

# This museum may be the last of its kind

**On the author's vision of the WGM's permanent exhibition, the need for it to show the dialogue between the ghetto and the occupied Poland and the dream to create the world's most important Holocaust museum in the heart of Warsaw – we talk with Prof Daniel Blatman of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a chief historian of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum**

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**How many people are involved in the Permanent Exhibition Team that you are part of, tasked with preparing the permanent exhibition of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum?**

*In the near future, the team will be joined by people working on the creation of individual exhibition galleries. Apart from me and the exhibit curator, Dr Batya Brutin, there are six more historians working on 11 galleries. The twelfth one is not a gallery as such, but an exit from the museum exhibition area, constituting a completely different exhibition than the other ones. The galleries will differ in size. The materials we are collecting now will then be taken over by the exhibition design team. In addition to six historians, there are about the same number of research assistants in the team.*

**Recently, the museum has completed the public procurement process for the services of quierers and curators. Do you know who is going to join the Permanent Exhibition Team?**

*Not as we speak, no.*

**In the context of the exhibition, what will be the most important to you as the chief historian of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum? What is your vision of that exhibition?**

*The creation of the permanent exhibition is a process. Its first stage was to discuss and create the program: the topics, relationships between them, and to decide on the main message of the exhibition compared to the messages of other Holocaust museums around the world. A few months ago, we managed to develop a permanent exhibition scenario, including the most important topics of each gallery. I am its author. It was assessed by other members of the Permanent Exhibition Team. The main message of the museum will be spread throughout the exhibitions in the galleries. It will merge different aspects of the exhibition into one. We want to achieve a historical dialogue between the ghetto and the rest of occupied Poland, especially Warsaw. The aim of the museum is to show the history of the Warsaw Ghetto and Polish Jews, especially Warsaw Jews during the Holocaust, but given that the WGM will be located in the heart of the Polish capital, we need to develop a separate language, more friendly to the younger generation of Poles who will visit it in 10 or 15 years. With the museum located in the heart of a bustling city here and now, if dialogue does not constitute a part of the museum's message, linked to the issue of the Jewish faith present here a hundred years ago, it will be a great failure. Then we will have something along the lines of yet another boring history book, which will be of no interest or significance to anyone. We want to combine the tragic history of Warsaw Jews with the history of occupied Warsaw and its surroundings. This is more or less the direction we are heading in.*

**You've said that the permanent exhibition is aimed at the young generation. Thus, it seems obvious that it must be created using modern technologies, doesn't it?**

*Of course. Accordingly to the objects we manage to find. I think that as soon as in the first half of 2021, the design team will be able to think about the right tools to use. We do not want to create a mid-20th century museum. It must be attractive to visitors from the mid-21st century. We just have to take into account that this is a Holocaust museum, not Disneyland, so we have to keep a balance between new technologies, attractive to the young generation, and the message.*

**Therefore, the creators of the permanent exhibition will have a great deal of work to do. Will it be opened to the public in 2023, on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw**

## **Ghetto Uprising?**

*This initial plan has already had to be changed; we are thinking about 2024. 2020 is very difficult due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, it's been a lost year. And we don't know what is going to happen in the coming months.*

**The pandemic is a particularly difficult time for queriers, who are not able to look for material...**

*The archives were unavailable for a few months. They're reopening now, but with various restrictions. It slows down the work progress.*

**What do you expect from the new queriers who are about to start working with the museum? Many Holocaust-related objects have already been found, collected and exhibited in museums. What else is there to find?**

*There are so many options. You can still find more, and more, and more. 81 years after the outbreak of World War II, many objects have already found their place in museums, from where they are lent to various institutions for exhibitions. A lot of mementos are in private hands. We have to get to them, hence the public procurement notices for research services that the museum has posted.*

**What would be the most interesting objects for you as the chief historian?**

*Personal items. Large objects are hard to find and difficult to reach. The exhibition space will not be too big either. We're not creating the museum by following our vision, but we have to "cut it down" to the space we will have at our disposal. Everyday items are very important to us. The war and pre-war ones, including, of course, those used in the ghetto. A suitcase used in the ghetto and on the outside is still the same suitcase.*

**One great advantage of personal items is that they carry a considerable emotional charge...**

*There's a story behind each and every one of them.*

**There are lots of Holocaust museums around the world. How will the Warsaw Ghetto Museum be different from them? What will be the thing that makes it special?**

*I think this museum may be the last of its kind; and if another one will ever be built, it is certainly many years away. My dream is for the Warsaw Ghetto Museum to be the most important Holocaust museum in the world, except for museums commemorating the concentration camps and death camps. I would like the focus on the dialogue between the tragedy of Jews and Polish history to be the thing that makes this museum stand out from the rest. However, it shouldn't be based on comparing the fate of some people to the fate of others, but on showing how one chapter of history has divided people into two groups. The fate of Poles was different from that of Jews. That fact should be emphasised. Nevertheless, it is the same chapter of the history of this country. That's how I wish to present it. This is where the Holocaust happened. One can build a wonderful Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, but the Holocaust happened in Poland. One can create a very important Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, but it is Poland where the Holocaust took place. This is the right place to tell its story.*

Interview conducted by Anna Kilian

Photo of Prof Daniel Blatman at the WGM scientific conference, November 2019