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

Ewa Bérard
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VISIT

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 shores 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 Rochtcha, 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 Abramovich. 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 Jews – and a “sectors” – the Shitet. 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 Ralph 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 surrealistic, 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 “shitet” space is in this regard exemplary. Indeed, visitors are here invited to dress up in virtual traditional Jewish costumes, to touch virtual herring bones 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 (unexplicably forgotten, this old Jew in platter 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 voca- tion 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 19th 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 Poland’s 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 sur- passing symbol of life as a Jew in the 19th century. But 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 Dubnow, 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 Enlightenment), 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 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 docu- mentaries 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 pro- grammatic 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 stereo- types are tenacious which present them as profiting from the revolution, clever to quickly rise up to the governing bodies of the Bolshevik apparat 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 educa- tion, 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 gene-
ralities, 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, aban-
doned 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 their absence): this is a simplification of the guide, the historical vision, inevitably, becomes museum.

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 visitor, in an interactive sequence: (1) a front page of the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda” from 1926 which launched the “campaign against cosmonauts”; (2) the photos of the thirteen members of the 1963 Soviet-Union underground resistance; (3) photo of Solomon Mikhoels, president of the JAC, with the “feeling of pride” this event “awoke in the hearts of many Soviet Jews”, but is very careful not to compare 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 “patriotism” of 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 recogni-
tion 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 of the “inter-
difference” – or the very opposite…

As we progress further toward the present day, the past is reduced to anecdotes. To talk about the 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 spi-
rit, 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 acti-

ties take the form of workshops. What is discussed are not these present-day current news that preoccupy Russian society, such as the atti-

tude 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 insti-
tution. 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 per-
sonal 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 recogni-
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This full (French) version of this text will be published in the Revue des Études slaves.

We refer to the original text in the Revue des Études slaves.

Ewa Bérard, October 2015

1 Kroniek

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