

## The Curator of Joy and Ashes

How ethnographer Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett became the keeper of Poland's Jewish heritage

By [Allison Hoffman](#) | April 10, 2013 12:00 AM



*The Tablet Longform newsletter highlights the best [longform](#)<sup>[1]</sup> pieces from Tablet magazine. [Sign up here](#)<sup>[2]</sup> to receive occasional bulletins about fiction, features, profiles, and more.*

The new [Museum of the History of Polish Jews](#)<sup>[3]</sup> in Warsaw is many things: a memorial, a monument, a meeting place. It's also a visual metaphor, a concrete cube encased in glass curtain walls split in half by a roof-height gash. "It's a rupture or a break that can never be healed," the folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, who is designing the museum's [core exhibit](#)<sup>[4]</sup>, explained recently, sweeping her arm from the floor of the entry plaza up toward the bright blue sky above. She meant not just the depredations of the Holocaust but the half-century of the Cold War that hived off the place where she was standing—a park in a residential neighborhood known as Muranow, formerly the heart of Warsaw's Jewish ghetto—from most of its scattered survivors.

“But the museum is a bridge across time,” she went on. “It’s the best you can do. You can’t heal the rupture and put the pieces back together, but you can build bridges.”

Nearly two decades in the making, the museum will open to the public on April 19 in a ceremony hosted by Poland’s President Bronisław Komorowski. Designed by Finnish architect Rainer Mahlamäki (who beat out stars like Daniel Libeskind for the commission), it will house \$40 million worth of interactive exhibits tracing the long intertwined history of Jews and Poland, starting with a 10th-century dispatch by Ibrahim ibn Yaqub, an Arabic-speaking Sephardic Jew who reported back to the Moorish court at Cordoba on the Piast prince Mieszko I, Poland’s first Christian ruler. It will be the Polish capital’s newest, and by far its most sophisticated, attraction—a statement that Warsaw has arrived on the European, and perhaps the world, stage. And the museum’s chief backers also harbor ambitions for restoring Warsaw’s historic role as a Jewish capital. “The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews will take its place and rank alongside the Holocaust museum in Washington and Yad Vashem,” one of its chief American backers, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor named Sigmund Rolat, asserted at a preview in New York last October.

For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett—a distinguished New York University [academic](#) <sup>[5]</sup> who chaired the department of performance studies at Tisch School of Arts and holds an appointment in the university’s department of Hebrew and Judaic studies—the museum is also an effort to re-animate a vanished Jewish world she has spent a lifetime exploring. At the time she was chosen to head the museum’s exhibition team, in 2006, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett was finishing an illustrated memoir of her father’s prewar Jewish life in the Polish town of Apt, which is located halfway between Warsaw and Krakow. The book, *They Called Me Mayer July* <sup>[6]</sup>, was, in many ways, a bookend to *Image Before My Eyes* <sup>[7]</sup>, the groundbreaking photographic history she co-authored with the Łódź ghetto survivor Lucjan Dobroszycki in 1977. “I’m an outsider to Poland, but I’m an insider to Polish Jewry,” she told me over lunch at Cafe Blikle, which she chose because it was one of the few prewar Warsaw institutions to survive both the Nazis and the Communists. “Between Lucjan and my father I spent a lifetime absorbing this history,” she said.

For Poles, the museum opening will be a celebration of Poland’s commitment to reviving Jewish life—and, officials hope, of its successful re-entry into the grand narrative of the West. “For the second and third generation of American and Israeli Jews, we can say, ‘This is also your home,’ ” said Ewa Junczyk-Ziomecka, Poland’s consul general in New York, a former journalist who worked as a fundraiser for the museum in its early planning stages. “But it also says that this is a democratic country, whose government wants this institution because it believes there is no Polish history without the Jews. It says we want no more falsification of history, no more empty pages. That is not who we are now.”

The museum’s American backers—Rolat, a New York businessman who made a fortune after the fall of the Berlin Wall exporting denim to Eastern Europe, and the Bay Area-based real-estate developer Tad Taube, head of the Koret Foundation and of [Taube Philanthropies](#) <sup>[8]</sup>—are both Polish-born Jews who have been deeply involved in the revival of Jewish life in the country since the fall of communism. For them, the museum is in large part an opportunity to educate non-Jewish Poles about the legacy they lost along with their vanished compatriots. “The biggest

message here is that Western culture didn't just come out of a vacuum," Taube told me when we spoke by phone. "It wasn't just Jewish culture that was lost in the Holocaust, not just lost but murdered—it was essentially the greater part of Polish and Western culture."

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has set herself a far more difficult challenge: convincing Jews in the Ashkenazi diaspora that Poland, the place, should still matter to them. It's a tall order: Jews don't, after all, make pilgrimages to Egypt at Passover to connect with the era of pharaonic enslavement. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, with her characteristic intensity, argues that a millennium spent in a land necessarily leaves its imprint. "For American Jews, the first question is, 'Who are we?' And one way to explore that is to ask, 'Where did we come from?'" she told me. "Not just a place on a map, but culturally, linguistically. How did you get to be the person you are?" She told me about a colleague who asked why the museum should be in Warsaw, rather than in New York or in Israel, where the Jewish audience lives. "The answer is that we're telling the story literally where it took place," Kirshenblatt-Gimblett said. "The place is everything."

**Continue reading: Poland's top tourist destination** <sup>[9]</sup>

But most visitors to the museum will not be American Jews. They will be Poles, chiefly students traveling with school groups to Warsaw, where they can also visit a museum dedicated to the partisan Polish uprising against the Nazis, one devoted to the composer Frederic Chopin, and another to science exhibits named for the Renaissance astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus. The story they will be seeing is nevertheless an inherently Jewish one, guided and informed not just by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's scholarship but also by her sensibilities as a Jew who grew up in postwar North America. She has succeeded in instilling her staff—many of whom are not Jewish at all, and others of whom came from families that suppressed their Jewish backgrounds—with an almost evangelical enthusiasm for the Jewish threads woven into Poland's history. Yet when the core exhibit opens early next year, control over the museum will pass from Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's team—which was created by members of Poland's rump Jewish community and is mostly underwritten by Jewish donors abroad—to the **Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage** <sup>[10]</sup>, which runs all public museums in the country. "It's very easy for this project to become more and more Polish," said Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, whose formal role will end once the exhibit is completed. "It will become a Polish state institution."

\*\*\*

Less than a century ago—just barely within living memory—Poland was still home to more Jews than the United States. The trend lines were moving clearly in America's favor, even before the shadow of Nazism fell across Europe, but Poland remained the crucible of modern Jewish culture, with artists and performers and scholars traveling back and forth between Bialystok and New York. The depressed rural shtetl life conjured by the photographer **Roman Vishniac** <sup>[11]</sup> and the folk tales of Y.L. Peretz and other Yiddish writers existed alongside the tremendous wealth and cosmopolitanism of the urban bourgeoisie—people who wouldn't recognize themselves in the tragic, downtrodden caricatures that dominate the collective Jewish memory. The decades of the Cold War divorced the world's Ashkenazi Jews not just from the few survivors who remained in

Poland after the war, but from their own heritage and from the land itself. “For 60 years, from 1939 to 1989, Polish-Jewish relations were in the freezer,” said Michael Schudrich, Poland’s New York-born chief rabbi. “So, each side grew up with its own story, and they don’t intersect.”

When they think about Jewish life in Poland, most Jews in the rest of the world—not just in the United States and Canada but in Israel, in Australia, in the rest of Europe—think of its terminal point: Auschwitz. The death camp has become Poland’s top tourist destination, attracting more than a million visitors annually. Travelers seeking a Jewish memorial in Warsaw go to see the sculptor Nathan Rappoport’s **monument** <sup>[12]</sup> to the 1943 Warsaw ghetto **uprising** <sup>[13]</sup>, an unbelievably heroic effort that nevertheless failed to alter the inexorable course of the war. Fashioned from heavy black feldspar blocks, stacked 50 feet high and 30 feet across, the memorial is adorned with twin bronze reliefs that depict the tragedy that befell Poland’s Jews in the six years between 1939 and 1945. One side of Rappoport’s monument—across which bent Jews march to the death camps, an innocent child and a bearded man carrying Torah scrolls among them—faces a quiet residential street lined with Soviet-era apartments, each with its own balcony, where aging Poles sun themselves and hang their laundry to dry.

On the obverse, the bedraggled but unbowed Jewish martyrs of Muranow stare directly at the sparkling new facade of the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, whose glass cladding is inscribed with tangled Roman and Hebrew characters spelling out the words “Polin.” “It references the stories Jews told themselves about how they came to Poland and why they stayed,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explained when she took me to visit the construction site last fall. “They were running away from persecution in Germany, expulsions, accusations that they



(Courtesy of The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews)

brought the plague, and they went east, and came to a forest.” Her voice took on the rhythmic cadence of a practiced storyteller as she spoke. “They came to a forest, and the clouds broke, and the hand of an angel came down and they heard in Hebrew, ‘*po lin,*’ rest here,” she went on. “Or they heard birds chirping, or they saw the words of the Gemara inscribed on trees, or they saw pages of the Gemara floating down from the sky.” The legends, she said, had been passed on orally and were incorporated into the folktales of writers like Peretz and S.Y. Agnon. “What’s wonderful about the story is that it says Jews would find safe haven here, that they were ordained or destined to be here,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett added.

At 70, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett radiates an uncommon blend of polymath wisdom and youthful curiosity. Petite and energetic, she routinely appears in a uniform of black basics set off by

textured jackets and geometric silver-and-stone jewelry she buys from an artist in New Zealand. She wears her graying hair smoothed back into a bun caught at the nape of her neck and peers out at the world with bright blue eyes from behind her black-rimmed glasses. She is Canadian by birth and has spent her professional life in the United States, but for the past half-decade she has been living almost full-time in Warsaw. Already in her sixties, she decided to learn Polish in order to communicate better with her staff. Last year, she took the final leap and filed a claim for Polish citizenship, based on her father's; in January, she got her passport and used it to travel with her Polish staff to Moscow in February to look at the **Jewish museum** <sup>[14]</sup> that **recently opened** <sup>[15]</sup> there. "When they asked for my nationality, I wrote down 'Polish,'" she told me, sounding both amused and proud. To celebrate, her staff bought her a cake decorated with a Polish ID card. "For us, she is the spirit of the museum," said Malgorzata Pakier, a project manager on the exhibition team. "She identifies very much with the Polish Jewish piece of herself, but her memories, or really her father's memories, of Poland are positive, and that's something very different than the experience of Jews here."

**Continue reading: "We had no artifacts"** <sup>[16]</sup>

Her unusual perspective allows Kirshenblatt-Gimblett to defend Poland, and Poles, in ways that, from someone less historically aware, might sound naive. "Somehow or other, I don't know what it is, but it doesn't have a good image," she said of her newly adopted country, "and among Jews especially it gets a bad rap." But Kirshenblatt-Gimblett knows as much as anyone not just about the history of the Holocaust but about the despicable facts of what followed and how it completely effaced centuries of Jewish history. Her point, essentially, is *Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater, however dirty and bloody it is*. "There was nothing inevitable about it," she often says. It's a position even Poland's fiercest critics can get behind. "To think of Poland as just a cemetery, it's such an impoverishment of history," Princeton University historian Jan T. Gross, author of *Neighbors*, told me recently. "This idea among American Jews that you don't go to Poland, it's crazy. That's where the patrimony is." He acknowledged the legitimate anxiety American Jews associate with the country, but—perhaps surprisingly, given that he has almost single-handedly **exposed** <sup>[17]</sup> how inhumanly many Poles behaved during and after the war—insisted that was exactly why the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews will be important. "To give these kids a sense of what was lost, not just life but a whole way of life, is really very important," he said. "We know neighbors kill neighbors—look at Rwanda, Yugoslavia. Poland is not unique."

But the extent to which the vibrant Jewish culture of the prewar period has been erased is staggering. In Warsaw, which was home to more than 375,000 Jews—a quarter of the city's population—few traces of authentic yiddishkeit remain. One of the exceptions is the **Jewish Historical Institute** <sup>[18]</sup>, on Tlomackie Street, the main thoroughfare of the city's former Jewish neighborhoods. The institute is housed in what was once the city's Jewish library, whose walls survived the dynamiting of the city's Great Synagogue by the Nazis in 1943, and is custodian of the Emanuel Ringelblum **archive** <sup>[19]</sup>, a UNESCO-registered collection of documents—letters, journals, sheets of food ration stamps—collected from residents of the Warsaw ghetto and hidden during its destruction.

It was where the original idea for a Jewish museum in Warsaw was born, in the early 1990s. “I was invited to the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and when I came back I said, ‘In the U.S. a museum

“This idea among American Jews that you don’t go to Poland, it’s crazy. That’s where the patrimony is.”

like this is very important,’ ” Grazyna Pawlak, who was then the institute’s director, said when we met at the office of the small Jewish education foundation she now runs. “But here, because we have Auschwitz, because we have Treblinka, where my grandparents perished, we need a museum of life.” Pawlak initially imagined exhibition galleries built on the top floors of the institute, to make it a hub for Jewish historical preservation in the city. But it turned out the building’s foundations wouldn’t support it. Instead, she **secured** <sup>[20]</sup> a promise from the city of Warsaw for a parcel of land on which to build her museum. She recruited Chaim Herzog, the former president of Israel, to headline the project and invited Jeshajahu Weinberg, the Warsaw-born founding director of the Holocaust museum in Washington—known as Shaiké—to consult on its development.

By 1999, Weinberg, who also created **Beit Hatfutsot** <sup>[21]</sup>, the Diaspora museum in Tel Aviv, had taken control of the initiative, which he imagined as an analogue to the Tel Aviv project, which relied on narrative re-creation rather than displays of objects. “We had no artifacts, nothing but what we could get on loan, so we understood it would be a virtual museum,” said Marian Turski, an Auschwitz survivor and Polish journalist who served as head of the council for the Warsaw museum. “And the idea of Shaiké was to recruit scholars from America, from Israel, from England, from Poland, and have designers and producers only from abroad, because there really was not the design expertise in Poland then.”

After Weinberg died of a stroke, in January 2000, it fell to his deputy Jerzy Halbersztadt to keep the project going. Halbersztadt, a historian by training, had worked as a liaison in Poland for the Holocaust museum in Washington. But, like Pawlak and Turski, he lacked the international museum connections and cosmopolitan experience Weinberg brought to the project. In 2006, he offered Kirshenblatt-Gimblett the job of overseeing the development of the core exhibition. “There was a wave of criticism from all sides, from Polish historians, from Jewish academics here in Poland, from Israelis, from some in America as well,” Halbersztadt told me. “They asked, ‘How is it possible an American Jewish professor will be head of such a team?’ ” But Halbersztadt was determined. “Barbara, with her brilliant mind and her competence in evaluating various museums in Israel and America, was the right one,” Halbersztadt said.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett grew up in a heavily Jewish Toronto neighborhood alive with Yiddish and fond memories of the old country. Her father, the painter Mayer Kirshenblatt, left prewar Poland as a child for Canada, and he gifted his oldest daughter with a deep sense of the importance of material culture. She met her husband, the New Zealand-born painter **Max Gimblett** <sup>[22]</sup>, at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto, where she was representing the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, when she was 19, just after she returned from spending a year on ulpan in Israel. “She had a hobby of copper enameling, and I was a potter,” Gimblett, a bluff extrovert who is an ordained Buddhist monk, told me when we met in New York. “I took her to a bar and she gave me a

treatise on how she was never going to get married. A year later, we were married.” After Kirshenblatt-Gimblett finished her undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto, the pair went to San Francisco, where Kirshenblatt-Gimblett earned her Master’s degree at Berkeley, and then to the University of Indiana at Bloomington, where she wrote her Ph.D. dissertation on traditional Jewish storytelling in the Toronto community where she grew up. She was in the first generation of scholars, primarily women, to explore folk arts and crafts as an academic subject. “Men in Jewish professional life were not used to looking at Jewish life as resource material, and Jewish art and art history was an unexplored subject,” said Nancy Berman, the former director of the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles, who met Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in 1975 when she was recommended as a consultant for the Skirball’s textile collection. “Her subject was ethnography and folklore, and she was a star in that world.”

**Continue reading: “We, Polish Jews” [23]**

In 1972, they moved to New York, where Kirshenblatt-Gimblett went to work at **YIVO** [24], the Yiddish research institute. She cultivated a bohemian existence on the Bowery with Gimblett, whose painting studio dominates their loft, but professionally she plugged into a thriving Jewish cultural scene. At YIVO, her colleagues knew her by her Yiddish name, Brayndl. (Today, most of her New York colleagues refer to her by her initials, BKG, while her Polish colleagues call her Barbara, with all three syllables carefully enunciated.) Karl Katz, a former director of New York’s Jewish Museum and of the Bezalel National Museum in Jerusalem, remembered inviting her and Gimblett to Rosh Hashanah dinner and being surprised when she arrived with a large homemade challah decorated with birds in flight. “She had a whole story to go with it, a Yiddish kind of a story, which was that for Polish Jews these challahs represented some kind of way of expressing wishes to fly through the air,” Katz said. “I thought it was so amazingly wonderful.”

\*\*\*

The Polish view of history is a deeply martyrological one, and, after a decade of confronting the questions of historic culpability that Jan Gross raises in his books, it’s somewhat vogueish now for Poles to identify with Jewish suffering. Waldemar Dabrowski, a former minister of culture who serves both as the general director of Warsaw’s **Opera Narodowa** [25] and as the government’s ministerial plenipotentiary for the museum, told me that, for him, the museum is part of the decades-long project of rebuilding Warsaw to its pre-1939 state. “We lost 6 million inhabitants during the war, 3 million of Jewish origin, 3 million Poles,” he said, ticking off the numbers in his spacious, wood-paneled office at the top of the ornate Opera building. “No one knows that Auschwitz was set up for Poles, not for Jews. The first many thousands of prisoners were activists in the Polish underground movement.”

Dabrowski smoked as we talked and lamented the calculated destruction of Warsaw during the citywide uprising in 1944, a year after the battle of the Jewish ghetto. He pointed at buildings outside the window that looked like they had been built in

**Warsaw was the biggest Jewish city in the world—out of 1.4 million inhabitants, 350,000 could pray in Yiddish.**

the late 19th century but that were in fact a century younger; even the façade of the Opera building in which we sat had had only been finished in 2002. An alcove outside his door contained the sole remnant that survived in the rubble of the prewar opera house: a small statue of a forgotten actor named Alojzy Zolkowski, which was missing its face. “Nothing is real, because Hitler commissioned the only plan in mankind not to build a city but to destroy a city,” Dabrowski said. “Warsaw was the biggest Jewish city in the world—out of 1.4 million inhabitants, 350,000 could pray in Yiddish. They had their specific culture, their certain districts, and Warsaw without it is not complete. Without this Jewish component, the city is not real.” He paused. “The fate of Warsaw is incomparable to any other city in the world,” he added. “No other city was killed on purpose, none of them was killed according to a plan. So, in this perspective, as I told you, this museum is filling this painful gap.”



(Courtesy of The Museum of the History of the Polish Jews)

Halfway through our conversation, Dabrowski handed me a copy of a manifesto by the poet Julian Tuwim titled, “We, Polish Jews.” “I am a Pole because I want to be,” Tuwim wrote in 1944, from New York. “A Pole, also because the birch and the willow are closer to my heart than palms and citrus trees, and Mickiewicz and Chopin dearer than Shakespeare and Beethoven.” Dabrowski told me he chose to see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s decision to acquire a Polish passport as a statement of fidelity. “She has brought a lot as a person with a strong identity in a world which disappeared, vanished, actually,” he told me. “On the other hand, she became much more Polish, and she started to understand us much better. So, I see Barbara now as a Polish patriot, in this broader sense.”

But being a patriot, or a citizen, doesn’t make Kirshenblatt-Gimblett Polish. There is a universe of anxiety around the later galleries in her exhibit—the ones depicting the years of the Cold War, when the stories of Jews who remained in Poland and their former compatriots everywhere else in the world diverged. For Polish Jews, exploring that history means excavating not just the pogroms visited on Holocaust survivors who tried to return home after the war, but the history of Jewish communists who helped build the new Stalinist regime. “For us, the postwar galleries are really the biggest issue,” said Konstanty Gebert, a columnist for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the country’s largest daily. “There’s a picture of the Communist Congress, and four leaders are Jewish. Are we supposed to put a Magen David by their names? It’s an issue of credibility for non-Jewish Poles.” But the story also includes the purge of most remaining Jews from the country in 1968—an event that at the time, Gebert said, was seen by some Poles as another kind of Jewish privilege, since most Poles were prohibited from emigrating at all. Even the history of the Solidarity movement, in which Jews were deeply involved, is fraught. “The fact that Jews were also overrepresented in Solidarity makes it worse,” Gebert, himself a former Solidarity activist, told me with a rueful grin, “because then you activate the ‘cling to power’ trope.”



Gebert looks forward to the opening of the museum—in part because of how often the project, initially scheduled to open in 2010, has been delayed, first because of problems facing the contractor hired by the Polish government and then because of funding shortfalls for the core exhibit, the development and fabrication of which has been underwritten by the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the nonprofit entity that employs Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. The name is, at this point, something of a misnomer; while Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has drawn heavily on the holdings of the institute for her exhibit, which will feature reproductions of photographs and documents from the institute’s collections, there are no plans to move any of the original materials from the institute building, where they are kept in rudimentary archival storage, to the newly outfitted museum building a few blocks away. “It makes no sense to move from here, because the museum has no research capacity,” Pawel Spiewak, the director of the institute, told me. “In this museum there is simply no one who knows anything about the Jews. We have no partner, simply no partner.” Rather than fighting for a role, Spiewak said the institute, while committed to lending items to the new museum, wants to establish itself as a destination in its own right, drawing largely on its claim to be a surviving remnant of Jewish life in Poland. “We want to make our brand,” he told me. “We want people to come here and know that the materials were prepared here before the war.”

In 2011, Jerzy Halbersztadt **resigned** <sup>[26]</sup> his role as director of the museum. He has been replaced by Andrzej Cudak, a technocrat whose chief qualification for running Poland’s highest-profile cultural development project is his successful oversight of Warsaw’s preparations for the Euro 2012 soccer championship, which was jointly hosted by Poland and Ukraine. We met one morning at the museum’s temporary offices downtown. “I serve three masters,” Cudak told me, in his limited English, referring to the Ministry of Culture, the city of Warsaw, and the American-backed Association. His desk was decorated with a small silver soccer ball trophy, a memento of his previous success.

**Continue reading: From one death camp to another** <sup>[27]</sup>

A few days later, Cudak waved to me cheerfully from behind a bank of microphones set out in the lobby of the museum building, where the government was holding a hard-hat tour for the Warsaw press corps. He stood alongside Warsaw’s Mayor Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, an economist who served as head of Poland’s national bank in the 1990s. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett flitted around the edges of the crowd photographing the almost-finished interior of the museum building, whose soaring, undulating walls were reminiscent of the symbolic eternal flame. At one end of the lobby, a giant linden tree shaded the plate-glass windows; at the other, the corner of the monument to the ghetto uprising stood beyond the entry hall, barely visible through the scrim of “Polin”-inscribed panels. Just beyond the lobby was a glass-walled viewing area through which visitors will be able to look at the roof of a **wooden synagogue** <sup>[28]</sup>, completed last summer and installed earlier this year, which will be the centerpiece of the 18th-century galleries.

After the tour, I asked Gronkiewicz-Waltz—who many believe has designs on higher office—what her hope for the museum was. “As a symbol for the Americans, it’s like the Ellis Island museum,” she told me. “There I learned the history of Jews in America, and I think here they will learn the

history of Jews in Poland.”

\*\*\*

Whether the Poles will succeed in selling a new narrative to Jewish visitors from abroad still remains to be seen. While I was in Warsaw, I spent an afternoon with an adult tour group organized by the Ramah Israel Institute, the Jerusalem-based offshoot of the American Conservative movement’s camping arm. Their itinerary included stops at the major camps—Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek—as well as formerly Jewish shtetls in Galicia, the ghetto of Krakow and the factory where Oskar Schindler saved the Jews on his list. Their first stop was the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, where their guide, Moshe Gold, started by holding up a plastic sleeve containing a sheet of paper with a series of words printed on it in Roman and Hebrew characters: *Polin*. He told an energetic but far less poetic version of the Polin legend. Then he led the group on a quick highlights tour that included the tombstone memorializing the three fathers of Yiddish literature—Y. L. Peretz, S. Ansky, and Yankev Dinezon—and the ohel of Chaim Soloveitchik, the Brisker rebbe. As we walked along, one of the women in the group asked, somewhat rhetorically, “Why do they preserve it, when there aren’t any Jews here? Just for tourists?”

From the cemetery, the group proceeded to the orphanage run by Janusz Korczak, the martyr who accompanied his young charges to Treblinka in 1942 rather than let them go alone to their deaths. The tour did not stop at the nearby

Warsaw Rising Museum, which opened in 2004 to commemorate the citywide revolt against the Nazi occupation in 1944 that followed the Jewish ghetto uprising the year before. Instead, the bus went directly to the remnants of the ghetto walls, which are sandwiched between apartment buildings off a busy commercial stretch. We arrived at dusk, under a light drizzle, and found Israeli security outfitted with earpieces at the entrance. Seated in consecutive courtyards, groups of Israeli teenagers looked at photographs from the ghetto. Some were in tears; most were respectfully silent; all ignored the residents of the surrounding buildings as they came and went.

“Why do they preserve it, when there aren’t any Jews here? Just for tourists?”



An exhibition under construction, featuring a reconstruction of the roof of an 18th century wooden synagogue. (Janek Skarzynski/AFP/Getty Images)

This is precisely the phenomenon both the Polish and American sponsors of the museum want to disrupt. “I don’t think going from one death camp to another is what the Jewish experience in Poland should be about,” Tad Taube, who has given about \$16 million to the project, told me. “It’s a bad experience, in fact. I think people should honor the Holocaust, but it doesn’t really pay a lot of respect to why all those people died, or to the thousand-year history that ended up

in ashes.”

In late October, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett returned to the United States to give a lecture about the museum at Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution in Connecticut, hosted by the school’s center for Judaic studies. About a hundred people, only a few of them students, turned out in the autumn chill to hear the talk. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, wearing her customary black outfit with a nubby knit jacket, stood up and launched into her pitch. “What we’ve created is a multimedia narrative exhibition, what I’d call a theater of history,” she told the audience. “Our story is not teleological. It doesn’t drive to some pre-ordained end, which would of course be the Holocaust.” She asked the crowd to think in terms of a millennium, an impossible stretch of time for most Americans to wrap their heads around. “It’s an extraordinary message, one thousand years,” she explained, “because you don’t become the center of the Ashkenazi world and a center of the Jewish world if your story is a thousand years of unmitigated anti-Semitism.”

She showed a video introducing the museum and its galleries and then took questions: about how Poles have responded to her work, about whether any historic material had been found in the ghetto rubble beneath the museum site, and about the artists and typeface specialists she’d commissioned. Someone asked about the interest from the Polish public, and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett replied, “I’m counting initially on the Bilbao effect”—a reference to Frank Gehry’s swooping architectural fantasia in northern Spain, which almost incidentally houses an outpost of the Guggenheim Museum. She went on to say that when she began traveling to Poland friends of hers encouraged her to visit the **Wieliczka salt mines** <sup>[29]</sup>, in the country’s south, where miners carved underground cathedrals into the rock over hundreds of years. “I said, ‘Look, I’m not interested in salt, I’m not interested in mines, I’m not interested in salt mines,’ but after I was told I don’t know how many times how incredible it is, I went—and it is incredible,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett told the crowd. “So, I hope that this museum is something like that: If you only went once, you can’t not have gone.”

\*\*\*

**Sign Up** <sup>[2]</sup> for special curated mailings of the best **longform** <sup>[1]</sup> content from Tablet Magazine. Fiction, features, recommended reading, and more:

Subscribe

Allison Hoffman is a senior writer for Tablet Magazine. Her Twitter feed is [@allisont\\_dc](#).

Find this story online: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/128885/poland-new-jewish-museum>