

Museum for future generations

We share an interview with Albert Stankowski, director of WGM, by Ewa Kielak-Ciemniewska, editor-in-chief of “Stolica”, published in November issue of the monthly

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Was there a need to establish the Warsaw Ghetto Museum in Warsaw? Is the POLIN Museum not enough to cover the subject of the Holocaust?

The ghetto, created in Warsaw by the Germans, was the largest ghetto in Europe in terms of the number of people, and was the site of one of the greatest crimes on Warsaw residents, which has not yet been commemorated properly with future generations in mind. In a short time, 1/3 of the population of the capital city was resettled here, then Jews from all over Poland were moved to the ghetto, as a result of which the ghetto population reached over 400 thousand people. Crowded in inhumane conditions, in a limited space, the ghetto inhabitants tried to preserve their dignity, organised self-help and health care. Although it is hard to believe, there were theaters in the ghetto, which allowed some of the residents of the closed quarter to escape their everyday life. Orthodox Jews tried to live according to the rules of religion, although it was forbidden. Under the conditions of terror, organisations whose goal was to resist, demonstrated in various ways, were established. Oneg Shabbat (Joy of Saturday), an organization founded by Emanuel Ringelblum, documented everyday life in the ghetto, aiming to give testimonies of the tragedy of Jews to the world. Fighters from the Jewish Combat Organisation and the Jewish Military Union organised an armed uprising against the Germans. The ghetto wall, 16 kilometers long, divided the town almost overnight. Today, it is difficult to tell this story, because Warsaw looks completely different, but you have to show the full picture and this is what will happen in the Warsaw Ghetto Museum.

To what extent will WGM be interested in ghettos in other Polish cities – were there ghettos similar to those in the Second Polish Republic in other countries?

One of the statutory goals of WGM is to commemorate ghettos throughout Poland, not only the Warsaw Ghetto. Showing the reality of the closed quarter in Warsaw on the permanent exhibition, we will also symbolically show the situation of isolated Jews in other ghettos. What is the significance of its location – the area of the former ghetto and buildings of the hospital, which played a significant role in the ghetto itself – for the future Museum? The building of the former Bersohn and Bauman Children's Hospital is an important witness to history. It is a symbol of several eras, the history of Warsaw Jews in a nutshell. Its history began in the second half of the 19th century. It was founded by families of Jewish philanthropists. Children of all faiths were treated here. After regaining independence, in the 1920s, thanks to investments of Jewish organisations, the hospital was one of the most modern in Poland. The times of the ghetto are a period of heroic struggle for the lives of small patients, fought by doctors under the guidance of Dr. Anna Braude-Helder. After the war, the building became the seat of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland. It was here that, just after it was discovered in September 1946, the first part of the Ringelblum Archive was studied. History lives within the walls. The team working on permanent exhibition of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum will bring it to light.

The Museum is an exhibition combined with an educational program and a research program – scientific works, documentation, publishing program. Please provide the characteristics of the research program. Last year, there was a very interesting conference – I watched it on the Internet – which raises the question of international cooperation. What is the extent and the subject?

The process of establishing the Warsaw Ghetto Museum has been international from the beginning. The permanent exhibition team is headed by the world-famous Israeli historian prof. Daniel Blatman from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The Warsaw Ghetto Museum Board of Trustees is also international. Our program activities are evaluated by, among others, Holocaust survivors Marian Turski and Waclaw Kornblum, Colette Avital, chairwoman of the Association of Holocaust Survivors in Israel; Barbara Jolson Blumenthal – daughter of the

Survivor, Warsaw-born Leon Joselzon vel. Jonson, distinguished for preserving the Jewish cultural heritage; Irene Kronhill – Pletka – who supports Jewish cultural and educational projects around the world through the Foundation's activities, and Gideon Nissenbaum – President of the Nissenbaum Foundation. It is worth recalling that it was Sigmund Nissenbaum, Gideon's father and founder of the foundation, who for three decades has been preserving the traces of Jewish culture on Polish lands, who was the first initiator of establishment of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, in the early 1980s.

Last year's scientific conference was a big event, which was a part of the 80th anniversary of the beginning of World War II. It was organised in cooperation with the Polish Association for Jewish Studies, Jewish Historical Institute, European Network Remembrance and Solidarity and Touro College in Berlin. This is an example of scientific activities that will be conducted by the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. We are also planning to establish an Educational Center at the museum. Now, however, our forces are focused on building the scenario of the permanent exhibition.

Exhibition program: it is known that there are not many relics left, those that are – are the property of the Jewish Historical Institute or other museums, the preserved pictures also belong to archival or museum institutions. So what kind of permanent exhibition will it be? A multimedia exhibition? How will it differ from other museums related to the Holocaust? What does the permanent exhibition team work on now?

A few dozen-page preliminary scenario of the permanent exhibition – co-authored by prof. Blatman – contains the most important themes of the eleven galleries included in the exhibition. On their way through them, visitors will get acquainted with more than fifty years of the history of the Warsaw Jews – starting from the end of the 19th century until the end of World War II and the return of the survivors to the capital. The aim of the museum is to show the daily history of the Warsaw Ghetto and other ghettos created by the German occupier on Polish land. The museum will be located in the heart of the Polish capital, at Sienna 60 Street, so we have to create the narrative in such a way that it is understandable for future generations. Our recipients will not only be Poles, we will have to reach people from all over the world with the

story.

Does the Museum already have any collections, how does it want to acquire them?

“We collect, we build, we remember” under this title the museum starts a campaign of collecting relics. We have the support of various institutions; the Institute of National Remembrance has promised to donate the Stroop Report, one of the two original copies of the ghetto liquidation document, to the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. We received a valuable collection of drawings by Henryk Hechtkopf from his heirs from Israel. We are grateful for this first foreign gift in our collection. The Nissenbaum Foundation supported the purchase of a cart that was used to transport the bodies of the dead in the ghetto. We collect letters, photographs, objects of everyday life. I am aware that after so many years it will be difficult to find the original exhibits, but the above examples prove that it is not impossible. Hence our message to the public for cooperation in building this exhibition. We are looking for original objects from the Warsaw Ghetto or other ghettos; with their help we want to bring closer the everyday life of the ghetto. We will also use new technologies, which, while maintaining the balance between the original exhibits and multimedia, provide great support in museums. The exhibition is to open in a few years' time, we have to think about a way of telling stories that will allow us to reach future generations.

At what stage of creation is the Museum?

The situation related to the pandemic has caused delays in our work due to limited possibilities of movement, including in particular archival and museum searches in Poland and worldwide. Unfortunately, this resulted in delays in the subsequent stages of the Museum establishment plans. We are working as fast as possible in the current situation.

How do you plan to adapt the historic hospital building to the Museum? Surely the historical building can't undergo many transformations?

We are working on projects, both the permanent exhibition and the adaptation of the building itself. The difficulty is that we will place the exhibition in an original, historic building. In order to obtain as much exhibition space as possible, we must remember to adapt this object to the needs of visitors, make this space accessible to everyone who will visit us. The works are carried out under the supervision of a specialist; in August, Joanna Dudelewicz who managed the architectural works on the revitalisation of the old town tenements of the Warsaw Museum has joined our team. So we will benefit from her experience. Our task is to build the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and at the same time to save the former Bersohn and Bauman Hospital, a unique, over 140-year-old witness of history located in the very center of the capital. This is a huge commitment, but I believe that with the help of the Museum team we will be able to accomplish our goal.

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