



## New Jewish museums in post-communist Europe

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## INTRODUCTION

### New Jewish museums in post-communist Europe

In 2013 Tamar Latzman, a young Israeli artist, held an art residency in Vilnius. The city, known as the “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” was once her family’s home. Although she went to the city as an artist, this visit prompted her to start thinking about her roots and identity, her family history and cultural memory. The image that graces the cover of this special edition dedicated to Jewish museums in post-communist Europe comes from *Studies of a Wandering Jew*, the project she completed during her residency.

It is not by chance that for her project Latzman worked with a spiderwort plant, officially known as *Tradescantia* but commonly called “Wandering Jew.” The name reflects the plant’s resilience and versatility. It easily regenerates, and can grow nearly anywhere – in the sun or in the shade, indoors or outdoors. For her project, Latzman smuggled a shoot of Wandering Jew from Israel to Lithuania, a symbolic gesture that forced her to violate international customs rules.

One part of *Studies of a Wandering Jew* is a series of photograms – images taken without a camera by direct exposure of photographic paper to light. One of these images graces the cover. Latzman’s photograms depict the leaves, roots, and shoots of the smuggled plant. Some of the spectral black-and-white images look like plants or fossils, others like ancient tools. Some appear natural, others man-made. These photograms resemble X-rays from a clinical anamnesis, medical or scientific evidence of an extinct organism, a relic, or a fossil. They allude to ghostly things from the past, shadows of a world gone, beautifully arranged for us to see. Whether fossils or tools, the objects are disconnected from their natural context and are disassembled with a scientific impartiality. What once was a living plant, a Wandering Jew, is now on display – a spectral image to marvel at and decipher.

The second part of the project is a video documenting the artist’s own meandering through the streets of Vilnius, a wandering Jew with a Wandering Jew, to the tune from the 1937 film *The Dybbuk*. At the end of her journey, Latzman sets the pot at the foot of the memorial to the Vilna Gaon, the famous Jewish scholar who helped define the city as the Jerusalem of Lithuania, and then plants her exotic-looking, purple-leafed shoot in the local soil. While the photogram part of the project looks to the past, echoing the familiar representation of Eastern Europe as a museum or a cemetery of Jewish life, the video reverses this dynamic by planting the Wandering Jew in the Lithuanian soil, and provocatively questions the established ideas of home and diaspora. After all, for Israel-born Latzman the trip to Vilnius is a kind of homecoming, as it is for her Israel-grown Wandering Jew, which can now generate roots and thrive in the Lithuanian soil.

Latzman’s project raises issues at the heart of this special edition on new Jewish museums in post-communist Europe: history and memory, home and exile, local and

global, roots and routes. There once was a large Jewish community and flourishing Jewish life in Vilna and throughout Eastern Europe. Today, after the Holocaust, Soviet and communist rule, and emigration, most Jewish communities there are small. Descendants of these once flourishing communities can be found now not only in their countries of origin, but also in other parts of Europe, the Americas, Israel, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere. They may return for a visit, whether to rekindle memory and reconnect to their ancestral home or to explore their ambivalent relationship to the places where their families once lived, as Latzman does in her provocative project.

Today, post-communist Europe is experiencing a museum boom as countries try to consolidate a collective identity in museums that tell their nation's story in a way that was not possible under communism. Jewish museums and Holocaust memorials offer not only histories of Jewish communities in a given town or country, but also a perspective on the place of those communities within a larger national history and a country's self-understanding. For decades, in the public sphere, the subject of Jewish history and memory was largely off-limits in the Eastern bloc. In the last 25 years, however, since the fall of communism, there has been a revival of public Jewish culture and institutions in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the former Soviet Union (FSU). New museums, memorials, and education centers are an important part of this trend. This special issue is dedicated to this phenomenon, first charting a map of new Jewish museums throughout post-communist Europe, and then attempting to draw some analytical conclusions about the place and meaning of such museums.

Projects such as the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow, which opened in 2012, and POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which opened in 2013, are ambitious. They are multi-million-dollar endeavors with money raised from both private and public funds. Both museums were initiated and supported not only by local and international Jewish donors, but also by non-Jewish benefactors, foundations, corporations, and local and national state authorities. Their core exhibitions, relying on the expertise of both local and international academics and designers, offer affecting multimedia narrative exhibitions. Although not located in historic buildings connected to the local Jewish communities, these two museums present the full sweep of Jewish history in a given place, including the Holocaust and postwar period. In the short time since their establishment, these two museums have become part of an international museum scene, with 85,000 visitors in 2014 to Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, and a staggering 300,000 visitors to POLIN Museum during the first six months that the core exhibition was open.

These two museums are the largest and newest, but there are many others, in Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova, and elsewhere. Some of them are brand new; others existed before World War II and re-established themselves after the war. Many were revived more recently or were refurbished. Some reflect and contribute to a revival of Jewish life and may be located in or around a synagogue or Jewish community center. In other cases, local enthusiasts felt an urgent need to document and display Jewish life and culture when members of their communities emigrated en masse after the fall of communism. Many of the museums presented here are state institutions. Others are projects of the Jewish community, with substantial support from abroad, and a few are, to varying degrees, private-public partnerships. Still, most of these museums are small, with limited staff and funds, and relatively few visitors. While some of these institutions are independent of any larger national museum initiative, others are simply the

Jewish iteration of a national ethnographic museum. Finally, a few exist only as memorials, disconnected from living local Jewish communities.

The remarkable flourishing of Jewish museums in post-communist Europe forces us to think critically about Jewish memory and museology. What exactly constitutes a Jewish museum in post-communist Europe? How do Jewish museums respond to the opportunities and challenges of the post-communist period? How does the history they present figure in national narratives and what is the role of these museums in post-communist civil society? The essays in this special issue explore these questions by examining how Jewish museums in post-communist Europe construct historical narratives in relation to the museums' various publics – Jewish and not, local and international – and in relation to their many stakeholders, including the municipality, national government, local Jewish community, and international organizations supporting Jewish life. Our authors pay particular attention to objects in the museum's collection and the provenance and restitution of these objects, a special concern after the German occupation of nearly the entire region during World War II and communist nationalization of most private property immediately thereafter. Finally, they explore museum architecture and location: site specificity, new architecture, and the challenge of adapting pre-existing buildings, some with religious significance, to contemporary uses of the local population, which often lacks a Jewish community.

The organization of the volume reflects both the geography of the museums and genre of essay, ranging from peer-reviewed essays, to reports on a number of museums in a given area ("Reportage"), and accounts from museum professionals – creators, designers, and curators who are also scholars in their own right ("Inside the Museum"). The issue concludes with a section of book reviews dedicated to broader questions about museums, memory, and meaning after communism.

Two clusters of essays about the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center and POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews open the issue. Essays by Olga Gershenson and Deborah Yalen explore how the museum in Moscow incorporates Jews into a post-Soviet heroic narrative of Putin-era nation-building. Gershenson analyzes the museum's relationship to Holocaust history and memory in the post-Soviet context. She describes the museum's struggle to reconcile a Soviet understanding of the "Great Patriotic War" with a dominant Western narrative of the Holocaust, while also bringing the Holocaust in the Soviet Union to a broader audience via the museum. Yalen analyzes the museum's presentation of the shtetl, a prominent part of the exhibition, and compares it with a similar exhibition during the Stalinist 1930s. These two articles are supplemented by an account of the scholars responsible for creating the historical narrative of the core exhibition of Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, thus offering an insider perspective on the development and final form.

Leading the next cluster is Elżbieta Janicka's essay, which argues that although the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews was created as a private–public partnership and was designed to face Nathan Rapoport's Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, the area around the museum has become a magnet for monuments to Polish Catholic wartime heroism and suffering. Janicka suggests that this is a concerted effort by the city and state to create what she calls the "symbolic encirclement" of Polish Jewish memory by memorials commemorating Polish non-Jewish martyrs. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Chief Curator of POLIN Museum's core exhibition, focuses on how the exhibition was received by its publics and critics during its first six months. Innovative in its approach to the historical narrative and mode of narration, the exhibition sets the Holocaust within a thousand-year history of Polish Jews. Much debated is

how this museum will contribute to an ongoing effort to deal with the most difficult aspects of Polish–Jewish relations.

Read as an engagement with a nation's own history, Jewish museums in places such as Poland have the ability to recover a country's multicultural past in the context of its relatively homogeneous present. In other cases, establishing museums is a way for a post-communist state to emerge from the shackles of "communist oppression" by celebrating ethno-nationalism, often to the exclusion of its Jewish population. These issues are explored in the cluster of articles dedicated to Jewish museums in East-Central Europe. As Anna Manchin argues, Budapest's three major post-communist museum projects simultaneously work to construct a Hungarian past without conflict, in which Jews are either absent or figure as model Hungarian citizens. In either case, as Manchin demonstrates, these museums fail to engage Hungary's multicultural and multiconfessional past as a resource for thinking about its present and future. This is all the more ironic, she writes, because Hungary's Jewish population is one of the largest in post-communist Europe.

Katalin Deme's essay explores how Jewish museums in Prague, Czech Republic; Budapest, Hungary; and Bratislava, Slovakia contribute to the formation of Jewish identities in societies struggling to form collective national identities after the fall of communism. Maroš Borský, founder and curator of the new Jewish Community Museum in Bratislava, discusses the relationship between the Bratislava Jewish community and the Slovak state. Ruth Ellen Gruber takes readers on an evocative journey through the Czech Republic and its 10 Stars project as she explores how Jewish communal institutions and leaders of the post-communist Czech state worked together to build the most well-developed array of museums in any post-communist country. Moving further south, Dan-Ionut Julean offers a close look at Jewish museums in Romania. Though modest, these museums have made a great effort to preserve and maintain local Jewish heritage. From Romania, essays come full circle back to Poland. Natalia Romik describes the challenging but inspired process she and her team of architects went through in order to convert a turn-of-the-century Jewish building for preparing the body for burial into a Museum of Upper Silesian Jews in Gliwice. Jakub Nowakowski, director of Galicia Jewish Museum, shows how this relatively small museum functions now as part of a wildly successful Krakow Jewish tourist and educational scene.

Taken together the essays highlight some of the common experiences of communist rule across the region, but what emerges more clearly are the radically different manifestations of Jewish museums in a given city or post-communist state. This is further explored in the cluster of articles about museums in the former Soviet Union. Ze'ev Levin's essay about the Bukharan Jewish Museum in Samarkand, Uzbekistan widens the perspective beyond Ashkenazi Jews, an important reminder of the diversity of Soviet Jews. Anastasia Felcher explores Jewish museums in post-Soviet Moldova, Ukraine, and Belarus. Irina Shikhova, director of the Museum and Research and Educational Center "Jewish Heritage in Moldova," introduces this museum, which was recently created by the Jewish community of Chişinău and is housed in a historic building. Returning to new Jewish museums in post-Soviet Russia, Maria Kaspina and Hillel Kazovsky, curators of the Museum of Jewish History in Russia, located in Moscow, describe this small private museum and its collections and exhibitions. Finally, Shimon Iakerson and Marina Shcherbakova, curators of "Jewish People on the Territory of Russia," at the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg, present the challenges of curating this "museum within a museum."

In addition to exploring the relationship between local Jewish communities and municipal and state authorities, essays included in this special issue highlight the role of global tourism in the blossoming of museums in cities and towns across post-communist Europe and the interest of municipalities in Jewish heritage tourism to improve struggling economies. Latzman's Wandering Jew project, which plants seeds in post-communist Europe even as it recognizes the ghostliness of the landscape in which it is planted, offers a suggestive framing for this special issue.

Taken together, the essays included in the issue open a conversation between established scholars and curators, often one and the same, and practitioners who are rarely heard in the academic arena. We made special effort to give them a forum in an international scholarly journal and value the range of approaches, bringing together theory and practice, represented by the essays in this special issue. New Jewish museums in post-communist Europe are developing apace. It is our hope that this issue will be a step towards future research on their development and a source of inspiration for them.

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