

## Conference Impressions by Vita Susak

*of the Annual Conference of the Association of European Jewish Museums in Munich and Hohenems, 16-19 November 2013*

### **AEJM Conference, We Should Be There.**

I really liked several things about the Conference of the AEJM. First of all, it was not overloaded with numerous papers, but it had a particular subject and theme as well as key presentations. Question like *Where We Are? How Jewish museums in Europe should function in future?* were discussed by participants at the Conference sessions, on coffee-breaks and during the bus trip to Hohenems. This allowed producing ideas and plans that will determine future activities.

Strong feature of this international meeting were the thematic workshops that not only offered new knowledge, but also allowed to establish personal contacts. It was a great pleasure for me to participate in the workshop "Questions in Space" by Hannes Sulzenbacher. Our task was to develop the concept of a blockbuster exhibition on Judaica objects, "accidentally discovered in the city hall of Bregenz". During 40 minutes our group of 4 people (Israel, Austria, Germany, Ukraine) first developed a concept for a contemporary video art exhibition and then worked on a historical-documentary exhibition «Lost in Austria», devoted to refugees and displaced persons. The workshop "Exhibitions & Communities" by Jutta Fleckenstein and Piritta Kleiner, analysed the exhibition devoted to Jews from the Soviet Union and its successor states, which took place at the Jewish Museum Munich in 2012. Curators did a great job trying to understand and show objectively ex-Soviet people, who have settled down in Bavaria from the 1990s. At the same time, when I was looking at the pictures of the exhibition design, I couldn't stop thinking about the power of stereotypes. The first room of the exhibition (departure from the USSR) was painted in bright red - the traditional symbol of the communist regime. But as I remember those days in Ukraine – it was all grey...

Another positive feature of the Conference was its *mobility* – the opportunity to see exhibitions, collections and different Jewish museums. A visit to the famous Bregenz Haus der Kunst and Barbara Kruger's exhibition was a real gift for me as an art historian. An acquaintance with the Austrian town of Hohenems also had a special importance. This small town has no Jewish community today, but there is the Jewish Museum, a restored synagogue building, used as common cultural and community centre. This is an instructive example for contemporary Galician towns – Drohobych, Zhovkva, Brody, where unique synagogues are deteriorating.

In the case of Ukraine, the central question of the Conference *Where We Are?* should be changed to: *Where You Are?* And the answer is: *You should be, and you should be there.* First of all, it has to do with the revival of the Jewish Museum in Lviv. This museum existed in the

interwar years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its collection is now preserved in the depositaries of the Museum of Ethnography and partly in the Lviv National Gallery of Arts. It has to be exhibited in order to introduce this rich heritage to Lvivians and numerous tourists. Topics of traditional Judaica and the Holocaust have to be covered in Ukraine, just as it is done in Europe and the U.S. At the same time, taking into consideration the experience of Jewish museums, it is important to create not a solid memorial, but a living institution that will actively take part in cultural life of contemporary Lviv. It is clear that the museum cannot only be a repository of historical and art objects. However, a space with the latest 3D installations is not a museum yet (in spite of tolerance). The problem of the museums functioning in today's world exceeds the "Jewish framework", that is why the Conference had truly international significance.

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