The Memory of the Holocaust in Poland and Ukraine: Exhibitions at the Galicia Jewish Museum

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From the point of view of Jewish history, the territory of historic Galicia is an extraordinary place. There is no other area where traces of Jewish life and traces of the Holocaust exist next to each other in so visible way. There is no place in Europe apart from Poland and Ukraine where the feeling of emptiness caused by the Holocaust is so tangible. Nowhere else are traces of destruction so permanently present—just as there are no other lands in Europe where Jewish life flourished to the extent it did here. This land, over centuries a centre of Jewish life, became the core area of annihilation during the Holocaust— the epicentre of the Holocaust.

The political and social reality which followed the Second World War caused these physical remains to be forgotten for many years. In place of remembrance a lack of memory appeared and this shared amnesia sanctioned further mass devastation of the fragments of that broken world which remained. This devastation created a situation in which Jewish cemeteries covered with concrete were converted into bus stations and matsevot with still visible names inscriptions of those who died became a cheap and popular building material for new inhabitants. In towns without Jews, synagogues have been transformed into schools, cinemas and fire stations. These buildings, which not so long ago served Jewish communities, have become enigmatic artefacts—obscure remains of a world that once existed.

How was this possible? How is the memory of this lost Jewish world utilised in Poland and Ukraine today? What is remembered, how is it remembered, why is it remembered, and at the same time, what is still there that is not remembered? Who is responsible for the past memories and why and how should we remember?

Within the framework of its activities, the Galicia Jewish Museum attempts to raise these burning questions and to look for answers. ‘Traces of Memories’ – the museum’s permanent exhibition is concentrated on the traces of Jewish heritage and on memories of the heritage of historic Western Galicia – today within Polish borders. Its authors, Chris Schwartz and Professor Jonathan Webber, travelled for nearly 15 years around South-East Poland documenting hundreds of places connected to the culture and history of Galician Jews. The exhibition is the heart of the Galicia Jewish Museum and the core point for many cultural, educational and exhibition projects.

One of these projects, realised in 2010, was the exhibition: ‘A City not Forgotten. Memories of Jewish Lwów and the Holocaust’. The exhibition was based on memories from only one city – Lviv. When the Second World War broke out, the Jewish community in Lviv was estimated to number over hundred thousand people, one third of the city’s population. At its liberation fewer than a thousand Jews had survived. In the overcrowded ghetto they experienced hunger, disease, escapes, deportations, concentration camps and problem of seeking shelter outside the ghetto. They witnessed the Holocaust, which took their families, friends and their whole world. The exhibition ‘A City not Forgotten …’ presented stories of Lviv’s Jews. By exploring the lives of individual people born and raised in Lviv, we provided an opportunity to encounter one of the largest cities of pre-war Poland, full of life, an important and modern centre of culture and art. Multicultural and multinational Lviv was a city where not only Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, but also Germans and Armenians lived next...
to each other for many centuries. Among Lviv’s Jews there were groups of very religious and Orthodox, but there also emerged assimilated Jews who played a leading role in political, economic, social and cultural life of the city.

Through this exhibition the Galicia Jewish Museum attempted to investigate and present how, after many years, the image of their home town exists in memories of those who survived the Holocaust. Based on the memories of more than forty survivors, we created a picture of a city which—despite the fact it was the scene of terrible events—stayed in hearts of its former dwellers forever.

In 2013 the Galicia Jewish Museum commenced work on another project whose main theme is the small Galician town of Śniatyn. Before the war the town was inhabited by Ukrainians, Poles and Jews. On the basis of a set of photos taken by a local photographer, Ignacy Schmitzler, historic memories and documents, an exhibition is being created which investigates the complex relationship between the citizens of this town located in the south-eastern periphery of the Polish Second Republic.

At the same time the Galicia Jewish Museum has also prepared an exhibition ‘All the paths…..’ Its title comes from the poem written by the major Jewish poet, Rajza Zychlińska, ‘And God Covered his Face’ published shortly after the Second World War, which contains the line ‘All the paths led to the death…’ These words carry a real truth in relation to the prewar Jewish population of 3.3 million Polish Jews of whom only ten per cent survived the Holocaust. Using this line as a jumping-off point, the Galicia Jewish Museum tried to show the path not to death but rather to salvation.

When dealing with the history of survivors, we often ask the question: what determined that they survived? Did it depend on bravery, particular personal attributes, a series of certain events, luck, chance? Perhaps it depended on all of them or perhaps one of those factors was the most important? Where to seek answers to these questions? By investigating the statements of survivors and witnesses? Digging deep into the history of the Holocaust, studying documents and publications? Asking historians, sociologists, psychologists?

The history of the Holocaust is not only the history of those who died, but also of those who survived. Through the exhibition ‘All the paths…..’ the museum—using the cases of several Jews whose roots were in prewar Galicia and who survived the Holocaust—made an effort to present different ways of surviving and illustrate dramatic decisions and the danger which every of those persons had to face. Along with those who died, those who survived are also victims of the inconceivable crime that was the Holocaust. ‘All the paths…..’ was therefore an attempt to recall the life stories of both groups, through the memories of witnesses.

The exhibitions that the Galicia Jewish Museum do not focus only on themes connected to the history of western Galicia. In 2014 the Museum will open an exhibition exploring the traces of the Jewish heritage preserved in territories of current Western Ukraine. Through colour photographs taken by prof. Jason Francisco and the accompanying texts, the exhibition will try to analyze the state of memories of Jewish past in this region, asking at the same time questions related to ongoing changes in Ukraine and developments in Ukrainian-Jewish relations.

In addition to its exhibitions, the Galicia Jewish Museum conducts a number of other activities related to the memories of the Holocaust in Ukraine. The most important such project is a seven-day seminar for teachers from Poland and Ukraine entitled ‘Teaching the Holocaust in Context.’ Apart from transferring knowledge, the seminar is an important opportunity for teachers from Poland and Ukraine to exchange experiences and contacts and, as a result, to build a close working partnership not only on issues related to the past but also to the building of tolerant and open societies.
All these projects are designed not only to present the history of a certain region but primarily they try to provoke us into a discussion about to whom the memory about Jewish heritage in historic Galicia belongs: is it solely a part of Jewish history? or does it perhaps have a wider context – the history of all of us, the past, present and future citizens of Central and Eastern Europe.