

Letter from Warsaw, December 2014

Dear All

You asked me to report on the Association of Jewish Museums Annual Conference. It was held in Warsaw at the new Museum of the History of the Jews in Poland. Yes, strange as it may seem - and is, there is a new and very large Jewish museum in Warsaw. In many significant ways, not least of which is how few artefacts are exhibited, *POLIN*, as the museum is called, belongs to a new typology of Jewish museums, making this remarkable enterprise the appropriate venue for a conference on *Approaches to Authenticity: the Virtual vs. the Material vs. the Recreated*. But more on this later.

My thoughts and feelings about the Conference cannot be separated from my responses to the museum and, it would seem, vice versa. For four grey, damp days, I walked the half hour from my hotel through part of what was the former ghetto to the warmth of the museum and the Conference. You will remember that 90% of Poland's 3.5 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust or soon after and, depending on how one counts, that the current Jewish population of Poland ranges from 20 – 200,000. The museum is located so that its entrance is directly opposite Nathan Rapoport's stone and bronze 1948 *Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, with both sited, more or less, in the middle of an otherwise empty city block used as a park by locals.

Each time I left Rainer Mahlamäki's elegant, welcoming, and sensitively designed building, ruminating on interesting and informative conversations with colleagues old and new, well-fed by the museum's excellent caterers, stimulated and provoked by keynote presentations given by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska and Konstanty Gebert on the transformative but controversial place of *POLIN* in today's Poland or Erica Lehrer's discussion of how new cultural practices by non-Jews in Krakow function as vehicles for discussions about Poland's Jewish history; or encouraged by reports about provenance research in Prague (Magda Veselska), digital programmes in Denmark (Janne Laursen) and curatorial education (Felicita Heimann-Jelinek), each time I left the museum, I was faced, literally, with Rapoport's materialized reminder of the horrors of the past. Unlike Moishe Safdie's hopeful, Zionist vista of the Israeli landscape at the end of Yad Vashem's *parcours*, one leaves the vibrant, light-filled Warsaw museum for a landscape that speaks to the darkest period of Jewish history in Poland. Maybe the exit experience will feel different when the days are longer and the monument is not lit against the 4 PM night sky and the walk back to the hotel in the cold through what was the ghetto is done in daylight. Maybe. And maybe I won't feel the wrenching, almost schizophrenic, discrepancies between my conflicting, deep emotions about Poland and my intellectual excitement tempered by an irrational fear about the very existence of *POLIN*. Maybe.

Throughout the conference, in her tours, presentations, and answers to questions, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Director of the Core Exhibition and indefatigable, generous, and enthusiastic host to AEJM, reiterated that the museum was dedicated to the rich and complex life of 1000 years of Jewish history in Poland, functioned as a

reminder of the long periods of co-existence of Poles and Jews, and was designed to serve as a corrective to reductive images of Poland as irretrievably anti-Semitic and, for most Jews, nothing more than death camps and dilapidated cemeteries. BKG also stressed that Poland has never been as homogeneous as it is now and attempts to retrieve the memory of its more heterogeneous history are inextricable from contemporary efforts to position post-Soviet Poland as a democratic nation. Many of these ideas were re-enforced during the excursion to Łódź where participants briefly visited the Jan Karski exhibition at the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center and spent extensive time at the first and very fine Maurycy Gottlieb retrospective organized by the Herbst Palace Museum of Art. Visits to the vast Jewish cemeteries in Warsaw and Łódź, though, served as reminders that contemporary Polish attempts to redress the past and reposition its future through materialized or recreated histories operate, to build on Ruth Ellen Gruber's 2002 concept, somewhat virtually in a Poland without Jews.

BKG's insistence that *POLIN* recounts the rich and varied life of Jews in Poland is borne out by the decision to use first person quotations wherever possible to transmit the concerns and cultures operative in the eight period galleries spread over the 4,000 square meters of the core exhibition. As I mentioned above, this is not a museum where the emphasis is on the display of a collection of artefacts or Judaica. Not just because *POLIN* is a new museum with relatively few pieces but because *POLIN* belongs to a new typology of Jewish museums seen as well in Philadelphia and Moscow - the experience museum which recounts the stories of Jewish populations, groups and individuals in relation to a given locale using whatever contemporary means possible to construct what BKG calls "a theatre of history." With the exception of the reinstallation of the twentieth century displays at the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam, artefacts in the multi-media, interactive Jewish experience museum seem old-fashioned and, when present, are not given primacy of place. In cities like Warsaw and Moscow, where there are both new, large immersion museums and collection-based museums such as the renowned Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute and the relatively recent Museum of Jewish History in Russia, the relationships between museums focusing on artefacts (the material) to retrieve and present history and museums which rely on the virtual and the recreated have yet to be fully mapped out and articulated. And in cities with only collection-based museums and once innovative but out-moded permanent displays such as Frankfurt, what is the range of optimal options for remaining pertinent?

My one regret about the Warsaw Conference is that because the core exhibition opened just weeks before the AEJM meetings, participants and non-*POLIN* presenters did not know the museum sufficiently well to grapple in depth with what may well be the key twenty-first century Jewish museological questions. Perhaps a future AEJM conference will return to the seemingly conflicting values of the material, the virtual, and the recreated in a series of presentations that allow for comparative case studies of relevant museums and panel discussions devoted to the trans-national and local issues raised by shifts in typologies, presentational formats, and audience expectations or experiences. Hopefully, most of the 110 participants who came to Warsaw, studied *POLIN*, and

visited the Jewish Historical Institute will attend, able and willing to contribute their considered reflections. Perhaps, too, this future conference on twenty-first century European Jewish museums also will address and assess expanded Jewish museum mandates that explicitly engage with current political issues and contemporary anti-Semitism. Put another way, what happens when European Jewish museums look out as well as in and insist on a place in the wider body politic for local Jewish populations? And what happens when European Jewish Museums insist on looking forward as well as back?

By bringing us to Warsaw at the beginning of a new chapter in Polish Jewish museum history and planning such a provocative program, AEJM provided much food for thought. Even if we have yet to digest it fully, we have shared knowledge for future discussion and debate. Next year we meet in Jerusalem...where there will be discussion and debate on another set of equally pertinent issues for Jewish museums and a newly refurbished Israel Museum to assess.

Until then,

Reesa Greenberg