

# Two Awards for POLIN Museum in the SYBILLA Competition

**The Warsaw Ghetto Museum would like to congratulate the Virtual Shtetl portal and POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The Museum received two awards in the SYBILLA competition for the Museum Event of the Year – honouring the achievements of Polish museology and organized by The National Institute for Museums and Public Collections – for the Virtual Shtetl portal and for the social and educational Daffodils Campaign and the Łączy Nas Pamięć [The Memory Connects Us] concert implemented as part of the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.**

This year, prizes were awarded in six categories and the Grand Prix, which was received by the Museum of Architecture in Wrocław for the temporary exhibition of Leon Tarasewicz. This is a change compared to the last editions, when 11 prizes were awarded. The aim of the SYBILLA competition is to award people and institutions praiseworthy for their care and protection of Polish cultural heritage.

On this occasion, we are talking to Mr Albert Stankowski, Director of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum and originator and the first coordinator of the honoured portal about its origins, the potential inherent in voluntary service and the growing interest in the culture and history of Polish Jews.

What was the knowledge of the Jewish history of our – once – neighbours in 2009, when you were creating the Virtual Shtetl?

First of all, I would like to congratulate POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews for the award received for the Virtual Shtetl portal in the SYBILLA Competition for the Museum Event of the Year. Thanks to it, the knowledge of our common Polish-Jewish history has changed. Ten years

ago, coming together with Jews who wished to find their roots, to the cities inhabited before the war primarily by the Jewish population, I was greatly surprised. The residents were often unable to tell us where the synagogue or Jewish cemetery was located, what was our neighbours' history in a given place. Two generations were enough to make the memory of it often obliterated or sometimes displaced. It occurred to me that this was the last moment to preserve and restore this memory. And so, dictated by the need, the idea of documenting the history of Jews in Poland appeared. My experience as a historian and researcher dealing with Jewish heritage as part of my work at the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland and the enthusiasm of local social activists helped me in its implementation. We were particularly interested, as the team that was creating this project – especially Krzysztof Bielawski, Grzegorz Kołacz, Justyna Filochowska, Marcin Dziurdzik, and many others – in discovering the somewhat forgotten history of eastern Poland, which as little as seventy years ago was teeming with Jewish life and culture.

How important for this type of initiative, which the Virtual Shtetl is, is the feedback from the users, communities?

A large group of the portal's co-creators were enthusiasts from Poland and the world. This movement gave us dynamism. The Virtual Shtetl counted on it the most.

How have you been able to involve so many people in the project's co-creation?

Giving it such character required a lot of engagement and contacts – for example, we organised research trips, including to Belarus. And now the Belorussian, Russian, German, and Hebrew versions have been abandoned, explaining this decision by a lower activity on these web pages. Meanwhile, the portal primarily mobilised people living in the East, in the territories formerly situated within Poland's borders. A large amount of information was obtained by volunteers. It was the volunteers who translated many texts, sent photos, and information. Historians writing for regional newspapers and periodicals cooperated with the portal.

How is the portal changing from your perspective?

A new function has appeared – video interviews. A significant and needed Genealogy panel is being developed. However, the extremely important project Pamięć w Kamieniu [Memory in Stone], was impeded. It consisted mainly in reading inscriptions on the matzevot, and they are, after all, an invaluable source of information about people living in our cities and towns. Thanks to the Memory in Stone, it was possible to inventory many cemeteries of which we have in over a thousand in Poland, often in very bad condition. The letters and the names are becoming obliterated more and more every year. You can still watch on YouTube our interviews conducted in Belarus, but unfortunately a similar project connected with Lithuania was closed. I have the impression that our research activity in the East has significantly decreased. It was there, after all, that a large number of Polish citizens of Jewish origin had lived. I have recently returned from the exhumation ceremony – and reburial – of Jews, Polish citizens, murdered in the ghetto in Belarusian Brest. The Virtual Shtetl reminded us of our heritage in the East.

How do you perceive the Virtual Shtetl today?

It is still the only full source of information on the Internet about the history of the Jewish community in a given town. I am very happy that so many people use the Virtual Shtetl. I would like to extend my sincere congratulations to those who are creating the portal today and continuing this project. I wish you good luck and I keep my fingers crossed for the Virtual Shtetl to continue growing, to have more and more users, to keep the content getting better and more interesting and please: do not forget about the portal's community, about the people, try to mobilise as many volunteers as you can, because there is enormous power in them. It is them – thousands of people from Poland and the world – who are behind the success of the portal. I am very pleased that the portal is anchored at POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews as it guarantees financial stability and prestige.

Are the Poles more interested in the history and culture of Polish Jews today than ten years ago, when the Virtual Shtetl was being created?

A lot is happening in smaller cities and towns, and we do not find out about it because it does not go to the nationwide press – only regional press prints such information. I can proudly say

that the Virtual Shtetl has contributed to the growing interest in Jewish culture and history and treating it as an integral part of our common Polish heritage. We have done something very important together.

Interview by Anna Kilian