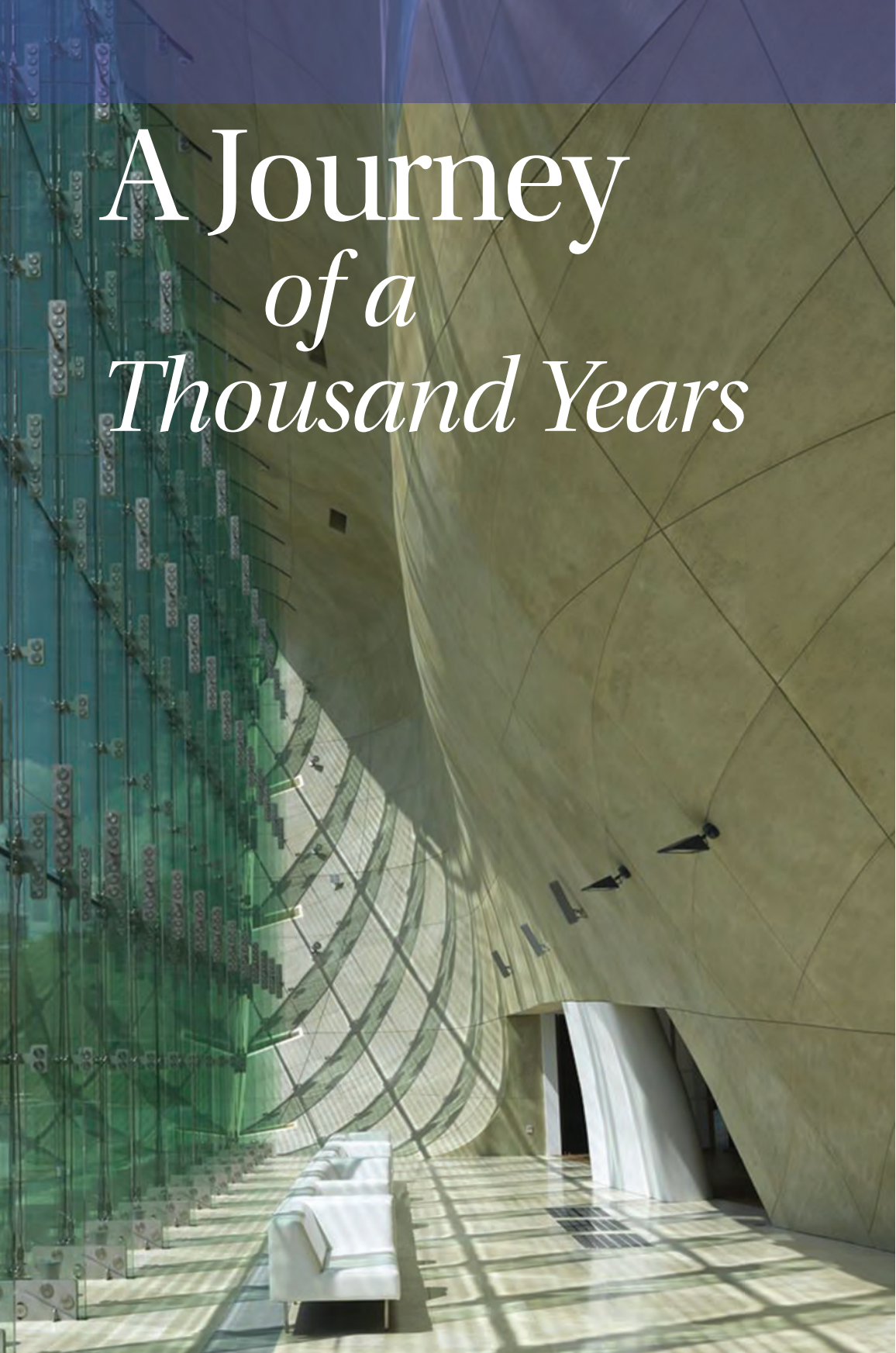






PHOTOS COURTESY OF M. STAROWIEYSKA AND D. GOLIK
POLIN MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF POLISH JEWS



A Journey *of a Thousand Years*

It is a deeply complicated story. Its every aspect presents grounds for passionate debate, for applause and anger, for wonder and tears; it is a theatre of history. It is rare for a museum to elicit such diverse emotions, yet manage to tell a narrative that succeeds in being both comprehensive and selective in its rendering of the story of a people whose lives were intertwined with another history that was central to their own.

It is the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Even its location is fraught: situated in the heart of the former Warsaw Ghetto, destroyed by the Germans in 1943, facing Nathan Rapoport's marble and bronze Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in a city that was itself totally demolished by the Nazis. This is a place that had once been at the heart of European Jewish culture – Jews were about a third of the population of the city – and just a short distance from the *Umschlagplatz*, the deportation point for the last 300,000 Jews to the death camps. During World War II, there were more people killed in Warsaw alone (about 600,000) than in France or the UK.

Polin is a museum of life, not death. “A theatre of history in seven acts, with a prologue and an epilogue,” ethnologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains. A small, slender woman of about seventy, she is the program director of the Core Exhibition, the only Canadian on the large team of scholars, curators, designers, and filmmakers from all over the world. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett views this museum as the experience of a lifetime, not only because of what she believes has been achieved here, but also because her parents, indeed her whole family going back generations, were both Polish and Jewish.



The point she and the museum want to make is that Jews had not been a people apart, but an essential element of Polish life. Poles and Jews had been inseparable for a thousand years.

The huge glass, copper, and concrete building, designed by Finland's Rainer Mahlamäki, is a formidable statement rather than an inviting presence on this cold, windy day in Warsaw.



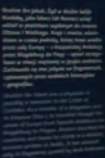
But once we enter, the light through the glass illuminates the main hall, draws us to the grand staircase, and down to the prologue: the legendary forest where Jewish travellers thought they heard a voice inviting them to stay.

Then you begin to wander through the galleries – the Middle Ages, the years of tolerant monarchs, the grand Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the golden age of Jewish culture,

• إبراهيم بن يعقوب (القرن العاشر)

Abraham ben Jakob, X w.

Abraham Ibn Yehuda
with courtesy

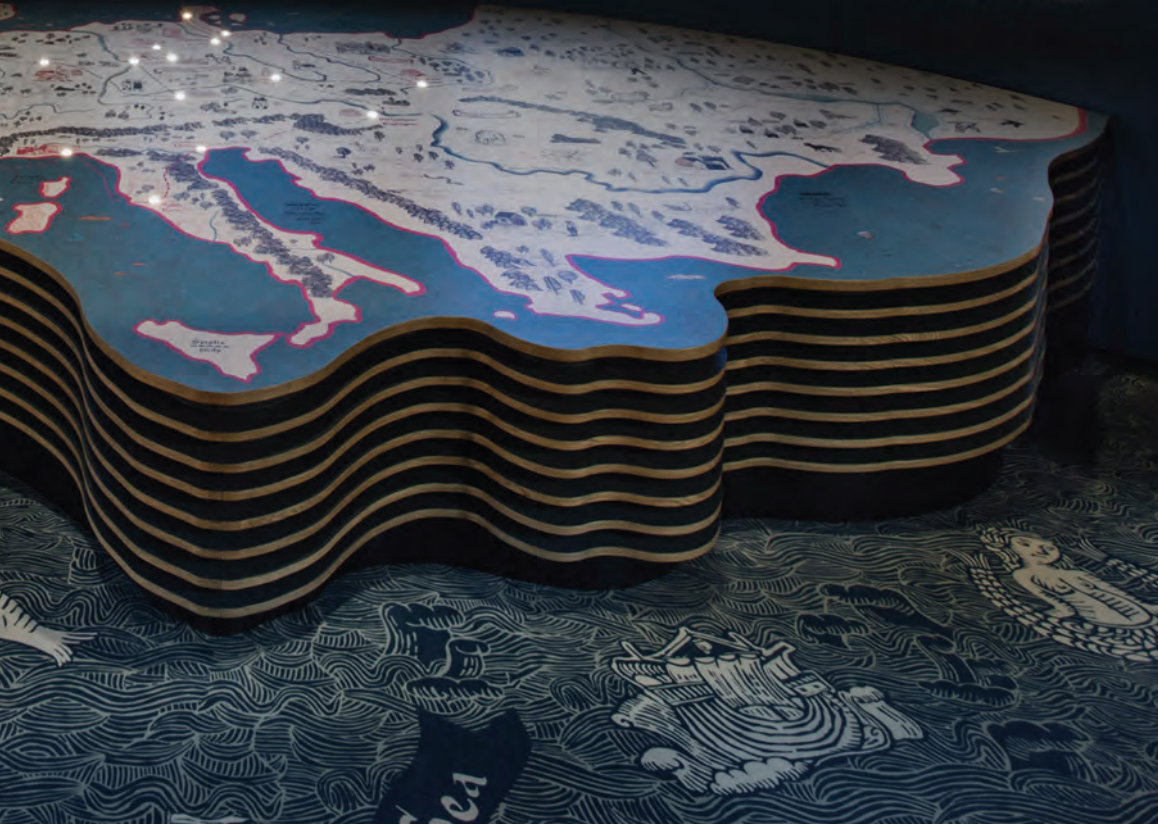


Kraków Krakov
kraj Mieszka Land of M

Wielkim dla... do Szczyrków. Mieszkańcy wczoraj
...chcą, żeby chętniej, którzy posiadają tam
...wizna, że do miasta, żeby
...mieszkańcy wyrażają
...nieda nigdy nie grzeje. Nigdy nie
...sposób mieszkańcom Szczyrków

Ibrahim bin Jakub napisał o kraju Mieszka: „Obfituje w żywność, miodo, miód i rolę. Pobierane przez niego podatki stanowią ówzdnaki handlowe. Kdą one na żółd jego picburów. Ma on trzy tysiące pancernych ... daje on tym mżom odzież, konie, broni i wszystko, czego potrzebują. A gdy jednemu z nich urodzi się dziecko, on każe mu wypłacić żold od chwili urodzenia, czy będzie płci męskiej, czy żeńskiej”.

About Mieszk's realm – Poland – Ibrahim
It abounds in food, meat, honey, and arable land
there are based on merchants' weights. They are
the king's retainers. He has three thousand archers
he provides them with everything they need: clothing
and weapons. And if a child is born to one of his
payment to be made to him from the moment
whether the child is male or female."





the growth of the populations, the dramatic “Corridor of Fire,” or the Khmelnytsky Uprising, the wars, the killings, the seventeenth-century pogroms ... all deftly handled, yet recalling the terrible atrocities that occurred in this period. I kept thinking about my art collector friend Murray Frum, for whom even the mention of Poland was troubling. He had been here once – Kielce, I think, and had no intention of returning. His



daughter Linda, however, visited the museum and was awed by the experience.

The visitor then goes on to the town – a re-creation of the boisterous Jewish life in the Commonwealth – a history told through individual stories that engage you in the personal lives of the merchants, the villagers, the brewers, the printers, the rich and the poor who inhabited the “Jewish town,”



A wooden structure that was used to hold the body of a person who was killed in a battle. It is made of wood and has a simple, rectangular design.









conjured here in a remarkably lifelike way. There is a fantastic reconstruction of the painted synagogue of Gwozdziec, as painstakingly re-created as the furniture and ornaments of the Castle in Warsaw's Old Town, which was looted, then dynamited when the city was razed.

The disappearance of the Commonwealth into the Russian, Austrian, and Prussian empires ends the eighteenth century and leads us into the Jewish Enlightenment and the rise of Hasidism led by charismatic rabbis – the rendering of a small yeshiva where visitors can join students and listen. But there are new pogroms even as the question of modern Yiddish or Hebrew culture is debated and even as the First World War threatens.

This is not a museum of artifacts – indeed I doubt if many objects, other than broken tombstones and whatever Hitler's men carried off for what was to be “the museum of a vanished people,” remained. There is, however, through models and lifelike drawing, tangible

ב'י'ערט דעם 1-טן מאי. דעמאָנסטריט קעגן דעם אָרדענונג פון
עקספּלואַטאַציע, פאַר דער באַפֿרייַונג פון אַרבעטער־קלאַס.

W DNIU 1 MAJA DEMONSTRUJECIE PRZECIWKO USTROJOWI
WYZYSKU I DLA WYZWOLENIA KLASY ROBOTNICZEJ!"
For emancipation against the State

"ON THE 1ST OF MAY, DEMONSTRATE AGAINST
THE SYSTEM OF EXPLOITATION AND FOR
THE LIBERATION OF THE WORKING CLASS!"
Was for appeal by the Bund

מיין פאַרערן
אומזיכערע
באלד-אין אונזער שטח
אין דער פּוּלעק שפּראַך

מיין פאַרערן
אומזיכערע
אריסטאָקראַטע

On May 1st, 1917, a large demonstration took place in New York City, organized by the Bund. The demonstration was held in support of the Russian Revolution and against the system of exploitation and for the liberation of the working class. The demonstration was held in the city of New York, and it was a very successful one. The demonstration was held in the city of New York, and it was a very successful one.



אין דער פּוּלעק שפּראַך
אומזיכערע
אריסטאָקראַטע
אין דער פּוּלעק שפּראַך
אומזיכערע
אריסטאָקראַטע



„Kobieta żydowska żąda swego przedstawicielstwa, które jej się przynależy ... Przyznano nam prawo wybierania, a tym samym reprezentowania. Nie twierdzimy bynajmniej, że ... istnieją sprawy czysto kobiece – domagamy się głosu decydującego we wszystkich sprawach”.

Pauline Appapouh, „Nasze Przeglądy”, 1928

“A Jewish woman demands her representation, which she should be granted ... We were given the right to vote and therefore to representation. Moreover, we are not concerned only with purely women's issues: we demand a decisive voice in all the issues”.

Pauline Appapouh, „Our Review”, 1928





evidence of creativity – the building of the Great Synagogue of Tlomackie, journals of every description, books, passionate engagement with local politics, Zionist organizations and cultural associations. Still, as I read the contemporary stories, I was haunted by the memories of Pinchas Gutter, a Holocaust survivor whose childhood was cruelly interrupted by the 1939 German invasion and his family’s “escape” to the Warsaw



Ghetto. As the Holocaust years rolled by, I kept thinking of that little boy and what he witnessed of the German murder machine, and no amount of brave effort by the museum's founders could persuade me to see the events as they unfolded. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explained the plan: "We asked visitors to forget what they already knew and put themselves in the shoes of those who knew little about what



was about to happen.” The idea is consistent with the rest of the museum: experience what you see through the eyes of those who were there.

For me, though, remembering the stories and knowing that more than 3 million Polish Jews were murdered here, in Poland, that fewer than 10 percent of the Jewish population remained, made it almost impossible to go on to the final gallery of the postwar years. Yet, there was still the Kielce postwar pogrom, the desperate emigration, the blame for communism and then for anti-communism in 1968 when the government provided one-way tickets out of the country for Jews.



This museum is timely – it opened 25 years after the Iron Curtain was raised. Under the thick ice of communism, those east of the Iron Curtain had not dealt with the Shoah, the murder of their Jewish populations. Except for the immediate postwar execution of a relatively small number of collaborators, a complicit silence shrouded the 6 million dead, despite the fact that most of the extermination centres were here, east of the Oder-Neisse line, with the full knowledge of the population and, in some places, with their complicity.

The last time I was in Warsaw, I went to the Singer Festival – just one of the many annual festivals celebrating Jewish culture

Przedstawienie Konstytucji PRL, w szczególności
171, który brzmiał: „PRL zapewnia obywatelom
wolność słowa, druku, zgromadzeń, wieców,
pochodów i manifestacji”.
Zaprzestanie represji w stosunku do
studentów.

demand that:

We categorically disassociate ourselves from Zionism and Revisionism.

antisenitism and antisemitism

kratkog intelligenz] i jednolično
dijemno nametnut prastu prastu
strukturu i organizacionu unobli-
zovanje na ustrojstvo za stru-
kovne inženjerske škole. A mar-
šalica i Henrika Solgerna, 8. marca
1968. izasla iz mene na Univerzitetu
u Göttingenu. Brojajući stari-
bratstvo na univerzitetima do
stranaka i razlika studenata do
opozicije sa razlika Polaca. By objek-
tivno prevođen, objavljen program
na jeziku, iz takih studenata još nimalo
prastu prastu „gimnazijama“.

Students at Warsaw University organised a protest rally on 1 March 1968 in response to the expulsion of student activists Adam Michnik and Henryk Soljusz. A brutal assault on the rally by security forces led to further protests, as well as to student strikes and sit-ins throughout Poland. To discredit these calls for freedom, official propaganda immediately began to portray the student movement as a manipulation.

This circumstance gave rise to the misunderstood phrase "fight with Zionism" in response to these events.





in Poland. I was amazed to see period costumes, Yiddish books, imitation Jewish sweets, handmade figurines (one of them an old Jew clutching a money bag – a good-luck charm, I was informed), wildly joyful klezmer bands, and an imported Israeli singer to lead a “traditional” line dance through the fake-Jewish street.

“There are no Jews here,” my guide had said. “But we miss them.”

Stanislaw Krajewski, a teacher of logic and mathematics at the Institute of Philosophy, told me it was futile to search for logic in Poles’ desire to rediscover their missing Jewish selves. “The challenge we face is very simple. We have a choice between oblivion and remembrance. Can anyone have doubts about which is preferable?”

The Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews will go a long way towards remembrance. It may even show the way to a different, shared future. It may even help restore some of Pinchas Gutter’s happier childhood memories. He could, in some small way, reclaim his birthright.

ANNA PORTER is an author, journalist, and former book publisher. Her most recent books are *Buying a Better World: George Soros and Billionaire Philanthropy* and *The Ghosts of Europe: Journeys through Central Europe’s Troubled Past and Uncertain Future*. She has also been writing about Central Europe for *Maclean’s* and the *Globe and Mail*.



