

# AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN JEWISH MUSEUMS SINCE OCTOBER 7, 2023

Impressions from a Survey Conducted by Two Collegial Networks



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# INTRODUCTION

Countless personal, social, professional, infrastructural, and geopolitical shifts have resulted from the devastating Middle East war that began with the attack of Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023. The Association of European Jewish Museums ([aejm.org](http://aejm.org)) and the Council of American Jewish Museums ([cajm.net](http://cajm.net)) were among thousands of organizations around the world to make statements condemning the attacks on Israel, expressing empathy with colleagues, and mourning the loss of all civilian lives in Israel and Gaza.

Jewish museums are assumed to represent the Jewish people, and by extension, they are often assumed to represent Israel. This has long been the case - whether or not that second assumption corresponds with individual museums' structures or missions. And it has increasingly been the case since October 7, when these institutions have been on the receiving end of hate-filled sentiments and hateful incidents.

Our two professional organizations have been in long-term, regular communication. Over the decades, museum professionals from North America have attended and participated in sessions at AEJM's annual conferences and vice versa. Peers across the two networks have continued to forge formal and informal relationships, offering advice, exchanging exhibitions, and visiting one another's sites.

Witnessing firsthand serious ripple effects of the global Middle East conflict – calls for the freeing of hostages; protests condemning the war and those connected to Israel; rallies, vigils, demonstrations, boycotts and walkouts; suppression of free speech; cancellations, ostracisms, and dismissals – and aware that our museums had been experiencing such pressures, AEJM and

CAJM thought it imperative to examine related impacts on American and European Jewish museums.

The leadership and individual members of AEJM and CAJM have stayed in touch through the ongoing tragedy of the war in the Middle East - holding several online sessions for directors and senior content professionals to discuss issues and offer assistance. These online sessions were always marked by a dramatic change in the overall situation among our members.

To get a clear and reliable picture of the status quo, we assembled a brief, five-question survey to poll directors on the consequences of October 7 and its aftermath on member museums. Our purpose was to understand the impact more clearly and to provide additional counsel and support where needed.

Not every member museum within the two consortia chose to or was able to participate, including a few where unsettling or hostile incidents definitely took place and were well-publicized during the time frame of the survey, but which are not reflected in these findings. Despite the absence of several such institutions in the survey process, we believe that our findings offer suggestive snapshots of a particular period (October 2023 to early July 2024) when institutions on both sides of the Atlantic were confronted with a variety of new challenges.

The survey, and our efforts moving forward to strengthen our museums in regard to these issues, are signs of the respect we hold for one another's work and for our museum members around the world. We are grateful to all who responded to the survey so openly and thoughtfully.

“Museums are trusted resources and spaces – they are democratic, pluralistic institutions with unique abilities to foster engagement and dialogue – and should be allowed to function that way without fear of repercussion.”

American Jewish-museum staff member

“Especially in these challenging times, we must do everything we can to ensure that the Jewish museum is and remains a place where conversations can be held openly and respectfully and where the diversity of Jewish voices is represented. Combating antisemitism and propaganda also means listening and setting an example of respectful coexistence.”

Barbara Staudinger, Jewish Museum Vienna

# DATA & METHODS

Our two organizations used SurveyMonkey software, and we distributed the simple questionnaire to 105 Jewish-museum directors. We received responses from 42 of them. We should point out that, while responses to the survey came from a solid, informative cross-section of our Jewish museums, the polling is not in every way representative. The museums within our two consortia are extremely diverse. They differ in scale, in purposes, and in local community contexts. And yet they have much in common - including, often, and pertinently here, the ways in which they are perceived.

Twenty-two Jewish-museum directors (or designated senior staff members) from 16 European countries, and 20 Jewish-museum directors or designees from 15 U.S. states responded to the survey. A list of participating museums can be found at the conclusion of this report.

We posed five questions. We asked colleagues (1) whether they had personally been subject to antisemitic incidents since October 7, 2023; (2) whether their museums had been subject to antisemitic incidents; (3) what, if any, changes in museum visitorship they had observed since October 7; (4) what new needs, if any, had arisen at their sites, and what strategies they had employed to address them; and (5) if they chose to, we asked them to offer a general quote or statement about Jewish museums in this moment.

The first two questions included a range of categories (e.g., cancellation, hate mail, hate speech, negative social media, physical threat, vandalism) from which respondents could select those that applied, as well as a comment box for elaboration or additions. The third question, on visi-

torship trends, was also structured to be tabulated. Accordingly, we have assembled statistics.

However, because our data pool is limited in size and we have more saliently gathered impressions of colleagues' experiences, we here emphasize anecdote over numbers, while still highlighting trends. And we have organized the results by general subjects or themes, rather than by each question in turn.

Intentionally, the survey questions did not canvass opinions on the Middle East war or on current political matters. The questions did use October 7, 2023 as a reference point and specifically employed the term "antisemitism." Even so, some responses came back using both "antisemitic" and "anti-Zionist," sometimes interchangeably – reinforcing our awareness that our lexicon and language precision, or lack thereof, can complicate, and are currently complicating, cultural and political discourse.

Given the tense environment and delicate political circumstances, we assured survey participants that their responses would remain anonymous – with limited exceptions and only with those individuals' stated permission. Some participants volunteered to be quoted in their response to the survey's final question.

# KEY FINDINGS

Our Jewish museum colleagues have been struggling for many months; and their museums have been operating within broader atmospheres of tension, anguish, and ill will.

Challenges reported take a number of forms. **There is, first, the overall struggle – a pervasive sense of anxiety, sadness, and heaviness.** In her comments, a German museum director emphasized the ongoing “psychological impact of the situation,” the “exhaustion and fear” affecting so many in the field. This is compounded by conflicts that have arisen among museum staff members, an increasing workload, and three phenomena that have dramatically altered their museum lives:

- **Hostile Actions:** Eighty-one percent of the museums have experienced some form of antisemitic and/or anti-Israel harassment, whether in the form of hate speech, hate mail, vandalism, threat, or malicious prank. Among these were five incidents of physical threats to museums, their staff members, or visitors.
- **Damaged Partnerships:** For more than 40% of institutions, programmatic and financial opportunities were cancelled, and long-standing relationships were negatively affected.
- **Changes to Visitor Landscape:** With a combined 38% downward trend in visitation, numbers dropped more in Europe than in America. In both places there were variations, with possible explanations pointing to security concerns, political positions, and Jewish identity.
  - Where there were **downturns**, respondents speculated that visitors might be (1) avoiding Jewish museums because, given current violence and disruptions, they were considered unsafe spaces; or they might be (2) staying away specifically to oppose (and conflate with the museum itself) what they were viewing as an overly aggressive Israeli war on Gaza.
  - Regarding **upward** trends: There were new learning opportunities, such as training programs for students or new exhibitions and projects to see, and other opportunities to embrace Jewish museums out of a positive concern for them. Visitor groups also indicated a wish to counter prevailing antisemitic sentiments or to seek communion with peers and community, thus expressing solidarity with Jewish institutions in these challenging times.

# IMPRESSIONS & ANECDOTES

## Specifically, what has increased antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment looked and felt like at our Jewish museums?

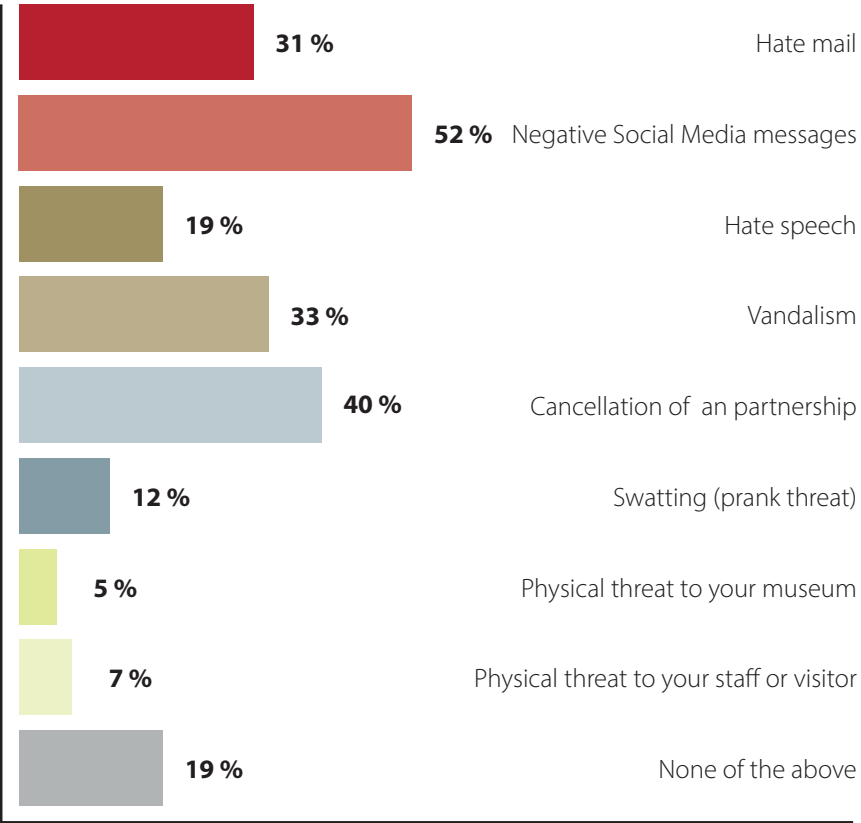
More than half (51%) of respondents had received negative social media messages. 31% had been subject to hate mail and 19% to hate speech. Forty percent were forced to cancel an opportunity or a partnership – a particularly disappointing subject - and 33% had experienced vandalism. Five participants (12%) reported threats to their museums or physical threats to their staff and visitors. In addition, there were five incidents of swatting (prank threats) in the United States and at least one in Europe.

Museum directors also mentioned discomfort and disruptions around them. Demonstrations had taken place at or near several museums on both sides of the Atlantic, and Jewish sites on both continents had been vandalized. Respondents were also aware of incidents at museums not represented in this survey but covered in the news.

For example, at New York’s Jewish Museum, protestors disrupted a public program featuring artist Zoya Cherkassky discussing her exhibition “7 October 2023.” At San Francisco’s Contemporary Jewish Museum, seven Jewish artists, self-identifying as “anti-Zionist” and “pro-Palestine,” decided to withdraw their works from the Spring 2024 “California Jewish Open.”

The following anecdotal information from participants is organized into three broad categories referenced in “Key Findings” above.

## Reported incidents



# IMPRESSIONS & ANECDOTES

## Hostile Actions

Hate speech, hate mail, vandalism, and disruptions **reported by participating U.S. Jewish museums** includes:

- staff and visitors were verbally assaulted by protestors outside one museum
- prank threats disrupted activities at three museums
- there were numerous instances of defacing and graffiti
- anti-Jewish iconography was found in one museum's art studio
- one museum was forced to put on extra security after a mentally disturbed individual entered the museum on two occasions
- a large antiwar poster was glued to a museum building
- there was graffiti (antisemitic, anti-Israel and/or pro-Palestine) outside one museum and on the sidewalks outside of two more
- on at least two occasions, a sculpture outside one museum was defaced with graffiti and pro-Palestine stickers
- posters calling for the freeing of hostages in Gaza were slashed or defaced at or near several museums

Hate speech, hate mail, vandalism, and disruptions **reported by participating European Jewish museums** includes:

- one institution had been receiving pro-Palestinian (anti-Israel) hate mail even before October 7, sufficient to have initiated a police investigation
- antisemitic hate speech was found on the feedback walls in exhibitions, as well as in mail and social media
- incidents of physical threat during demonstrations
- protestors posted antisemitic stereotypes related to the Shoah
- one museum director enumerated several troubling incidents and multiple criminal complaints in late 2023 and early 2024, including a physical threat directed to staff by mail
- swastikas and antisemitic stickers were placed on posters and signs outside one museum
- antisemitic inscriptions were found on a museum wall and bannister
- protestors wrote that one museum should close because of "what the Jews are doing in Gaza"
- Staff at POLIN-National Museum of the History of Polish Jews evacuated approximately 800 people, and another 1,000 people could not enter the building when there was a bomb threat during the Night of Museums. The police report indicated that three bombs had been planted; fortunately, the alarm turned



# IMPRESSIONS & ANECDOTES

out to be false.

- A director was silenced by pro-Palestinian protestors during her reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in an event at Berlin's National Gallery for Contemporary Art Hamburger Bahnhof.
- A public official responsible for tourism and promotion suggested to a museum's director that, due to the situation in the Middle East, it might not be the right time to promote the institution as one of the city's "must see" attractions.

Only 19% of participants (eight, or less than one out of five) reported no antisemitic or hostile incidents at their sites during the focal period. One of them, a director from the American Midwest, wrote that, while their community had experienced disturbing incidents, their organization had not – but, even so, recent history has spurred them to look more closely at their future direction and ask to what extent they should expand their purview in response to current events to better serve their region.

## Damaged Partnerships

### In Europe ...

- there have been "unsubscriptions" and a general sense of cancellation by press, other cultural institutions, curators, and schools
- a school collaborating with one museum withdrew from a launch event accompanying a joint educational project
- several museums discussed frequent cancellation of school visits
- an artist who had agreed to collaborate on a forthcoming exhibition reneged after October 7
- various artists canceled collaborations on one or more projects at another museum
- several contractors have not wanted to be associated with their local museum
- to maintain a lower profile given general security concerns, one museum decided not to hold opening events for the last three cities on its traveling exhibition's eight-stop tour

### In the United States ...

- at one museum, approximately 15 school groups (about 1102 students) and 200 individuals cancelled visits after October 7

# IMPRESSIONS & ANECDOTES

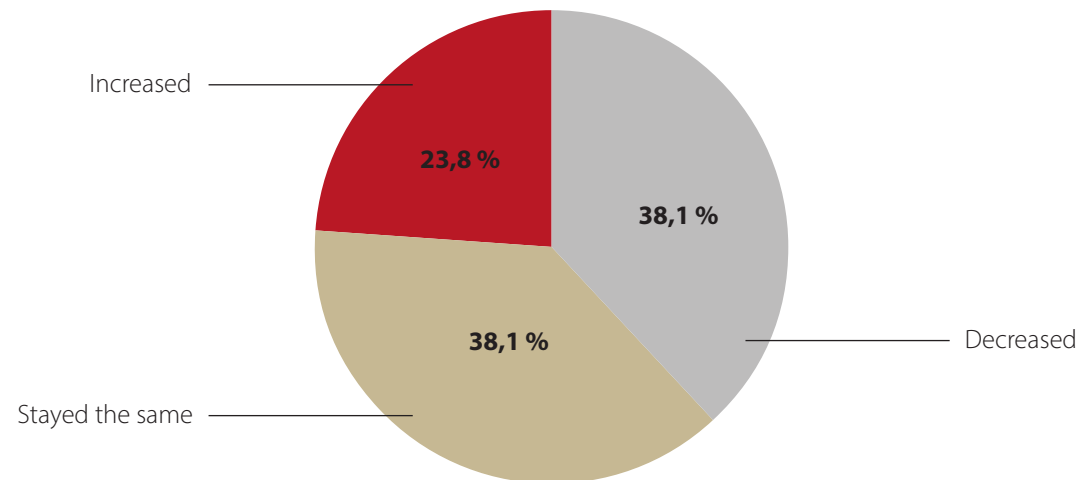
- another reported at least five instances of an artist, private event client, or school group cancelling their participation because of the museum's identity as a Jewish cultural center.
- out of safety concerns, one museum did not move forward on a potential program with a community organization
- because of heightened sensitivities in the community post-October 7, another cultural institution encountered protests and impediments on a civic-minded exhibition created in partnership with other ethnic-specific museums in their vicinity

## Changes to Visitor Landscape

Statistics from our sample revealed a 38% decrease in visitation overall, a 24% increase, and a steady state of approximately 39%.

Where there were decreases, museum directors most frequently posited as reasons a fear around security (e.g., potential demonstrations or terrorist attacks at or near the sites) and a fear of appearing to take sides in the complicated Middle East conflict. Representatives from Europe also attributed the negative change to a significant drop in tourism from Israel and/or the United States.

### Changes in Number of Museum Visitors since October 7, 2023



# IMPRESSIONS & ANECDOTES

## In the United States ...

- Although political tensions and practical concerns continued throughout, museums reported fewer instances of decreased visitation and many more increases. One museum had increased its open hours and program schedule; others believed that visitors were drawn by a new permanent exhibition or compelling temporary ones.
- One director remarked that while half the museum's audience seemed too nervous to associate Jewishly (i.e., be publicly Jewish) at this time, the balance seemed more eager to visit than ever before.
- Another reported that, despite a few cancellations, there was a huge demand from schools for educational programming and resources; that the museum had become an important and safe space for educators and students to learn about antisemitism and to gain tools to combat it in their schools and communities.
- Two respondents proposed that the desire for new learning in this moment was an incentive, as was a desire (among Jewish visitors) to feel solidarity and communion at these institutions.

## In Europe ...

- Twelve of the twenty-two European museums reported a decline in visitor numbers, again pointing to visitor apprehensions about security, absence of tourist groups, and concerns over suggesting a political allegiance.
- The three museums that reported an increase in visitor numbers attributed it to particular exhibitions, changes in school curriculum, and visitors' desire to learn more about Judaism and the history of Israel-Palestine.

# MOST PRESSING NEEDS

American and European museum directors were essentially unanimous in their statements of needs and problems since October 7. These operational challenges fall under the principal categories of security, communications, training, and finances.

## **Security**

Nine European directors and four American ones identified security as their primary concern, although one U.S. director noted that these measures would be in response to largely “perceived” threats of violence.

Previous question summaries above refer to a variety of hostile incidents, manifestations, and encounters. In addition, frequent demonstrations, including ones devolving to violence and/or arrests, have taken place in many of the museums’ immediate or nearby communities, in public spaces and on university campuses, and these have increased anxiety on the part of museum staff and visitors. One European museum reported a close-range, October 7-related shooting at a university nearby.

## **Communications**

Numerous respondents wrote about the challenging communications environment. Directors have had to navigate difficult conversations with staff and board (including different political opinions among these bodies), with the press, and with the general public. One director reported having to manage different audiences who have wanted to use museum spaces to meet their own political priorities.

Museum administrators have needed to develop new policies and positions – how to deal with unruly visitors; how to respond to accusations of bias; new rules about sponsorships and about participation in protests; decisions whether or not to sign on to various documents or petitions; the rapid crafting of statements in response to media demands – all skewing the amount of time spent on internal and external communications in contrast to direct public service and curatorial work.

# MOST PRESSING NEEDS

## Training

Both Americans and Europeans agreed on the urgent need for staff training:

**(1)** to better equip museum personnel to respond responsibly and sensitively to questions posed by the public and the press - about Judaism, Israel, the Holocaust, contemporary antisemitism, and numerous other topics (or to explain, where appropriate, that these subjects are not areas of expertise for the particular cultural institution), and

**(2)** in some instances, to acquire skills in conflict management and resolution, or information about appropriate local resources for same, when issues become pressing or heated in and around their museums.

**(3)** for help in repairing disrupted relationships, both internally and externally.

These first three challenges clearly impact the fourth, i.e., finances.

## **(4) Finances**

Institutional budgets have been affected to varying extents since October 7, a result of reduced visitor admissions revenue, where admissions are charged; significant costs to hire additional security personnel and to introduce new or augment existing security equipment (at one American museum, the security budget tripled on October 8 and now constitutes 15% of the overall budget); and because the climate for fundraising has been affected by world events. At the time of completing the survey, the directors at one U.S. and one European museum agreed that this was an inappropriate moment to raise funds, and they both anticipated a shift in donor priorities as the war continues.

# CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our survey's final question gave participants the opportunity to make broad statements about Jewish museums that might be meaningful to funders, press, or stakeholders. You will find a selection of those responses as an appendix on the next pages. But the thoughts of one museum director from the U.S. combined the variously somber, idealistic, and determined spirits of colleagues.

The director reported that there had not been a single working day since October 7th that was not impacted by the war, increased antisemitism, or public perceptions of the situation – but that, still, those associated with the museum remain committed to mission and continue to cling to hope.

This “hope” (unspecified) may have been shorthand for peace in the Middle East, for a lessening of anti-Jewish thoughts and actions, or for a return to the sense of workplace normalcy that existed prior to last autumn. Perhaps all three.

As the previous section of this report reveals, our institutions reached consensus on four significant post-October 7 needs in common. Continued support from colleagues, boards, and museum friends should ameliorate these issues to a degree. However, to address all four needs, relating to security, communications, training, and finances, fully, we must turn to friends and partners in the broader funding community.

In doing so, we will strengthen our capacities to carry out our respective missions -- while also healing relationships, internally and externally, and reestablishing our museums as safe, welcoming, and politically neutral sites of expertise and excellence.

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Statements from seven American Jewish museum directors and one museum-goer:

"Museums are trusted resources and spaces - they are democratic, pluralistic institutions with unique abilities to foster engagement and dialogue – and should be allowed to function that way without fear of repercussion."

Anonymous

"Now, more than any time since WWII, it is crucial for Jewish museums to live and thrive, to tell our stories and educate new generations."

Susan Gladstone Pasternack, Jewish Museum of Florida-FIU

"In America, no one should feel like a stranger in a strange land. Our museum encourages understanding and appreciation for identity, diversity, and acceptance."

Kenneth Hoffman, Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience

"Jewish museums are more essential than ever before in providing a welcoming environment in which visitors of all backgrounds can explore Jewish history, culture, and values to strengthen mutual understanding, empathy, and action to heal our society and our world."

Jean Bloch Rosensaft, Heller Museum, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

And from a museum visitor: „The messaging and hope you have been putting out is so needed right now in this polarized world."

courtesy Laura Mandel, Jewish Arts Collaborative

„By telling complex stories that defy stereotypes, creating space for community members to gather, and providing access to arts for study and enjoyment, Jewish museums are supporting Jewish life and identity and combating antisemitism. We admire and understand directing support to Israel in this moment, and simultaneously recognize the need to support our local Jewish institutions – perhaps more than ever – to care for our communities here at home."

Hannah Weisman, Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life

"We are in a time period that is bringing challenges we had hoped we would not see. It is incumbent upon us to document the true history of these times."

Anonymous

"Jewish museums and cultural organizations are central to a vibrant Jewish future in the United States. They are spaces for learning, dialogue, and exploration. They build Jewish identity and foster understanding across cultures. They are important institutions in the battle against antisemitism. Jewish cultural organizations need support now as never before."

Susan Bronson, Yiddish Book Center

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Statements from eight European Jewish museum directors:

"Now, perhaps even more than ever, it's of vital importance to promote and strengthen a tolerant and respectful intercultural and interreligious dialogue, to reinforce our endeavours of building bridges among the nations and fight against any form of discrimination, and to protect historical facts and cultural heritage."

Anonymous

"Jewish museums around the world are primarily cultural institutions that care about Jewish history and culture. I believe that they have always strived to promote understanding and respect for other nations, ethnic groups and cultures."

Pavla Niklova, Jewish Museum in Prague

"The need for education and knowledge is more important than ever in the face of historical relativism and outright Holocaust denial. The cancelling culture that we have been witnessing is therefore highly problematic and disturbing."

Janus Møller Jensen, The Danish Jewish Museum

"Jewish museums have always been relevant and remain so today. Our role and focus change over time. Education, building understanding and bridges, are becoming increasingly important."

Lisbeth Bilvoet, Jewish Cultural Quarter Amsterdam

"Museums are key institutions in times of crisis and must offer more sustainable programs for schools. School outreach programs with especially participatory programs are sustainable and most effective."

Daniela F. Eisenstein, Jewish Museum Franconia

"It is definitely the wrong time to make any funding cuts to learning programmes in museums and to political education programmes in general. With so many threats to democracy the world over, there need to be programmes and projects for children and also adults to learn democratic competence."

Anonymous

"The massacres of October 7th went along with an explosion of antisemitic incidents in Europe and the U.S., mostly from left wing activist and Islamic groups. At the same time, right wing populism is on the rise in all Western societies. Both developments have led to an increasing isolation of Jewish museums and Jewish organizations from their surroundings. It is becoming more difficult and yet more important for Jewish museums to remain open and inclusive social spaces that keep on building bridges with other minorities in society."

Mirjam Wenzel, Jewish Museum Frankfurt



# SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



## European Countries Represented

Austria / Belgium / Czechia / Denmark / Estonia / Germany / Greece / Italy / Netherlands / Moldova / Poland / Slovakia / Slovenia / Switzerland / Turkey / Ukraine

## Participating Museums

Center of Jewish Cultural Heritage Synagogue Maribor (SI) / Danish Jewish Museum (DK) / Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute (PL) / Estonian Jewish Museum (EE) / Galicia Jewish Museum (PL) / Jewish Community Museum Bratislava (SK) / Jewish Cultural Quarter Amsterdam (NL) / Jewish Memory and Holocaust in Ukraine Museum (UA) / Jewish Museum Belgium (BE) / Jewish Museum Berlin (DE) / Jewish Museum Franconia (DE) / Jewish Museum Frankfurt (DE) / Jewish Museum of Greece (EL) / Jewish Museum Munich (DE) / Jewish Museum in Prague (CZ) / Jewish Museum of Rome (IT) / Jewish Museum of Switzerland (CH) / Jewish Museum of Turkey (TR) / Jewish Museum Vienna (AT) / Jewish Museum Westphalia (DE) / Museum of the Jewish History of the Republic Moldova (MD) / POLIN Museum of History of Polish Jews (PL)

# SURVEY PARTICIPANTS



## **U.S. States Represented**

California / Florida / Georgia / Illinois / Louisiana / Massachusetts / Minnesota / New York / North Carolina / Ohio / Oklahoma / Oregon / Pennsylvania / Washington / Wisconsin

## **Participating Museums**

Bernard Museum, Temple Emanu-El (NY) / The Breman (GA) / Columbus Jewish Historical Society (OH) / Heller Museum, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (NY) / Holocaust Museum LA (CA) / Illinois Holocaust Museum (IL) / Jewish Arts Collaborative (MA) / Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest (MN) / Jewish Museum of Florida-FIU (FL) / Jewish Museum Milwaukee (WI) / Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life (CA) / Museum of Jewish Heritage (NY) / Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience (LA) / North Carolina Museum of Art (NC) / Oregon Jewish Museum and Center for Holocaust Education (OR) / Sherwin Miller Museum of Jewish Art (OK) / Skirball Cultural Center (CA) / Washington State Jewish Historical Society (WA) / Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History (PA) / Yiddish Book Center (MA)