

Legacy – Introduction

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

The Legacy gallery and this volume are the outcome of years of advocacy and resistance: advocacy to celebrate Jewish achievement and resistance to doing so within POLIN Museum's Core Exhibition. The team of scholars responsible for the Core Exhibition developed principles that would guide our presentation of the thousand-year history of Polish Jews. We considered not only historical, but also historiographic issues arising from the history of how this history has been written. With the help of Moshe Rosman, an outstanding scholar of the early modern history of Polish Jews, we formulated "metahistorical" principles, by which we mean ways of thinking about this history, that would inform the historical narrative.¹ We were committed to meeting the highest scholarly standards, to reflecting the best recent thinking about the history of Polish Jews, to taking a critical approach to past ways of writing about this history – and to avoiding an apologetic approach.

While showcasing distinguished Jews and their accomplishments is popular with the public and animates many Jewish museums around the world, this approach is not simply a matter of justified pride.² It is at bottom apologetic, that is, defensive. Buried within this preoccupation is a defense against critics, from the defense of Judaism in antiquity, as seen in *Contra Apionem* by Josephus, to seventeenth-century and early modern efforts to prove Jewish worthiness for emancipation, nineteenth-century attempts to answer the "Jewish question," however it was posed, and the idea that

¹ Moshe Rosman, "Categorically Jewish, distinctly Polish: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews and the new Polish-Jewish metahistory," *JSIJ (Jewish studies, an internet journal)* 10 (2012): 361–387, <http://www.biu.ac.il/JS/JSIJ/10-2012/Rosman.pdf>, accessed 7 September 2020.

² For a recent example, an entire museum dedicated to Jewish achievement, see World's Jewish Museum, an ambitious new project to be located in Tel Aviv. Its mission is to "attest to the significance of outstanding Jewish contributions and how they have shaped the path of humankind." <http://worldsjewishmuseum.com/>, accessed 8 September 2020.

Jewish achievement would offer a defense against antisemitism.³ However, antisemites have also found and continue to find in Jewish achievement handy “evidence” of ostensible Jewish world domination.⁴ Instead, POLIN Museum’s Core Exhibition would present a social and cultural history of Polish Jews in which all Polish Jews and not only the famous ones are agents of history. The heroes are also present, of course, but not by virtue of their prominence. Rather they appear where they play a role within the historical narrative. This approach did not sit well with those expecting much greater emphasis on the luminaries of Polish Jewish history and their contributions to Polish and world civilization. Many of them also wanted to see a greater emphasis on assimilated Polish Jews, especially those whose Jewish origins are generally unknown and would come as the greatest surprise.

As it became clear that the Core Exhibition was off limits, demand for a “Hall of Fame” intensified – from Polish Friends of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the POLIN Museum Council, our benefactors, and also from within POLIN Museum. It became apparent that we had to find a way to meet this sincere, deeply felt, and well-intentioned desire. We thought long and hard about what to do: where to locate a “Hall of Fame” and, paradoxically, how to create the Legacy gallery without creating a “Hall of Fame,” while still satisfying the demand for one. As those who have visited the Core Exhibition know, there is a large circulation area at its very center; visitors can enter and exit the exhibition and various galleries to and from this space. There were various proposals for this space – a “Hall of Fame” was one of them. As Chief Curator of the Core Exhibition, I found this proposal in violation of our historical approach, which has been highly praised for its intellectual coherence; our team of scholars were also opposed. Having managed to protect the historical narrative of the Core Exhibition from the demand to feature prominent Jews, we were not about to place a “Hall of Fame” at the very center of the Core Exhibition space and to fill it with a spectacular multimedia presentation of famous Polish Jews – especially since it would be the exit experience, as it would follow the last historical gallery, which deals with the complicated history of Jews in postwar Poland.⁵

Where then to locate this presentation? After considering various possibilities, we found the perfect place: a beautiful space on the main floor of POLIN Museum, overlooking the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes. This is a ceremonial space, not a gallery in the conventional sense of the word – it is neither a white cube, nor a black box. It is rather an architectural space, with natural light, whose unique character needed to be respected, but also this is a prime space for meetings and small events – a multipurpose space. Only after our curatorial team had worked on the concept for this installation during many meetings and heated discussions, only after extensive research and consultation with colleagues, did we formulate questions and criteria for who to include in the Legacy gallery. After considering various design proposals, we decided to create an installation, rather than an exhibition, and to organize a competition for an artistic interpretation of the Legacy concept. The winner of the competition was Hubert Czerepok’s “Tree of Life.” The next step was to select a designer for the

³ See Jeremy Cohen and Richard I. Cohen, eds., *The Jewish contribution to civilization: Reassessing an idea* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).

⁴ See Esther Webman, ed., *The global impact of the “Protocols of the elders of Zion”: A century-old myth* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

⁵ Finally, the decision was taken to create an epilogue to the Core Exhibition in this space. The epilogue would expand the geography of the history of Polish Jews beyond Poland to the many places in the world where they made their new homes, the legacy they took with them, and their connection to Poland today.

installation. Joanna Fikus, head of POLIN Museum's Exhibition Department, suggested we approach Arnaud Dechelle, who had worked with us on the Core Exhibition when he was part of the Event Communications design team. He met our requirements perfectly with his characteristic intelligence, creativity, and minimalism.

The most daunting challenge was coming up with a concept that would showcase distinguished Polish Jews and their achievements in an intellectually responsible way. Those who most wanted the "Hall of Fame" were most concerned with the list. Who would be included, how many, and according to which criteria? They circulated lists of hundreds of names and were eager to include as many of them as possible. In our brief for this space, we explained that the Core Exhibition includes hundreds of individuals, many of them on the circulated lists and others not. Some of them are presented in focused displays, for example, Rabbi Moses Isserles, the Vilna Gaon, the Ba'al Shem Tov, Menahem Mendel Lefin, Maurycy Gottlieb, Yitskhok Leybush Peretz, Samuel Poznański, Rosa Luxemburg, Emanuel Ringelblum, Nathan Rapoport, and Alina Szapocznikow, among many others, and many more are woven into the historical narrative. Explaining that the task before us was to create a compelling visitor experience, we gradually whittled the selection down to the 26 that made the final cut – many more individuals would appear in this volume and online. However, we did not think of these individuals as forming a list, but rather a constellation – a group portrait. We wanted to shift the focus from the "list" to the lives and careers of these individuals in relation to the history of Polish Jews. Our goal was to engage visitors in that wider history, with these individuals as inspiring points of entry. However exceptional their achievements, they would also need to be representative of the diversity of Polish Jews and of the range of fields in which they were active.

In selecting individuals to be featured in the Legacy gallery, we wanted to avoid the trap of "Jew spotting," a common sport on the Internet and in innumerable published lists – a game of trivial pursuit. Did you know that Edgar G. Robinson or Kirk Douglas or Paul Muni or Billy Wilder or Paula Abdul, to mention only Hollywood stars, is Jewish? More important, why did identifying them as Jews matter, if at all? We also wanted to be sensitive to how individuals identified themselves and preferred to be identified by others. Many individuals of many origins make important contributions to the world regardless of their place of birth or religious or other identification. For many of them, these are very private matters, and they may object to anything but their achievements as the basis for honor – Nobel laureates are identified by field not by country or any other criterion. Some also fear that drawing attention to them as Jews, even positive attention, could work against them, relegating them and their achievements to an ethnic niche, or provoking antisemitism.

With these considerations in mind, we established criteria for who would be featured in the Legacy gallery and how they would be presented. We asked the following questions.

- Who is a Jew? Who is a Polish Jew? How do individuals identify themselves in relation to how others identify them, whether as Jewish or Polish? If they do not identify themselves as Jewish or "of Jewish origin," on what grounds would we include or exclude them? What about converts? Would the individual in question want to be identified as a Jew (and as a Polish Jew) and to be included in this presentation?
- Why does it matter? Assuming a case can be made for identifying an individual as a Jew (and as a Polish Jew), what is the relevance of such identifications for each individual and for the Legacy gallery more generally?

- Who is representative? Which individuals best represent the diversity of what it means to be a “Polish Jew” and the broad spectrum of fields in which they were active – from the eighteenth century to the present?
- How does the story of this individual illuminate the history of Polish Jews, and how does the history of Polish Jews illuminate this individual’s story?
- Who is distinguished? On what basis should “distinction” be determined?
- Should living individuals be included?

Our goal was not simply to select outstanding individuals, but to make a selection that would form a coherent whole, however kaleidoscopic it might be, and to raise questions, indeed the very questions that we asked ourselves and that the essays in this volume also pose. These are open questions, as is the selection. The 26 individuals featured in the Legacy gallery represent but one constellation. We hope even more will be nominated by our visitors and readers and included in an online supplement to the Legacy gallery.

The Legacy gallery, as a complement to the Core Exhibition, and this volume as a complement to the Legacy gallery, offers another way to engage with the history of Polish Jews. Hopefully those who experience the Legacy gallery will be inspired to revisit the Core Exhibition and rediscover some of these luminaries within the historical narrative presented there. Here, in the Legacy gallery, we wanted to offer a compelling visitor experience in an inspiring space and an opportunity to explore in greater depth the lives, careers, and achievements of the 26 individuals at interactive stations. Tamara Sztyma, co-curator of the Legacy gallery, undertook extensive research and curated the rich content for these beautifully designed stations.

This volume is intended to broaden the discussion of the participation of Polish Jews in a broad range of fields in ways not possible in the Legacy gallery itself. Not only do the essays present many more individuals, but also they set their lives and careers within the fields to which they made their major contributions. The essays also take up the questions that we posed when planning the Legacy gallery. The invitation to each author explained that while the Legacy gallery is dedicated to Polish Jews who distinguished themselves in their chosen fields, in Poland and on the world stage, our goal is to bring a critical perspective to what might otherwise be a “Hall of Fame” and Jewish apologetics. The essays should not only reflect on the achievements of Polish Jews in each field, but also consider the social and historical conditions that affected Jewish creativity in those fields in relation to the following questions:

- What were the barriers and what were the opportunities that Jews faced in the fields where they distinguished themselves – to what extent do these factors account for the large or small number of Polish Jews active or stellar in particular fields? While these individuals should be appreciated, we also welcome a critical perspective: why were some individuals highly esteemed in their time, but forgotten today, while others who were not acclaimed in their time are recognized as exceptional today?
- What were the factors in their lives, milieus, and identities that shaped the paths they followed, what they achieved, and the extent to which their Polish and Jewish beginnings are factors or even relevant? We will avoid treating Polish and Jewish “origins” or “roots” as an accident of birth, but also we will avoid giving undue emphasis to these aspects.

- What were the wider social, cultural, political, and economic developments that shaped their lives and careers and in which they played a vital role – the emergence of modern Jewish, Polish, and international social, political, and cultural movements, and scientific and economic fields?

The authors responded to this call in a variety of ways. Tamara Sztyrna and Jerzy Malinowski focus on a field of activity, the art world and art history, and the role of Polish Jewish artists in the creation of modern art in Jewish, Polish, and international contexts, while J. Hoberman traces the outsize role of Polish Jews in the development of the film industry, both Jewish and Polish, as well as in Hollywood. Stanisław Krajewski takes as his starting point a uniquely Jewish phenomenon, Judaism. After considering the concept of religious heritage and Jewish religious heritage, he focuses on Polish Jewish religious heritage, which he defines as deriving from Polish Jews, not others. Antony Polonsky explores the contributions of Polish Jews to the creation of modern Jewish studies and to the study of Polish Jews, as well as to the humanities more generally. In his essay on the role of Polish Jews in the economy and business, Polonsky takes a long historical perspective and considers both the barriers that Polish Jews had to overcome and the opportunities that they seized, as well as how they were able to take advantage of their circumstances.

Others ask why some individuals are singled out for distinction while others, who are equally talented, are not. Halina Goldberg tackles this question in the field of music, noting a national bias in how the history of music is written: Polish Jews were often excluded from the Polish musical “canon” because they and the music they composed were not considered Polish, strictly defined, even though they were Polish citizens and may have identified more as Polish than Jewish. Moreover, she argues, the music of Polish Jews should rightly be considered part of the history of Polish music. Katrin Steffen in her essay on the achievements of Polish Jewish scientists also addresses this question, taking as her starting point the “unofficial canon” of Polish Nobel laureates, which generally omits Polish Jewish Nobel laureates, although, as noted above, the Nobel Prize identifies laureates by field only, while the public creates its own categories based on country, gender, and other criteria. Steffen also explores why Polish Jews have been concentrated and have made outstanding contributions in particular fields and looks for answers in the history of science and how that history has been written.

Several authors focus on the question of identity – how particular luminaries identified themselves and were identified by others as revealed in their lives, careers, and work. Karolina Szymaniak and Piotr Paziński consider what they call the “paradoxes” of identity arising from the multicultural and multilingual worlds in which Polish Jews lived and wrote – paradoxes that are reflected in their self-understanding and literary creativity. Edna Nahshon, in her essay on the role of Polish Jews in the world of theatre in Poland and Israel, sees identity as holding the key to the career choices made by four figures: Arnold Szyfman, who identified first and foremost as Polish; Ida Kamińska, who dedicated her life to Yiddish theatre; Yitskhok Nozik, who brought the cabaret tradition from Poland to Israel; and Giora Godik, son of a popular Yiddish actor, who became a highly successful impresario, best remembered for the Broadway productions that he brought to the Israeli stage.

James Loeffler, in his essay on Jewish visionaries, takes up the utopian impulse, focusing on Jan Bloch, Rosa Luxemburg, and Raphael Lemkin, their complex relationship to their Jewish backgrounds, and the very different ways they imagined a better world and ways to bring it about. The attraction of Polish Jews to revolution-

ary movements is the subject of Michał Trębacz's essay, which contrasts the lives and careers of Sonia Nowogródzka, a socialist, Józef Lewartowski, a communist, and Yitshak Cukierman, a Zionist. All of them were imprisoned in the Warsaw ghetto, where Cukierman played an important role in the Warsaw ghetto uprising.

While the Legacy gallery offers a group portrait, based on 26 individuals, this volume sets them and their achievements within their fields of activity, which we have organized in four sections: Words and Ideas (Literature, Religion, Scholarship), Revolution and Utopia (Radicalism, Visionaries), Enterprise and Innovation (Economy, Science), and Sound, Gesture, Image (Music, Theatre, Cinema, Art). The volume concludes with Moshe Rosman's Epilogue, which encourages readers to consider the lives and careers of those featured in the Legacy gallery in light of an open question: What is the relationship between Jewish culture and Polish culture, but more generally, between Jews and Poland? Taken as whole, these essays succeed in just the ways we had intended. They take a critical approach to the task and question the very premise of this exercise. In the process, distinguished Polish Jews and their achievements emerge, but not as a "Hall of Fame." Rather, the Legacy gallery and this volume offer a provocation and an invitation to think differently about the history of Polish Jews – and not only about the most famous ones.