

Warsaw Ghetto Museum in Jerusalem

Post.

Plans for Warsaw Ghetto Museum unveiled

• By GREER FAY CASHMAN

"Who needs another museum in Warsaw?" asked Alex, a tour guide with Israel's Education Ministry.

Alex takes Israeli student groups to Poland to familiarize them with Holocaust history.

His question was directed to historian Albert Stankowski, the director of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum, a project adopted in November 2017 by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Deputy Prime Minister Piotr Glinski who is also the minister of Culture and National Heritage.

Stankowski is in Israel to present the Warsaw Ghetto Museum education and research project to the Israeli media, educational tour guides and Holocaust historians and researchers. It is the first time that the project is being presented outside of Poland.

Stankowski, who was involved in the creation of the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, explained that the Warsaw Ghetto was the largest ghetto in Europe and also had the largest number of victims confined to any ghetto. There was a large ghetto and a small ghetto, both in the same area of central Warsaw.

What is not commonly known, said Stankowski, was that the Nazis evacuated 100,000 non-Jewish Poles who were living in the area, to build and seal off what became known as the Warsaw Ghetto.

Although tourists come to historic sites, he said, it's very important to give the local population a sense of their own history. The history of the Warsaw Ghetto is part of the history of Warsaw per se. It's also noteworthy that the Polish uprising against the Nazis took place a year after that of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Also present at the presentation that took place on Tuesday at the Polish Institute in Tel Aviv was Daniel Blatman, professor of Contemporary Jewry and Holocaust Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who has been appointed chief historian of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum.

His appointment generated considerable controversy, and was largely seen in Israel and elsewhere in the Jewish world as an attempt by Poland to rewrite history and to whitewash its own dark chapters.

It was precisely because of the bitter accusations that erupted when news of the museum became public that Blatman agreed to become chief historian.

Acknowledging that the project is in the eye of a political storm, Blatman insisted that he and Stankowski and all of the 18 members of the museum team are in agreement that this is a historically sensitive project and not a political one.

"The museum has to speak to the community in which it finds itself," Blatman said.



PROF. DANIEL BLATMAN (left), chief historian, and director Albert Stankowski of the Warsaw Ghetto Museum. (Warsaw Ghetto Museum)

To emphasize why it is important to have a Warsaw Ghetto Museum in what was once the Warsaw Ghetto, even though there is a Holocaust section in the Polin Museum, Blatman said that the two largest and most comprehensive Holocaust Museums in the world are Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. Neither, he said, is located in a city where the Holocaust took place.

But the Holocaust took place in Warsaw and its victims were both Jews and non-Jewish Poles. It is important for the sake of future generations to show what life was like for families and individuals inside the ghetto and what it was like for families and individuals outside the ghetto.

Blatman promised that there would be no censorship or distortion of history.

In other words, all forms of Jewish resistance to the Nazis will be incorporated into exhibits, so that the world will know that there were heroes who did not share the ideology of Mordechai Anielewicz, but they were no less resolute in their determination to be part of the armed struggle against the Nazi death machine.

Though not religious himself, Blatman wants to devote space to ultra-Orthodox Jews who maintained their faith under the most challenging of circumstances.

Such people are dealt with only superficially and in a folkloric manner in other museums, said Blatman, stressing the need to know more than the fact that they did their utmost to observe the Sabbath.

"We have to know what they were thinking about," he said. Blatman anticipates that controversy will continue regardless of any assur-

ances that he and Stankowski might give. He recalled that there were many disputes between Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, because the latter created its own narrative to suit its environment and did not conform with the Yad Vashem narrative. The Warsaw museum will fit into the glove of the history of its location and its population.

What is truly miraculous is that the museum will be housed in one of the oldest and very few surviving buildings in the ghetto – a former hospital, dating to the 19th century, which was built by Jewish philanthropists for the purpose of giving free medical treatment to children of all faiths. The building has been designated for preservation as a heritage site.

Stankowski, who has a well-developed sense of humor which came through despite the seriousness of his presentation, commented that he expects to see a lot of Israelis visiting the museum which is situated between Warsaw's two largest shopping malls. Israelis love to shop, he observed, so when they go from one mall to the other, they'll stop off at the museum on the way.

Funded by the Ministry for Culture and National Heritage, the museum is scheduled to open in 2023 on the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

The only flaw in the plans as presented became apparent when someone from the Education Ministry asked about the languages that would be used for explanatory texts. The reply was Polish, English and Hebrew. When one of the journalists present protested the absence of Yiddish, noting that it was one of the more common languages in the ghetto, the response was that not many people know Yiddish these days.