The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre in Moscow

Le musée juif et le centre pour la tolérance de Moscou

Het Joodse Museum en Centrum voor Tolerantie in Moskou

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THE JEWISH MUSEUM AND TOLERANCE CENTRE IN MOSCOW

VISIT Created at the initiative of Dov-Ber-Pinhos Berez Lazar, Chief Rabbi of Russia since 1999, the Jewish Museum in Moscow opened its doors in November 2012. The inauguration took place in the presence of the president of Israel, Shimon Peres, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Sergei Lavrov.

The Museum was established through private funding, subsidies from the Russian government and from the Federation of the Jewish communities of Russia, an inheritor of Habad, an ancient Hasidic movement that prospered on the eastern stairs of the Russian empire. President Putin gave one month of his salary to the funds of the Museum.

Whilst Moscow is disfigured by turgid and monumental constructions, the building of the Museum (a former bus depot on the Bakhmetev street) protected its silhouette. Conceived by Konstantin Melnikov and Vladimir Shukhov in 1926-1927, this jewel of Constructivism placed at the heart of the old Jewish neighbourhood Marina Rohtcha, was placed, in 1997, on the list of monuments to be privatized and given by the town to the community Centre, whose president at the time was the oligarch Roman Abramovitch. It was indeed very close to being disfigured, but the intervention of public and professional opinions allowed the damage to be limited.

The exhibition space is organized according to a circular plan. A centre with a double core is surrounded by walls forming two concentric circles: the “great Jewish cosmos” – cradle of Judaism, ancient Hebrews and the first Diaspora – and a “small cosmos” – the Shtetl. Upon the wall that surrounds them are projected photos illustrating the “living Judaism”, its rites and its precepts. A second wall, further removed from the centre, creates with the first wall a hallway where a timeline is organized. At the back, large rooms are each reserved to a different historical period. Parapets

fixed on both sides of the wall provide more detailed information.

The Museum’s ambition is to go beyond the traditional “museum” aspect and to arouse interest in its technological performance, “unique in Russia”, we are told. It aims to be a place of distraction, capable of attracting young people. The conception of the design was therefore trusted to Ralf Appelbaum’s American agency, known for its realization of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. Visitors only encounter screens during the tour: big, small, medium-sized, flat, curved, at times interactive, at other times in 3D, accompanied by written or audio legends. Artefacts are relegated to the space dedicated to temporary exhibitions, at the periphery of the three circles. What makes this universe of screens completely surrealist, are the poet Iossif Brodski’s words, engraved above... the Museum boutique: “The objects that we produce with our hands say more about us than our confessions.” Admittedly, we won’t find any more “confessions” than “products made with our hands” here. Craft workers and people of the Book are no longer. They have been erased before a virtual people.

The “shtetl” space is in this regard exemplary. Indeed, visitors are here invited to dress up in virtual traditional Jewish costumes, to touch virtual herrings floating in real barrels, to recognize their ancestors among plaster figures, like the one who is sat on a bench at a synagogue, immersed in the reading of the Book, their head covered with the Tallit (inexplicably forgotten, this old Jew in plaster is not interactive and does not swing from side to side). The best find,

without contest, is the virtual scroll of the Torah that unfolds at the desired speed from the pressure of an electronic stick.

How was the history of the Jews in the empire (1775-1917), then in the USSR (1918-1991) conceived? It was necessary to find a consensual version of this tortuous past, and also, to respect the ideological imperatives. The first director of the Museum and of the Centre, Nathalie Fichman, was clear. Indeed, the Museum’s vocation was not to bear witness to “the Soviet anti-Semitism” (sic): “We will not shed tears for ourselves. It is not about exposing our offences; it is about showing how we lived, how our country’s history shaped us and how we shaped its history.”

The timeline leads to a map of the “zone of residence” and the Kingdom of Poland (although at the time of the census, it was only called the “Vistula Country”), which shows the percentage of Jews among the population and the intensity of the pogroms. The sequence dedicated to the 18th century is very clear on the Polish origin of most Russian Jews, annexed in virtue of the divisions in Poland, and on their culture inherited from the Commonwealth of Poland (even though it was kept quiet that Polish Jews enjoyed the security of people, service and commerce).

The section “Towns and beyond. 1795-1913” opens onto a large photo of an urban artery, a slightly surprising symbol of life as a Jew in the 19th century, yet which immediately presents the central thesis: urbanization, assimilation, social ascent. We see an “installation” with coffee tables and the same white plaster figures which are supposed to embody Simon Doubnov, Sholem Aleikhem and a few other personalities from urban Jewish culture. On the wall, a “Chronicle of the events” proposes themes such as Haskalah (Jewish Lights), Jewish press, cultural awakening, assimilation, pogroms, emigration, political branches, new religious tendencies, etc. For he who is taken aback in front of so much information (although the famous anti-Semitic hoax, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, could have found its place), a lucky find (still virtual) entitled “Jewish destinies” allows one to enter into individual

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– Inside the museum.

time and to follow, with headphones and a small screen, the biographies of remarkable men.

The following section is entitled “War and Revolution, 1914-1921, 1921-1941”. On the big screen the documentaries on the acts of violence committed by the German army, the scene of the revolutions of February and October 1917, the civil war and the pogroms “more cruel than the pogroms of Khmelnytsky” (but the programmatic anti-Semitism of the Whites is erased) are projected. Difficult questions are raised: the “zone of residence” is finally abolished, Jews obtain civil rights. They owe everything to the revolution, and the stereotypes are tenacious which present them as profiting from the revolution, clever to quickly rise up to the governing bodies of the Bolshevik apparatus and to its organs of terror. On the screen, the voice of a specialist from across the Atlantic explains that with the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the Jews “were faced with the difficult dilemma: to adapt or to disappear”. We wonder what choice was offered to the other peoples in the USSR... In the same way as other believers, Jews, as we are told, were summoned to abandon their religious practices though, thanks to their level of higher education, they quickly achieved their social ascent, namely within the new intellectual and professional elite. ●●●

... We begin to grasp the function of the big screen which each section is equipped with: it must, whatever the cost, inscribe Jewish history within Russian generalities, erase the conflicts, sever all urge to shed tears or to feel proud – except when it is legitimate for the great people of the USSR. A coffee table in the shape of a five pointed star embodies this young Soviet nation; on its interactive surface, as if lost in space, portraits of Jewish personalities evolve: when it is at the level of the visitor, we can press it and the personality's short biography appears.

We approach the room dedicated to the Great Patriotic War, 1941-1945: the most vast of all rooms, plunged in darkness, with a screen that allows several projections simultaneously. Images of the Wehrmacht's offensive on the western territories of the USSR, abandoned by the Soviet army, are projected; the reasons of this retreat are not mentioned. The sequences taken at Babi Yar follow. Terrible, painful and crushing long moments. Yet the war continues, we approach Stalin-grad, well-known sights, deafening explosion sounds, the glory of the victors, songs, and once again scenes of battles and forced marches, this time in direction of Berlin. The soldiers traverse the burnt villages of Belarus and Lithuania. And the canonical photos of the Battle of Berlin and of Dresden destroyed (subtlety of the apposition!). Then we see the days immediately following the victory: we return to the scenes of the Babi Yar massacre, where hundreds of thousands of victims were not given the right to the Kaddish nor even to a mention of their Jewish identity on the commemorative plaque. We seek in vain the reasons for this new misfortune that struck the Jews. Something, someone, is missing from this ribbon of images: of course, yes, it is Stalin. The great Stalin only appeared on screen for a second, presiding the parade of 8 November 1941 on the Red square. The Generalissimo who carried the Soviet people to victory, who saved the lives of millions of Soviet Jews and several from other countries (when he did not hand them over to the Gestapo or did not have them shot), is basically absent from this narrative. It is not about smoothing over the rough edges anymore. A veil of silence enshrouds the one who, starting from the victory in Stalingrad, became the organizer of the State's anti-Semitism and of the chauvinistic Russian propaganda.

With Stalin absent, the Museum is not in a position to offer a shelter to the work that crystallizes the Jewish experience of the war: the novel *Life and Fate*

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– Map of the pogroms at the beginning of the chronological circuit, showing the percentage of Jews among the population and the intensity of the pogroms.

by Vassili Grossman. The interests of both parties of the Museum worked together in this avoidance strategy: Putin's doxa, that in advance excludes everything that may uphold the image of the Great Patriotic War, *a fortiori* a comparison of Stalin and Hitler's regimes (the main lines of Grossman's novel), and Habad, who has no reason to honour the culture of secular Soviet Jews, having become communists.

Disconcerted by this truncated history, we turn toward the explanatory panels. Yes, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is mentioned, as well as the consequences for the Polish Jews. Yes, there is mention of the ghettos and of the local population's collaboration with the

occupier. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), created in 1942, is present yet without mentioning its worldwide vocation nor the assassination, ordered by Stalin, of its two initiators, Henryk Erlich and Victor Adler, Polish Jews. The visitors can see the cover of the famous *Black Book* with the names of both authors, Ehrenbourg and Grossman, yet its origin (it is Albert Einstein, in the name of the Committee of Jewish American artists, writers and scientists, who proposed to the JAC to publish a book on the fate of the Jews in occupied countries) and its end will remain unknown. The commentary of the Museum claims that the *Black Book* was "denied publication". This is a euphemism: the leads, as well as all the printing equipment of the Der Emes publishing house, were ransacked by a commando of the NKVD, the ordeal destroyed.

The post-war period, of State anti-Semitism which can only be compared to the period of Hitler's Germany in the 1930s, is confined to a small room without any auxiliary computer device on the walls. At the entrance, a panel announces: "The Period of the troubles: 1940s-1950s". In Russian historiography, this expression traditionally pertains to the power vacuum in the 17th century, when the country was still subjected to usurpers and foreign armies. By dint of silencing the name of the Guide, the historical vision, inevitably, becomes muddled.

On the back wall – in small dimensions – a photo of the underground cells of the Lubyanka Building. Five pillars each equipped with a screen present to the visitors in a disorderly sequence: (1) a photo of Andrei Jdanov, with a caption on his famous report dating from August 1946 which launched the "campaign against cosmopolitans"; (2) the photos of the thirteen members of the JAC who were shot; (3) the photo of Solomon Mikhoels, president of the JAC, with a caption on his assassination in January 1948 and the beginning of the "State anti-Semitism and repression of Jewish organisations and intelligentsia" period; (4) the announcement of the creation of the Israeli State in May 1947, with the support of Andrei Gromyko, at the rostrum of the United Nations. The caption talks of the "feeling of pride" this event "awoke in the hearts of many Soviet Jews", but is very careful not to compare the cruel elimination of Jewish institution and leaders; (5) the headline of a newspaper – anonymous! – that announces "the affair of the doctors in white coats". On these five pillars, Stalin's name only appears once. His photo, never.

As we progress further toward the present day, the past is reduced to anecdotes. To talk about the Soviet Jews of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, there is no map of the emigration, no mention of the cultural production, no trace of the samizdat, not to mention, of course, the State repression and anti-Semitism. There are only two screens. The first one, in 3D, presents a Muscovite apartment where two young people are exchanging Jewish jokes on their own people as a young woman lifts from a box gifts sent by parents settled in the US. On the second one, a group of Jews are clandestinely meeting in a forest to encourage, in a community spirit, the sporting activities of their children. The young generation grows up, healthy in body and in mind.

The visit is finished – or just about. There is still the "Tolerance Centre". I am explained that its activities take the form of workshops. What is discussed during these times? Do questions about the current news that preoccupy Russian society, such as the attitude toward people with a "sexual orientation outside of the norm" or Asian migrants, find therein room to be raised? The person responsible for the Centre answers no, these questions do not concern her institution. Shocked, she offers me two brochures. We learn that the workshops are designed for school children. They fulfil the criteria set by the State's educational programs. Among the goals to be reached "on a personal level" lies: "Motivation and orientation of the active and creative participation in the life of the society and of the State. Motivation and orientation of the values, founded upon the ideas of patriotism, love and respect for the Homeland and of the recognition of equal rights of nations and the particularity of different cultures." So is it here, within this education on "tolerance" which is in fact merely the conditioning to the State's social engineering and discipline, that we will find the key to understand this astounding version of the history of Soviet Jews? A version which seems to have gained Muscovites' support, for many have returned for a second visit. Fascinated by the performance of the high-tech gadgets, the same intellectuals who denounce, indignant, the return of Soviet practices within history textbooks, seemingly willingly abandon all form of critical reflection. ■

Ewa Béard, October 2013

The full (French) version of this text will be published in the *Revue des Etudes slaves*.