eighteen-meter high corridor of the lobby provides a view that unfolds as visitors proceed further.

Mahlamäki designed this interior during the eight weeks leading up to the competition deadline in June 2005. On April 19, 2005, on the anniversary of the Ghetto Uprising, the competition committee invited the participating architects for a site visit, in which he took part. "In the beginning I knew nothing about the location," he admitted in 2013, stating that what he found inspiring about the location was mainly the visual surfaces: the monument, the green park, and the modernist residential buildings. His first design idea was simply to rely on these superficial aesthetics "to maintain the origin and atmosphere of this area, because it is a nice green park with two historical monuments" (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013). He commented, however, that even after the site visit it was not clear to him whether – and to what degree – the building was to serve a commemorative function. "Initially I had the impression that it was to be a Holocaust museum – more or less," he commented, stating that he could not work without clarifying this matter (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).

The matter seems not to have been fully clarified until Mahlamäki was announced as the winner. His competition design contains visible references to recently constructed museums narrating Holocaust history – the Jewish Museum Berlin, by Daniel Libeskind (2001), and the new Yad Vashem museum building in Jerusalem, by Moshe Safdie (2005). Mahlamäki's initial competition images show the entrance lobby as a spacious but visually cold cavern, an interior reminiscent of both the underground corridors ("Axes") and vertical "Voids" of Libeskind's museum, and of Safdie's linear composition,

structured along a 180-meter corridor enclosed by two curved concrete walls forming an opening at the top of the building.²⁶ The competition committee praised Mahlamäki's design for providing a "dramatically curved space of limestone texture, illuminated from above," which was "compared by the Authors to the sea coming apart (*Yam Suph*)" ("POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews", 2014, *The Decision of the Competition Jury*). Limestone, like raw concrete, is a construction material of a cold, pale color; as a finishing material that emphasizes the weight of the commemorated event, it was used extensively in the design of USHMM, while raw, gray concrete was exposed both in the Jewish Museum Berlin, and in Yad Vashem. The biblical metaphor of a "void" or "chasm" created by the Red Sea coming apart, while usually superficial, also holds a commemorative function, if it is narrated as such.

The eight-year long construction process of the Museum in Warsaw is a history of clarifying the matter that the architect initially found to be unclear. As a first step, the color of the interior was changed. The gray paint visible on the competition images was asked to be replaced by a much warmer, sandstone-colored covering. As the architect recalled, he "made a great many tests and mockups to find the right tone. It's actually very close to sandstone. Perhaps it underlines hope and beauty" (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).²⁷ Modifications to the architectural design were followed by alterations to the discourse on the building – what had been seen as a "void" was later interpreted as the much more reassuring environment of a "gorge," "canyon," or "valley," especially since, once re-colored, the lobby interior indeed began to resemble natural features of the Israeli or American landscape.²⁸ With the principle of the "museum of life, not the Holocaust" becoming a main narrative thread, the design of the lobby interior came to be interpreted accordingly: Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett saw the lobby as "a bridge across the chasm of the Holocaust", an interior "filled with radiant light" that communicates "a message of hope on a site of genocide" (Gruber, 2013, pp. 53–57; Barber, 2014). Likewise, the metaphor of the Red Sea became a symbol of "a ritual of the crossing or transcendence of the long and winding road of Polish-Jewish history to a symbolic, wide opening to a peaceful future" ("POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews," 2014, *The Decision of the Competition Jury*). Such a narrative shift harmonizes with threads of Polish right-wing historical discourse, since the concept of "crossing the Red Sea" circulates in Polish public debate less as a symbol of surviving the Nazi occupation, and more of the passing through the

26 In the quoted interview, the architect mentioned these two museum projects as his points of reference (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).

27 The architect admits that the narrative of a "thousand years of Jewish history in Poland" influenced his design: "I will give an example: I did not want raw concrete. [...] Use of this material in a specific way – exposing its cold, raw surface – in Holocaust museums around the world reminds one immediately how terrible this event was. We wanted to achieve a different effect" (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013). In the context of Mahlamäki's earlier comment on his lack of certainty about the degree of the Museum's commemorative function experienced during his work on the competition entry, it can be assumed that the above declaration refers to the post-competition work on the final version of the design.

28 Mahlamäki comments: "This lobby also resembles a canyon, a gorge, similar landscapes can be found in Israel, but not only there. The Americans have similar associations. They say: a canyon!" (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).

“red occupation” of Soviet communism.²⁹ In his own statements on the design, Mahlamäki conformed to the discourse’s transformation; he made efforts to downgrade his own architectural metaphors that proved problematic for his clients, commenting that

“one could say it [the lobby] looks like an empty river, or rocks in the East, or whatever. In the competition phase we tried to open our ideas, just telling the story of the Red Sea and how Moses escaped from Egypt. But it was only one metaphor, one allegory.”

However, he could not stop himself from commenting aphoristically that the “architecture is ever a mirror which tells about our hopes, our abilities, and what it is possible to do today” (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013).

Since the natural landscape came to the surface while the “Void” was discursively converted into a “(Great) Canyon,” the lobby became even more of a looking device, a framing installation designed to produce a landscape perspective. In compositional terms, the lobby is an optical mechanism, intended to focus the visitor’s gaze by means of a set of visual frames and apertures, constituted equally by the curved walls and by two large-scale windows. The frames transform the view as visitors proceed through the architectural space: if visitors positioned at the Museum’s front door see only the curved walls and an indefinite source of light behind them, those who pass the bridge over the exposed underground floor begin to see the huge window surface and the park greenery behind it. The view unfolds as visitors walk toward the ticket counter, and opens up further on the way toward the steps leading down to the core exhibition. As the frame widens, the light exposure increases. From the top of the stairs, the window allows a full perspective onto a green square with one large linden tree in front and a cluster of trees in the background, with pathways and benches, and with the outlines of residential buildings in the far background. Commenting on this view, Mahlamäki recalled his first impression from visiting the site on April 20, 2005: “the exceptionally beautiful spring, warmth and sunlight, the vivid colors and freshness of the park”; the director, Dariusz Stola, making a clear reference to the “museum of life” narrative, simply called this view “a beautiful symbol of life” (Bartoszewicz & Mahlamäki, 2013; Urzykowski & Stola, 2014).

Mahlamäki’s design decision of opening the lobby interior onto the view of the park is directly inspired by Safdie’s design of the new Yad Vashem building, opened on March 15, 2005, just weeks before Mahlamäki began his design work. There, in Israel’s memorial museum of the Holocaust, after passing a long claustrophobic corridor with ten exhibition rooms on both sides and walking through the monumental Hall of Names, visitors reach a wide, elevated terrace with an open view onto a green valley, and with the panorama of Jerusalem in the background. The view conveys a strong symbolic message. As Safdie commented on the use of landscape in this design,

29 I thank Anna Zawadzka for pointing out this context. For instance, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, IPN) together with the right-wing Catholic weekly *Gość Niedzielny* have published a series of popular brochures on the history of Polish communism titled “Through the Red Sea” (*Przez Morze Czerwone*).

“to stand on the extended terrace, the side walls of the prism curving away from the site seemingly to infinity, and see the fresh green of the recently planted forest with its great sense of renewal and the urbanizing hills beyond is to understand that, indeed, life prevailed. We prevailed” (Safdie, 2006, p. 99).

If Mahlamäki’s opening of perspective is considered a reference to what Eran Neuman saw as “an attempt to embed the Holocaust inside the Israeli landscape and to make it an inherent part of the local territory” (Neuman, 2014, p. 69), then everything seemingly remains in a formal accord: the wide angle of the view, the natural-urban landscape, and the green of the trees. Yet in Warsaw, a few key components are different – the first is Safdie’s “we,” the “prevailing” subject. In the visual absence of the materiality of the Jewish city, covered by the surface of Muranów park, “we” continues to signify the collective subject of modern nostalgia: the Polish majority. What is also likely to be different in the case of the Warsaw museum is the very action of prevailing. In Warsaw, like in Jerusalem, the landscape’s surface is appropriated and turned into a museum exhibit, into the “historical fabric” that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refused to notice in her design.³⁰ Such an appropriation, performed by the opening up of a visual perspective, in both cases results in the “embedding [of] the Holocaust inside the landscape.” Yet what establishes the other fundamental difference with Safdie’s project is the collective subject’s intention to keep the Holocaust “inside the landscape” on a permanent basis – to keep it under the surface of the grass in the same way it was hidden there during the postwar reconstruction of Warsaw sixty years earlier.

In the first architectural design of the space visible from the MHPJ’s huge window, Bohdan Lachert, the architect of postwar Muranów, saw this visual perspective as much less unproblematic. Quite the opposite, his design carried the intention to expose as much of the destroyed materiality of the ghetto as possible: on the new buildings’ facades in the form of reused brick, and through exposed landscape forms, hills and mounds that differ significantly from the flat geological landscape of Warsaw. Lachert’s Muranów was to become “a memorial district,” a space complementing Rapoport’s monument, where “new life comes into existence,” but the architectural plan continues to hold its obligation to protect “the atmosphere of a mausoleum, erected among a cemetery of ruins, permeated with the blood of the Jewish nation” (Lachert’s 1948 report quoted in: Meng, 2011, p. 79; Uchowicz, 2014b). Certainly, the architect’s decision to construct new buildings from reclaimed material from the ghetto was motivated by practical reasons associated with shortages of new construction material in the destroyed city. To a degree, the decision to leave the rubble on site can also be seen as a pragmatic one, yet it was also strongly rooted in the concept of leaving the destroyed

30 Eran Neuman points out the political implications of Safdie’s design decision: “At this point the landscape is appropriated, objectified and turned into another exhibit in the history museum; what began with the display of the events in Europe ends in the Jerusalem landscape. The building itself supports this process and marks an act of liberation, both symbolically and experientially. The visitors are liberated from the past, from the building, as they move toward the present, to the contemporary Jerusalem landscape. The symbolic approach of representing the Holocaust, constituted by the building’s path along the prism and its exit, is highly significant; it indicates the acceptance of the common Zionist narrative – from Holocaust to national revival” (Neuman, 2014, p. 68).

ghetto in the form of a permanent ruin, an idea promoted by postwar Jewish leaders.³¹ Presenting his design, Lachert wrote that the

“rubble should be left on the site in the biggest possible quantity to commemorate the days of terror and struggle – to form the ground on which new city and new life will be erected. The visual perception of the two levels of former streets and the new buildings will evoke the historical cataclysm, the historical break” (Lachert, 1948, p. 56; Uchowicz, 2014b).

The visibility of the destroyed materiality under the ground’s surface was to serve the creation of a “communicative urban design that remains a meaningful historical document;” its direct visibility on the surface of the buildings would serve the creation of architecture “built from red rubble, as if from the blood of Warsaw” (Baraniewski, 1996, p. 248; Meng, 2011, p. 79).

Lachert’s project was not free from omissions that can today provoke accusations of facilitating the appropriation of Jewish spaces, either in the form of rubble, seen by many non-Jewish Poles as a “‘post-Jewish property’ – meaning nobody’s property” (Gross & Grudzińska-Gross, 2011, p. 146)³² or in the form of the urban space that suddenly appeared as the sum of land properties being “nobody’s property.” The latter charge becomes substantial, especially in the context of the simultaneous careful reconstruction of Warsaw’s Old Town, perceived by its postwar architects as an urban complex of an exceptional value, “a document of [the] national culture” of Poland (Zachwatowicz, 1945, p. 7), quite unlike the former Jewish district; Lachert’s design also seems to lose part of its discursive idealism in the context of the Warsaw Reconstruction Office’s 1945 manifesto, where Lachert and his colleagues stated that “only what is really worth restoring, able to live, will be reconstructed,” while the “rebuilding may even require confirming the sentence of destruction” (“Od redakcji,” 1945, p. 1).

Yet, the value of Lachert’s design lies in its attention to the witnessing historical substance, a quality emphasized by the surprisingly short life of his project. The construction of postwar Muranów began in 1948, and already in 1951 it met with strong criticism from Lachert’s governmental clients, which resulted in an extensive transformation of the design and a thorough erasure of its commemorative function. The government-sponsored reviewers complained primarily about the architect’s aesthetic and practical choices, the “sad and grey” look of the buildings resulting from the “monotony” of the “pink color of brick combined with gray concrete” (Wierzbicki, 1952, p. 224; Baraniewski, 1996, p. 249); they also questioned the idea of forming rubble into

31 Artur Tanikowski quotes Warsaw rabbi Szymon Efrati, who stated that “the places, where these martyrs died in a shared feeling of solitude, should remain untouched. [...] Such commemoration expresses the Shoah in a more suggestive way than any building of a monument, because no description or visual image will represent this catastrophe more meaningfully than an empty place, a void space” (Tanikowski, 2013, p. 113).

32 The quoted phrase does not appear in the English version of the book (Gross & Grudzińska-Gross, 2012). The rubble from the site of the Warsaw ghetto was utilized not only for the state-sponsored reconstruction of the city, but was also re-sourced by private individuals, who used it for the construction of private houses. Numerous Warsaw residents collected household items, furniture and scrap metal. Many looked for gold and valuables; the Warsaw press also reported on individuals digging for valuables in mass graves in nearby Gęsiówka prison, behind the Judenrat building (Chomątowska-Szałamacha, 2012, pp. 134–138).

hills and embankments, suggesting the architect should have removed the entirety of the remaining rubble (“Muranów w 90 procentach zamieszkany,” 1953, p. 4). The criticism can be partially attributed to a move away from modernist design principles and the enforcement of the official doctrine of socialist realism, introduced in 1949, but the discursive focus on aesthetics and style cannot obscure the directionality of the design modifications made to Lachert’s project: after 1951 all the buildings were plastered and covered in stucco, trees were planted to cover the embankments, and the remaining rubble was removed from the construction sites where it was still possible to do so.³³ As a result, the entirety of the memorial district was “sanitized of its past” (Meng, 2011, p. 81) through the removal and concealment of visible pieces of materiality that might have caused reflection on the history of the Holocaust this space had witnessed. The modernist architectural principle of providing residents with access to fresh air, sunlight, space, and greenery, (International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM), 1973; Mumford, 2000, p. 130) implemented by Lachert, became appropriated as a device for turning the district into another “safe place,” where the self-image of the Polish majority can be peacefully constructed since the “beautification” of Muranów.

The frame of the lobby opens a view onto this landscape. The design choice to entrust the Museum’s first architectural narrative to a perspective onto Muranów’s multiple layers of visual insulation allows the “sanitized” district to enter the building’s interior, producing what resembles a cinematic panorama. There, magnified by the scale of the architectural frame, the view continues to produce a visual blind spot that silences the Jewish histories communicated by the materiality of the Museum’s location, and perpetuates its reduction into an invisible and untouchable site. Indeed, in the Museum’s lobby, “we,” the Polish majority, have prevailed over the obstacles of historical and memorial nature that might have interrupted the nostalgic dream of continued modernization. “We” have also prevailed over the rubble, the materiality that carried and materialized the histories that the nostalgic subject is continuously unwilling to confront. Mahlamäki’s design, combined with the curators’ efforts to structure the discourse on the Museum, in fact constitute yet another closure of Lachert’s project of a memorial district, performed by means of a visual reinforcement of the ground surface and the keeping of the unavoidably present “historic substance” at a safe distance from the Museum’s main narrative.

This omission appears to be even stronger if the visitor turns around and looks back toward the other large-scale window at the main entrance. One might expect the frame to remain focused on the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs, as the curators’

33 The anonymous author of one of the critical texts argues that while “the architect managed to resolve the problems caused by the curious landform features,” “a question remains whether this task should have been exercised at all? Would it not be better to simply clear the rubble and flatten the land? It seems that the architects have reached this conclusion after finishing the first section of Muranów, because now the rubble is removed before the construction works begin, and all the ‘landscape features,’ ‘craters’ and remains of the former district’s destroyed houses are cleared” (“Muranów w 90 procentach zamieszkany,” 1953, p. 4). In an official self-criticism published in 1952, Lachert admitted that he was wrong in designing spaces “completely devoid of greenery, but full of clouds of dust from crushed brick and mortar,” and that the design principles should not “affect the quality of buildings’ external finishing.” He also admitted that “removal of rubble from the entire construction site, as contemporary experiences show, would not be difficult” (Lachert, 1952, pp. 30–31).

narrative on the Museum as a “memorial complex” would suggest, and as Mahlamäki’s early visualizations of the lobby interior showed. Yet the shape of the window strongly restricts the visibility of the Monument. Commenting unofficially on the design background of such a framing, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explained that

“once in the building, the visitors do not have a clear view of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes from the large glass window at the entrance. This placement was intentional, because the POLIN Museum stands in relation to the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, but is not a Holocaust museum” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2015a).³⁴

The exclusion was intentional, yet the frame is not empty. It allows visitors to see only a corner of the Monument but, similarly to the wide perspective at the back of the building, it does offer a direct view of a tree, one that not only constitutes a section of the “beautiful symbol of life,” but also carries stronger and well-defined political connotations. According to information provided by the Museum, it is

“a Tree of the Joint Memory of Poles and Jews, planted in 1988 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. It commemorates Jews murdered by the Nazis in the years 1939–1945 and Poles who died while providing aid to Jews.”³⁵

While there is no room inside the lobby for a memorial that allows for the visual presence of the heroes and martyrs of the Ghetto Uprising, there is enough space for a commemoration of the same Ghetto Uprising that provides an opportunity to emphasize the heroism of Poles, one that, importantly, permits a merger of the infinitely different and incomparable Polish and Jewish memories of the Holocaust. One may ask how such a “Joint Memory” can possibly be produced, and why its production has to be carried out only on the side of Rapoport’s concealed monument, directly on the route of the historical Zamenhofa Street. But these questions do not appear to be overly significant after this successful merger. Visitors curious about its conditions and outcomes will find their answer in the larger window on the opposite side of the lobby.

Zamenhofa Street

The visitor’s gaze rests on the surface of the aestheticized Muranów, restricted by the frame of the lobby and by the sanitizing procedures performed on Lachert’s project

34 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s comment, published on social media, was a voice in the debate on the construction of a monument commemorating the Polish Righteous, planned to be built behind the back window of the Museum’s lobby.

35 A plaque next to the tree informs: “The tree of shared memory. To the Polish Jews murdered between 1939 and 1945 by the German invaders, and to the Poles who died bringing help.” The Museum’s website explains further that “The museum devoted to the history of Polish Jews ‘enters into a dialogue’ with the Monument standing opposite and facing it. The monument commemorates the murdered people and those who died fighting. The Museum complements the space of commemoration with a historical context and shows how Jews had been living throughout a thousand years of their history in Poland. The designers tried to break the symmetry and did not place the main entrance to the Museum opposite the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes but closer to the building’s corner at Anielewiczka Street. Therefore, the Tree of the Common Memory of Poles and Jews is growing opposite the entrance” (“POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews,” 2015a).

in the postwar decades. But attempts to control the ruined materiality of the site are not limited to the politics of vision. The back section of the lobby, the place where the panorama is widest and most spectacular, is also the place where the architectural design literally breaks the surface of the postwar ground and allows visitors to walk 5.8 meters down wide stairs and, crossing the thick layer of rubble, to access the basement floor. This is where the core exhibition is located, communicating the narrative of the thousand years of Jewish history in Poland. The action of crossing the geological layer of the rubble is designed to take place in the architectural space of the lobby's "canyon," which is curved downward, yet still narratively remains "a bridge across the chasm of the Holocaust" (Gruber, 2013, p. 54). What the lobby communicates in the symbolic language of landscape becomes translated by the device of the staircase into a physical action of descending; the horizontal direction of the lobby's visual perspective prefigures the vertical vector of movement through the space of rubble.

While the action of transcending the ground level happens in the safe and hermetically isolated environment of the lobby interior, reassuringly covered in warm sandstone, not all visitors have found that movement to be fully unproblematic. This is how the artist Artur Żmijewski remembered his first visit to the Museum:

"I left my coat in the cloakroom and while I went down these spectacular stairs, I had the unshakable feeling that it is a situation similar to that of Auschwitz. That it is a descent down into the abyss of a gas chamber. Why is this exhibition in the basement? Why is it not in this sunny space? Why is this glass building occupied by the museum offices, and in order to see the exhibition you need to go down to the cellar? For me, it opposes the concept that it is a museum of life. From the very beginning, I see death" (Leociak, Waślicka, & Żmijewski, 2015).

Żmijewski sees very clearly the Museum's design logic and its architectural precision, even though, importantly, at every moment of his visit, he remained safely isolated from the narratives contained in the rubble and the possibility of being influenced by its materiality; the "descent" is not planned as a means of experiencing the destroyed space but rather of walking past it. To be sure, as deep as 5.8 meters below ground level, there remains no residue of the rubble, and of the narratives it contains. The Museum's basement walls, immersed in this materiality, are constructed not to confront the ruin of modernity but rather to bypass it, to create an opportunity of accessing the geologically stable ground below on which the Polish nostalgic dream can be re-founded. The ground works performed during the construction of Mahlamäki's building were based on the assumption that the soil of Muranów can indeed be stratified, divided into historically distinct layers, and that after accessing the surface of pre-Holocaust Warsaw, removing the unwanted substance, and constructing retaining walls all around, a "safe place" can be established, albeit in the sterile and artificial atmosphere of an architectural laboratory. The designers' and curators' idea relied on the hope that creating such a safety zone inside the Museum's glass-and-concrete walls would facilitate the re-modeling of the urban layout on which the building stands, a re-conquering of the

territory that simultaneously seems to allow to ground a nostalgic (self-)image of the interrupted Polish “golden era,” but also communicates the histories and memories that call this image into question. Considering their aim of sanitizing the foundations of pre-Holocaust Warsaw of the residues of rubble, it would be significantly less productive for the Museum’s designers to locate this building in any space other than the epicenter: opposite the commemoration of the ghetto, on the grounds formerly occupied by the Judenrat and Zamenhofa Street, which during the destruction of the ghetto became a main route to Umschlagplatz. It is indeed there, on the excavated lanes of the street, where the attempts to sanitize the space and to construct nostalgia for lost modernity as a physical architectural object appear most evident.

While the majority of the Museum’s layout occupies the former site of the Judenrat, previously the military barracks and a prison, the northeastern corner of the Museum diagonally crosses the route of the prewar Zamenhofa Street and overlaps with a section of the space previously occupied by a tenement on its opposite side, at number 38. According to the Museum’s masterplan, the northeastern corner of the underground floor was to be designated for two sub-galleries of the core exhibition – the gallery of the interwar history of Poland (1918–1939), and the Holocaust gallery, respectively sixth and seventh out of the Museum’s eight sub-galleries. Entering the gallery of the interwar period, visitors are positioned at the end of a long corridor, designed to resemble a street. On both its sides, walls have been constructed in white plasterboard to resemble the lines of tenement facades; a series of digital projectors cast black-and-white images onto the walls, adding more detail: windows, stucco decorations, and signboards advertising shops and businesses: a newspaper office, a cinema, a bookstore, a food shop, a cafe. Many signboards are signed with Ashkenazi Jewish surnames. The doorways of the “tenements” lead to a series of exhibition rooms, narrating Jewish political and cultural life during the time between the re-establishment of the Polish state in 1918 and the beginning of World War II. The roadway surface is covered in cobblestone. If one looks at the architectural plan of the Museum, it appears evident that the line of the street simulated in the exhibition space overlaps precisely with the path of the historical Zamenhofa Street. The original street was wider, though, and its eastern roadway is now occupied by the row of “tenements”; yet, inside the “tenement” located opposite the entrance to the sub-gallery, there is a door leading to a technical room, normally closed, which is positioned almost exactly where the door of the tenement at number 38 was located.

Referring to the architectural plan may be necessary in order to trace this overlapping, because the fact that visitors physically walk the street that, for nearly eighty years, was located in the center of Jewish Warsaw and later became the scene of its destruction, is not communicated by the design of the exhibition, and was openly denied by its curators. In official communications, this space was identified not as a device for encountering the material past, but merely as a collage of unconnected urban settings. Michał Majewski, the curator of the prewar exhibition, called the reconstructed street “a visualization” and stated that the interior can probably be compared to Nalewki Street, the main street of

Warsaw's Jewish quarter, but in fact "it isn't any exact street," while Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett stated that it is an "abstract street" and "not a literal recreation of anything," emphasizing that the projections of shop fronts were copied from historical photographs from various Polish cities (Bernat, 2014; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2011). A mention of the site's past appears on the Museum's website.³⁶ Yet no information about the street's layers of materialized history is provided to visitors in the exhibition space while they walk on its actual surface and watch its beautified simulation.

The layers of history are numerous. The historical Zamenhofa Street was a space located in the very center of Warsaw's semi-formal Jewish quarter known as the Northern District, established in the early 19th century by a series of administrative decisions that forbade Jewish ownership of land along many streets of central Warsaw, simultaneously encouraging resettlement to the suburbs that surrounded the Warsaw Citadel,³⁷ north of the historical city center. Zamenhofa Street, until 1930 known as Dzika Street and later renamed to honor Ludwik Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto, was initially an access road leading to artillery barracks and military training grounds and, further north, to the Powązki tollhouse. With the rapid urbanization of the industrial era, the section of Zamenhofa (Dzika) Street closer to the city center, adjacent to the commercial district of Nalewki, became a residential area for prosperous merchants. The relative wealth of the area closer to the center disappeared as the street continued further towards the district of Powązki, an overcrowded area of extreme poverty and inhumane living conditions (Zonszajn, 1954, pp. 41–44). The economic, social and ethnic exclusion of the suburban parts of the Northern District was also reflected in the more central section of Zamenhofa, which was by no means an area of wealth and safety. The tenement at number 38, a part of which is now occupied by the interior of the exhibition's "tenement," was a huge building with two narrow courtyards and almost one hundred individual flats – or, more likely, cramped rental rooms. It also contained at least two prayer houses located inside the courtyards. Chone Shmeruk, a literary historian who spent his childhood in this house, remembered one prayer room, owned by Kotsk Chasidim, and another maintained by a group of tailors (Shmeruk & Adamczyk-Garbowska, 1998, pp. 326–333). The tenement was not entirely a safe place; in 1935, it became the scene of the killing of a police spy who attempted to infiltrate the delegatized Communist Party of Poland (Mirska, 1980, p. 258). It is possible that one of the prayer rooms described by Shmeruk remained in the building after the Nazi invasion and the creation of the ghetto. Such a prayer room was visited in this tenement in January 1943, five months after the liquidation of the ghetto, by Hillel Seidman, a historian and an

36 The website informs that "The Street is situated at the prewar location of Zamenhof St. – the main artery of the Northern District, a neighborhood inhabited chiefly by Jews. This fact was very much present in the minds of the creators of the gallery, which is set up along a 'street' whose frontage is formed by multimedia building facades. It is on these that presentations on topics of importance to this time period will be displayed. From the street, visitors will be able to go into building entrances, where they will discover the vibrant cultural and political life of the period" ("POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews," 2015b).

37 Development in the immediate neighborhood of the citadel was forbidden for military reasons. This limitation significantly contributed to the overcrowding of the Northern District (Gawryszewski, 2009, pp. 23–25).

activist from the Orthodox Jewish community. Seidman was invited to see this place by a group of yeshiva students, who led him through a series of attics and locked rooms in the neighboring buildings before taking him to the tenement at no. 38, where, through an entrance hidden in an oven, he entered an underground bunker. It was fully supplied, and at that time had access to water and electric power; religious studies continued inside (Seidman, 1998, pp. 180–188). It is almost certain this bunker was destroyed three months later, shortly after the outbreak of the Ghetto Uprising. On the first day of the fighting, on April 19, 1943, the tenement was burned down by the Nazis; it is known that many people died inside (Schieb, Voigt, & Weinstein, 2006, p. 526). During the weeks that followed, most of the civilians captured in the bunkers were escorted to Umschlagplatz along Zamenhofa Street, much like during the Gross-Aktion of July 1942.

With the separation of the Museum's exhibition space from the materiality it is located on, all these histories become excluded from the visitors' access, hidden behind the plasterboard facades of the artificial tenements. Considering the underground location of the exhibition, it is possible that the bunker visited by Seidman was located just meters away from today's "Jewish Street" constructed in the Museum's basement. Yet it is impossible to see it from the reconstructed "second Golden Age of Polish Jews," and so are the other histories and memories materialized by the space of the prewar Zamenhofa Street. The rubble remains outside, safely isolated by the reinforced concrete of the basement walls; inside, the designers created a space that communicates a political longing for an interrupted past, even more literally than the "ruin of modernity" ever could. The reconstructed "Jewish Street" conveys the message that nothing really happened: if geological works are carried out thoroughly enough, a street untouched by history can be uncovered below the rubble of the ghetto, ready to prove that a return to a "genuinely 'Polish' Poland" is more than possible.

Standing on the cobblestone surface of the street-like museum interior, visitors are physically standing in a re-creation, an identical replica of the prewar city cleansed of all the material and symbolic residue of the original. Like the landscape of Bohdan Lachert's postwar Muranów, the interiors are sanitized of the "historical fabric of where Jews once lived" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2011). The design concept of the "narrative museum" allowed to transfer the perceived objectivism of a physical object onto the historical narrative and to abandon the constructions of an artifact-based authenticity – but the designers of the MHPJ have pushed this principle to its extreme by excluding the spaces already present in the exhibition and narratively replacing them with the concepts of "abstraction," "virtuality," and "visualization." Such a design decision allows for the omission of the narratives carried by the real relic of Zamenhofa Street and to keep them outside the double walls of this laboratory of national nostalgia.

The narratives that remain outside would probably include the history of the economic and cultural growth of interwar Poland and Warsaw. They would, however, also be likely to convey accounts of continued exclusion and segregation of an economic,

spatial, class, and racial nature – contexts that were clearly visible in the spaces of the prewar Zamenhofa Street and constituted the essential structure of prewar Polish visions of growth and modernization. Among the other surfaces of the city, these contexts were strongly visible on the “Jewish” shop signboards, which did not so much reflect the Polish traditions of multiethnicity and tolerance as they were a direct result of Polish trade regulations intended to visually separate “Christian” businesses from “non-Christian” ones, in order to facilitate the economic boycott of Jewish shops.³⁸ Finally, these narratives would make it more difficult to delimit the antisemitism of the German Nazis presented in the Holocaust gallery from its Polish counterpart, thoroughly separated by the design and content of the core exhibition’s sub-galleries.

Even if such a separation of the temporal sections of history, presented in subsequent sub-galleries is considered a valid and productive narrative method, and it is accepted that the Poland of the interwar period and the country occupied by the Nazis were two fully distinct spatial-temporal islands – the decision to keep the materiality of Zamenhofa Street outside the Museum’s exhibition space is impossible to defend in the context of positioning this street inside the Holocaust gallery. The reconstruction of Zamenhofa is continued within its space, along the same street axis but in this gallery it is called the “Aryan street,” and is an exhibition space narrated as remaining outside of the ghetto and designed to educate visitors about the attitudes non-Jewish Poles adopted toward the Holocaust. Above the reconstruction of Zamenhofa Street, a gallery was designed to cross its axis perpendicularly on an upper level, decorated to resemble the well-known Chłodna Street footbridge, which connected two parts of the Warsaw ghetto across a street that remained outside its borders, placing the visitors in the spatial and visual position of a ghetto prisoner. If we realize that the “Aryan” street indeed constitutes a reconstruction of the route of Zamenhofa Street in its exact historical position, the image of the techniques used to erase all remains of physical substance from the exhibition space is complete: in the gallery narrating the history of the Holocaust,

38 Formally, none of the legal acts of interwar Poland differentiated between Jewish and non-Jewish shop owners. Practically, the obligation to denote the business owner’s name on the shop front served the boycott actions against Jewish businesses, organized by National Democrats following the reemergence of Polish state in 1918; the boycott actions intensified in 1932, and even more in 1934, after the Przytyk Pogrom. The law about signboards first appeared in the Industrial Law Decree introduced on June 7, 1927 (“Rozporządzenie Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej z dnia 7 czerwca 1927 o prawie przemysłowym,” 1927). The Decree defines “industrial business” as every business with activity in the field of production, sales or services (Article 1). Article 33 reads: “The manager should label his industrial business accordingly on the building exterior. The external description should denote precisely and clearly the name and surname, or the company name of the industry, and should clearly denote whether the business deals with production, sales of goods, or services. Written names and surnames should remain in accordance with the details given for the business registry or in concession application documents” (“Rozporządzenie Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej z dnia 7 czerwca 1927 o prawie przemysłowym,” 1927, p. 701).

In the late 1930s, the boycott action was supported by local governmental bodies. A series of documents was published by local authorities (*starostwa*), reminding of the obligation to clearly mark shops with owners’ surnames. See, for instance: “W sprawie oznaczenia na zewnątrz przedsiębiorstwa,” 1937, p. 1; “Obwieszczenia Starostwa i Wydziału Powiatowego,” 1938, p. 1. The nationalist press reported cases of avoiding the law; a local newspaper informed in 1938: “The obligation to disclose names and surnames on the signboards is strongly disliked by the Jews. As much as they can, they try to avoid it. In Płock, one can notice the following situations: on a regular signboard, an anonymous shop name is displayed, looking like a Polish, Christian one, and another, with a Jewish surname, is hung somewhere high on the building, where not everyone can spot it. And it is done only to hide the Jewish name and mislead the Christians!” (“Byłe tylko nazwisko ukryć...,” 1938, p. 1).

visitors look at the historical path to the Umschlagplatz, disguised as a street outside the ghetto, while standing on a gallery intended to imitate the space that constituted a part of the ghetto but was fully detached from the physical ground.

These strategies of multiple concealments prevent visitors from accessing the site of the history upon which they physically walk. The discursive and physical double insulation shields visitors from the site of the Museum, from the possibility of critically differentiating between the destroyed space and its reconstruction, and from narratives that could constitute a threat to the nostalgic image of Polish modernity. Historian Jacek Leociak, the co-creator of the Holocaust gallery, who later became critical of the Museum's final design, very accurately commented on the practical implementation of this design. He commented on the plasterboard rubble that appears in the postwar gallery in order to illustrate the look of the destroyed Muranów just as plasterboard tenements appear in the earlier sub-galleries:

“they look so terribly false, as if made of papier-mâché, while the authentic Muranów rubble could have been taken from the archeological excavations opened during the construction of the Museum. It is a huge misunderstanding. In promotional materials it is emphasized that the Museum was created in the heart of the Jewish district of Warsaw, in the heart of the ghetto. And the bricks excavated during archeological works were simply thrown away” (Leociak et al., 2015).

Conclusion

In July 2009, just after an official construction permit was granted for the Museum building but before the excavation works began on the site, a temporary structure appeared on the site of the historical Zamenhofa Street, opposite the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and Martyrs. In the summer of that year, Israeli video artist Yael Bartana filmed her “Polish trilogy,” a three-part work titled *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, which was presented in the Polish pavilion during the 54th International Art Exhibition in Venice two years later. Bartana's work is a study in collective psychology: the artist extracts and isolates images from Polish and Israeli national dreams, mixes, shuffles and re-pronounces them, allowing their repressed content to return, as a nightmare. The work, inspired both by the artist's confrontations with Israeli politics of memory and her experience of living in Poland during the debate initiated by Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*, allows for the interpretation of these dreams; it “gradually reveals layers of latent meaning” (Mytkowska, 2012, p. 130).

In the first video, titled *Nightmares*, a young fictional Communist politician calls on “three million Jews” to return to Poland (Bartana, 2007). He stands in the center of the empty Tenth Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw, a 1955 construction made of Warsaw rubble, addressing the derelict structure's empty terraces. Without clarification whether the

activist is addressing the living or rather the ghosts of the dead (the number of Polish Jewish victims of the Holocaust is estimated at 3 million), the speech contains references to Polish participation in the Holocaust, the appropriation of the victims' property, and the postwar materialization of a nationalist dream about a "Polish Pole in Poland, with no one disturbing him" (Bartana, 2012, p. 120). The speaker opposes the nationalist imagery, yet he calls for a "return," presented as an act of new Polish-and-Jewish nation-building, an effort at modernizing and creating new "works of hands and minds the world has never seen" (Bartana, 2012, p. 120). "Return, and we shall finally become Europeans" – calls the politician, simultaneously evoking the postwar discourses of Polish communism and Zionism, but also making a reference to contemporary Polish aspirations of "becoming European" by "working through" the memory of the Holocaust, which will allow Polish society to leave the burden of history behind, and, at last, to join the phantasmic "West" (Bartana, 2012, p. 120).

The second video, entitled *Wall and Tower*, was filmed in Muranów, literally under the poster advertising the Museum of the History of Polish Jews about to be constructed. Drawing from both Polish and Israeli national imageries, the film shows a group of pioneers constructing a "Kibbutz Muranów," a response to the call articulated in the first film, and also a first place of Polish-Jewish symbiosis on Polish lands (Bartana, 2009). The images of their work are reminiscent of the 1950s video reports on the construction site of Lachert's new Muranów, but the "Wall and Tower," *Homa u-Migdal* in Hebrew, is also the name of a strategy implemented by Israeli settlers in the 1930s and 1940s, which allowed for constructing in twenty-four hours a kibbutz that could immediately be used as a point of defense (Milstein & Sacks, 1997, pp. 233–239). The appearance of Bartana's building corresponds to the film's name: a high wooden fence with narrow vertical slots, enabling active defense, backed by an observation tower with a clear view of Rapoport's sculptures of ghetto fighters. Inside the walls, the video shows images of symbiosis: under the green of the Muranów trees, the pioneers are learning each others' languages, the background music plays the Polish and Israeli national anthems (the latter, however, is played backwards), a flag combining the Polish and Israeli national emblems flies at the top of the tower.

The place created and filmed by Bartana prefigures the design of the Museum's interiors, constructed in the same space during the following few years. It mirrors the aims the Museum was designed to serve, the curatorial and architectural solutions used to achieve these aims, and the substantial design problems and symbolic and spatial costs that the construction of this Museum has revealed. It mirrors the structure of the nostalgia for Polish modernity, for the project of a "Polish Poland" that was interrupted by the Holocaust and that the curators of Polish history are trying to revive today. It reveals that the Holocaust is integral to this nostalgic project, and that any attempt to revive it would require either confronting this project's integral background of nationalism and exclusion, or perpetually attempting to isolate the project from its context. It shows that materializing a nostalgia for a lost modernity requires constructing a wall: a struc-

ture that shapes view and, if needed, fully isolates from the outside environment – the historical substance of the place and the materialized substance of history, which pose an irremovable threat of criticality to the nostalgic hope of moving past history without touching it. What the isolating qualities of the wall do not change is the outside, understood also – but not only – in architectural terms. The rubble of Muranów, while swept under the green surfaces of the district's parks or hidden under technologically advanced works of architecture, retains its quality of an active “historical fabric,” the physical and symbolic ground on which the Museum was founded. Despite design efforts to isolate the Museum and its content from this territory, the rubble of Muranów seems to be the only ground available to support it.

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Mur i okno.

Gruz getta warszawskiego jako przestrzeń narracyjna Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN

Abstrakt: Otwarte w 2013 roku warszawskie Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich POLIN stanęło pośrodku terenu dawnego nazistowskiego getta warszawskiego, zburzonego podczas jego likwidacji w 1943 roku, naprzeciw powstałego w roku 1948 Pomnika Bohaterów i Męczenników Getta, jednocześnie pośrodku terenu dawnej, dziewiętnastowiecznej warszawskiej dzielnicy żydowskiej i pośrodku powojennego modernistycznego osiedla Muranów, zaplanowanego jako osiedle-pomnik zburzonego getta. Zlokalizowane w tym miejscu muzeum przedstawiano jako „muzeum życia”, opowiadające „tysiącletnią historię” polskich Żydów, nie zaś muzeum skoncentrowane na historii Zagłady Żydów i historii polskiego antysemityzmu.

Artykuł zawiera krytyczną analizę kuratorskich i architektonicznych strategii przyjętych przez twórców Muzeum w procesie umieszczania środowiska miejskiego w roli elementu narracji historycznej komunikowanej przez budynek Muzeum i przez jego wystawę główną. Szczegółowej analizie poddawane są dwa kluczowe dla projektu Muzeum wnętrza architektoniczne: główny hall wejściowy oraz przestrzeń „żydowskiej ulicy”, stanowiąca fragment dwóch galerii wystawy głównej, poświęconych historii Żydów w Polsce międzywojennej oraz historii Zagłady. Analiza struktury projektowej tych dwóch wnętrz służy próbie sformułowania odpowiedzi na badawcze pytanie dotyczące właściwości fizyczno-symbolicznych materialnej substancji zniszczonego getta w odniesieniu do narracji, która abstrahuje od historii jego zniszczenia, oraz na pytanie o odpowiedzialność projektantów wynikającą z decyzji o umieszczeniu narracji historycznej w fizycznej przestrzeni, w której wydarzyła się historia będąca tej narracji przedmiotem.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: muzealnictwo; Warszawa; muzea Holokaustu; warszawskie getto; nostalgia; nacjonalizm; miejska modernizacja.



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