



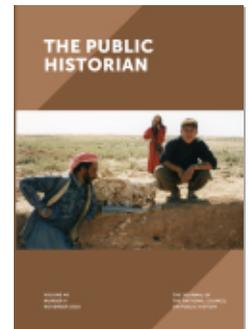
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Between Myths, Memories, History, and Politics: Creating
Content for Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center

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The Public Historian, Volume 40, Number 4, November 2018, pp. 91-106 (Article)

Published by University of California Press



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Between Myths, Memories, History, and Politics

Creating Content for Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center

Jonathan Dekel-Chen

ABSTRACT: This essay aims to share with the readers of *The Public Historian* some of the challenges, thoughts, and conclusions that I encountered as a historian during the planning and execution of content for the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow. As the essay illustrates, this extraordinary project sat at the intersection of a troubled history, widely divergent popular memories and national narratives, and divisive contemporary politics. The essay's possible uses are twofold: first, it offers insight for professionals into the intricacies of creating a large-scale, historically accurate museum in a complex political environment in today's Russia; second, it may help give some guidance to historians who find themselves in similar scenarios.

KEY WORDS: Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, Eastern European history, popular memory, national narratives, Russia

Among many of my colleagues in the humanities there is a shared, mostly unspoken recognition that the readership for our written work will probably always be quite small, regardless of the quality of our professional accomplishments, given the limited sales of most scholarly history books. Those seeking broader audiences must find other avenues, often dependent on one's intellectual horizons, skill sets, comfort level in public forums, geographic location, and other factors. For a fortunate handful, an architect or designer will at some point in our career invite us to contribute to the creation of a historical museum that capitalizes on our expertise. Such moments offer a rare opportunity to reach large numbers of people. Our professional training, however, usually does not prepare historians for this work. Participating in the development of a museum, for example, can severely test the mettle of scholars who are more accustomed to the norms of classrooms or academic publication. A few years ago I had the great fortune to help create the content for a major museum dedicated to a complex history amid contentious contemporary politics: the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in

THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 91–106 (November 2018). ISSN: 0272-3433, electronic ISSN 1533-8576. © 2018 by The Regents of the University of California and the National Council on Public History. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2018.40.4.91>.

Moscow.¹ Little did any of us working on the project know that international controversies ignited by the politics of East European popular memory would explode within a few years after the museum's 2012 opening.

Conventional training of historians likewise does not prepare us for sensitive questions arising during the development phases of museums. One, and perhaps the most delicate, issue is that of the “balance of forces” between owners, designers, and scholars working together on museum development. Who among these players should and does exercise influence when determining the museum's historical narrative? This question is doubly complex in a museum where space is limited and the history to be presented is crisscrossed by religious, ethnic, and national tensions.

Having been through the powerful experience of creating content for the Moscow museum, in this essay I aim to share some of the challenges, thoughts, and conclusions gathered during this project. Its possible uses are twofold. First, it offers insight for professionals into the intricacies of creating a large-scale, historically accurate museum in a complex political environment. How did we deliver solid history in a public platform in a highly contested landscape of popular memory and contemporary regional politics? I hope that the essay thereby provides guidance to historians who find themselves in similar scenarios. A second value of the essay arises from its discussion of the relationship between historians and the influence of museum owners or designers in deciding the content of a museum. Must this inevitably devolve into confrontation if disagreements about content arise? Given that the scholars contribute only opinions and not funds to pay for costly museums, can they hold firm at such moments? And does compromise around design necessarily equate to compromise of one's scholarly integrity? My working assumption is that the answers to these questions will be similar whether one serves as a consultant with a museum under public or private ownership. Although the essay focuses on a single museum, I imagine that the issues raised here apply universally to the work of scholars in these kinds of projects. What follows are my personal observations and conclusions from my perch as a member of the core Content Committee for the museum, all of which are my responsibility alone.

Situating the Museum in Moscow

In late 2012, in the shadows of the ongoing international debates about Russia's descent towards authoritarianism, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center opened its doors.² Although reviewed by the *New York Times* and a handful of other media outlets, the opening of a large, state-of-the-art, historically balanced

¹ A much smaller, artifact-based private Jewish museum also exists in Moscow, the Museum for the History of Russian Jewry [Russian acronym: МИЕВР].

² For more information on the museum today and photos from the permanent core exhibits on which the Content Committee worked, see <https://www.jewish-museum.ru/en/>.

museum of Jewish history was hardly noticed by the western press.³ Given that public relations was never my role, I can only conjecture as to why the museum received so little attention in the West. Perhaps this lack of attention is because the museum's target audience is primarily Russian-speakers residing in Eurasia, not tourists from afar. It also seems likely that the opening of the museum in Moscow may have been overshadowed by a vigorous international publicity campaign around POLIN: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. The public relations work for the Warsaw museum began years before it opened in 2013 and remains robust today. Finally, the appeal of Moscow as a tourist destination for non-Russian speakers has declined greatly in recent years. The physical location of the museum outside the relatively tourist-friendly city center further detracts from the likelihood of popularity among non-Russian speakers.

The building that is home to the museum embodies a fascinating past that only enriches the uniqueness of its present usage. Originally constructed as the Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage in 1927, the extraordinary one-story structure encompasses 8500 square meters. Designed by Konstantin Melnikov and Vladimir Shukhov, renowned Russian avant-garde architects and engineers, the building—still nicknamed “The Garage”—is a world architectural protected site. For several years before the museum project began, part of the building served as an art gallery. The museum opened privately in November 2012 to great fanfare, with the President of Israel Shimon Peres in attendance, and the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, participating via teleconference. The museum opened to the general public in early 2013. Approximately one-quarter of the total space in the building is set aside for educational and other museum-related activities. In addition to the permanent installations, the museum hosts temporary historical and cultural exhibits. The museum is situated in a compound of several buildings in the Marina Roscha neighborhood in northern Moscow that was a bastion of Jewish life in the city before and after the 1917 revolutions. In the 1990s the Russian Federation returned the old communal buildings in the neighborhood to the Jewish Federation, which now owns and operates them. The orthodox Jewish population of Marina Roscha grew significantly as a result of these developments. The “Garage” is adjacent to these buildings, which now house a variety of communal agencies. Although easily accessible by Moscow's superb public transportation system, as stated above, the neighborhood is outside the city center and its tourist attractions. The Federation initiated the museum project and hired the museum design firm of Ralph Applebaum Associates in New York (henceforth, RAA) to execute its planning and to supervise construction. Estimates for the total cost of the museum usually revolve around \$50 million.

³ Ellen Barry, “In Big New Museum, Russia Has a Message for Jews: We Like You,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2012.

The background story of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center “thickens” at the crossroads of politics, history, and memory. Although it is not a “national” museum that is owned, operated, or formally mandated by the Russian state, it is a matter of record that President Putin fully endorsed its founding and upkeep, elevating it as a symbol of contemporary Russia’s readiness to embrace its past with an eye toward greater domestic harmony in the present and future. From the start of our work on the museum, we understood that this desire to project a kinder, more inclusive image of Russian history vis-à-vis the state’s myriad minority groups and its multi-ethnic contemporary scene carried great significance for the owner and perhaps the Russian government. This principle of a museum with an associated message of inclusiveness, as we came to understand, was modeled at least in part on the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, created by the Simon Wiesenthal Center and opened in 1993. From the outset of our work, it became clear that the inclusion of “tolerance” as part of the institution was non-negotiable for the owner; the question then arose about if and how the Content Committee would participate in this part of the project.

The founder and owner of the museum—the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia—is controlled by the ultra-Orthodox Chabad movement, representing a small minority of Jews now living in the Russian Federation.⁴ The warm relationship between the Chabad movement in Russia and the Kremlin—frequently exhibited in public platforms—has for years fueled consternation among non-Orthodox Jews in Russia as well around the Jewish diaspora. For many, the proximity of a Jewish organization to any authoritarian regime is troubling. In the case of today’s Russia, this discomfort increases because of what critics see as excessive cordiality between the head Rabbi of Chabad in the country, Berel Lazar, and President Putin. Tensions surrounding Lazar’s elevation to both leader of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia as well as Chief Rabbi of the Russian Federation in 2000 never entirely abated because many non-Orthodox Russian Jews consider these appointments supported, if not sanctioned, by the Kremlin as a way to install compliant and loyal leadership.⁵ Misgivings only increased given the fact that prominent Russian-Jewish oligarchs (some of whom are expatriates) fund much of the activity of the Federation of Jewish Communities, including the creation of the Moscow museum.

4 Chabad (a Hebrew acronym signifying “Wisdom, Understanding, and Knowledge”) is a Hasidic movement founded in the eighteenth century in the town of Lubavitch, in modern Ukraine. Its currently operates on a global scale and has taken leadership roles in a number of East European Jewish communities. Since the 1940s, Chabad’s worldwide base has been located in Brooklyn, New York.

5 Joshua Keating, “Putin’s Chosen People: What’s Behind the Russian President’s Close Relationship with an Orthodox Jewish Sect?” *Slate*, November 28, 2014, www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/11/vladimir_putin_chabad_what_s_behind_the_russian_president_s_close_relationship.html. Lazar immigrated to the USSR from Italy in 1990 as a representative of the global Chabad organization. His first responsibilities included serving as rabbi of the Marina Roscha synagogue.

A Museum from Volatile History

For those unfamiliar with the topic, it must be stated at the outset that Jewish/non-Jewish relations are still hotly debated in the scholarly world and in the public sphere in Eurasia. In short, the shared history of non-Jews and Jews in Eastern Europe, including in post-Soviet areas, enjoys little agreement even about what might seem relatively straightforward facts. This discord holds true whether one is referring to the long history of westward migration from the region, oppression “from above” at the hands of this or that regime, socio-economic mobility “from below,” the role of Jews in the rise of radical movements throughout Eastern Europe during the long nineteenth century, or their part in the Soviet regime’s horrors and successes. It is surely true that with the opening of archives in Eastern Europe after 1991 scholarship has benefitted enormously from previously unknown data about the region. As a result of this access to documents and quantifiable facts, important revisions and reassessments have generated much clearer pictures of this past as well as the roles of Jews in traumatic events like the Russian revolutions, famines that ravaged Soviet Ukraine in the early 1930s, Stalin’s purges, and the immense suffering caused by the Second World War. Despite these scholarly achievements, however, regional politics and popular memories remain stubbornly tied to older, often judeophobic, narratives and suspicions.⁶

All of these unresolved issues meant that a museum showcasing the legacies of Jews in Russia arose from a debated historic and public landscape. The owner wanted a highly approachable, modern facility to display this complex history. The team of designers and academic consultants hired by the owner aimed for an authoritative, inclusive historical account for wide audiences in the Russian-speaking world, most of whom are inheritors of collective memories that often reflect not a shared past between Jews and non-Jews but rather a sense of victimhood at the hands of repressive rulers or violent neighbors of another religious, ethnic, or national group. For those national groups who see themselves as victims of the Soviet regime sometime between 1917 and 1991, this anger is often coupled with suspicion of the Jewish role in the emergence and practice of Bolshevism.⁷ Given what we knew was a highly contested landscape, all involved in the design of the museum felt an urgency to “get it right” and create a space for serious, level-headed consideration of a shared past.

6 For a case study of this kind of spillover of distorted historical memory into politics, see Jonathan Dekel-Chen, “Crimea 2008: A Lesson about Uses and Misuses of History,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 39, no. 1 (April 2009): 101–5.

7 A short list of those peoples who see themselves as victims during the period includes Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, myriad Caucasian peoples, and Jews. For studies of this phenomenon, see Wilfried Jilge, “Competing Victimhoods: Post-Soviet Ukrainian Narratives on World War II,” in *Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941*, ed. Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag GMBH, 2007), 103–31; Alon Confino, “Remembering the Second World War: Narratives of Victimhood and Genocide,” *Cultural Analysis* 4 (2005): 47–65.

From another angle, the construction of a new, costly, cutting-edge museum at a time when existing institutions struggle with financial survival suggests a kind of optimism doubly remarkable for the history that it attempted to capture and the uncertainties of political and economic life for most people living in post-1991 Russia.⁸ Unlike museums elsewhere around the world that illustrate national, religious, or ethnic legacies, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center is a private institution funded by affluent donors almost entirely without state support.

After years of preliminary planning and aborted starts, during 2008 and 2009 Ralph Applebaum formed a Content Committee for the museum's core exhibit. This team included Benjamin Nathans (chairperson of the Committee from the University of Pennsylvania), Natan Meir (Portland State University), Oleg Budnitskii (Higher School of Economics, Moscow), Risa Levitt Kohn (San Diego State University), and myself (Hebrew University of Jerusalem). Each member of the committee wrote the textual content for one to three of the museum's studios.⁹ From 2009–2012, RAA contracted additional scholars from Russia, North America, and Israel for more specific tasks. The Content Committee met repeatedly with RAA's designers (led by project managers Evelyn Reilly and Doug Balder) in workshops that envisioned, then executed, the transformation of 250 years of Jewish history in Russia into a museum pathway. These workshops yielded a periodization around which we designed nine chronologically based studios and one nonchronological pathway on the history and practice of Judaism.¹⁰ The members of the Content Committee wrote the texts for all of these exhibits while working closely with RAA staff to develop the visual, audio, and interactive elements throughout the museum. Having completed most of our texts several months before the museum's opening in late 2012, the role of the Content Committee decreased as the pace of exhibit fabrication and placement increased. For reasons that are discussed later in this essay, the Content Committee did not take part in envisioning or developing the Tolerance Center, which is housed in the "Garage" building but is physically separate and functions programmatically in separation from the permanent studios and pathway that we created for the museum.

Throughout the planning and execution of the studios that constitute the permanent exhibit, the Content Committee functioned without a curator which meant that scholars determined content together directly with RAA's design team. From the outset the owner decided that the permanent studios would feature mostly digital, not artifact-based, displays. Consequently, this large museum contains only a handful of artifacts. Although it may surprise some readers and critics,

⁸ For the general picture, see Ben Davis, "How the Rich Hurt Museums," *International New York Times*, July 27, 2016.

⁹ The five of us contributed individual essays to a short colloquium. See "Inside the Museum: Torahs, Tanks and Tech: Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center," *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, nos. 2–3 (2015): 190–99.

¹⁰ The permanent studios are (1) the 4-D Beginnings Theater, (2) Migration: The Jewish Diaspora, (3) Shtetl: A Jewish Town, (4) Cities and Horizons, (5) War and Revolution, (6) Soviet Union: 1922–1941, (7) The Holocaust and the Great Patriotic War, (8) Postwar, (9) Perestroika to Our Days.

to the best of my recollection the Content Committee had no objection to this approach. Although none of us had extensive experience with digital platforms, we all embraced this design principle as a professional challenge and as an ambitious vehicle to reach new, younger audiences.

The Content Committee crafted a narrative pathway that transmits Russian-Jewish history without controlling a visitor's comprehension of that story. Throughout the process the owner attended many of our planning meetings but rarely offered input. During our initial meeting, the Content Committee set a priority to demystify Judaism and Jews for visitors, particularly for non-Jews. For nonexperts in East European Jewish history, this might seem an odd goal for a museum situated in Eastern Europe, where large numbers of Jews have lived since the Middle Ages. Yet most Russian-speakers today know little about Judaism because of their relative geographic confinement in the Pale of Settlement that began during the annexations of Polish-Lithuanian lands in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and lasting until the revolutions of 1917. Thereafter, the heavy-handed Soviet secularization campaigns, coupled with existing trends of secularization among Jews, resulted in the near disappearance of Judaic ritual life from public spaces. We felt that a deep and even-handed portrayal of events, individuals, belief systems, traditions, and rituals were of paramount importance in the former Soviet Union, where legacies of Jewish life remain huge. The question then rose in our discussions: "How can one tell the story of a collective past when approximately 75 percent of all Jews in the FSU (Former Soviet Union) left following the disintegration of the USSR and today's communities are no more than a demographic shadow of what they once were, barely visible to most of the population?" Furthermore, how could a museum properly reflect the complexities of repression and anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe versus the reality that by the 1950s most Soviet Jews were white-collar and successful by almost any local standards? If contemporary developments were to be addressed in the museum, we had to take into account the totality of the Jewish experience under a repressive Soviet regime as well as the vibrant Russian-speaking diaspora communities that have taken root in Europe, the Americas, Israel and elsewhere since the 1970s.

As an outcome of our early discussions—and given the working assumption that most visitors, whatever their religion, would have little or no familiarity with Jewish history and rituals—we formulated a kind of "Judaism 101" component. This idea eventually evolved into the "Living Judaism" thread that runs alongside the eight chronological studios. "Living Judaism" is based on the yearly cycle of the Jewish calendar and, like all the exhibits in the museum, offers a multi-layered introduction to Judaism, allowing individual visitors to decide how much information to access. Thereby, the demystification of Judaism can be pursued via pathways of faith, observance, religious texts, or ritual objects while one proceeds along the main chronological axis of the museum.

What were some of the challenges encountered when conceptualizing the museum's content? First, we had to consciously avoid a persistent, popular impulse

toward nostalgic, simplistic interpretations of East European Jewish history. This approach is informed more by popular memory and cultural icons than by solid research—a habit sometimes referred to as the “Tevye-ization” of Jewish history.¹¹ Artists, popular authors, laypeople, and scholars embrace elements of an imagined, quaint past overlaid with a belief in nearly constant victimization. This imagined past surfaced in cultural productions of American Jewry during the interwar period, then intensified greatly after the Holocaust, disseminated in later decades throughout the Jewish world. The artists involved sought to capture, and later resurrect, onstage and on the screen an appealing version of past that never actually existed. The Content Committee, however, felt it imperative to communicate the complexities of life for most Jews in Russian-speaking geographies including hardships, daily routines, joys, and moments of success.

Ahistorical approaches in service to national narratives have been dominant in former Soviet space, attested to by the public interest in Russia in the early twenty-first century following the publication of the two-volume *200 Years Together* by Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The first of the two volumes attributed disproportionate weight in the history of Russian Jews to their involvement in leftist political movements and their part in the 1917 revolutions. Complicating matters further, in recent years extremist Ukrainian nationalists have instrumentalized the Jewish role in the early Bolshevik regime as a part of an evolving national narrative. Among the accusations dredged-up are discredited charges of a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy used to explain Ukraine’s suffering during the Holodomor (the Ukrainian term denoting what they contend was a famine-based genocide perpetrated by the Soviet regime against the Ukrainian people between 1931–33). Other cases of instrumentalization of judeophobic popular memories surround the brutal Soviet suppression of the Ukrainian national movement during the interwar period and again after 1945, as well as the immense suffering experienced on its territory during the Second World War.

Beyond the peculiarities of this museum, there are surely common issues facing any scholar participating in similar projects. Somehow, a balance must be struck between the technical and artistic capacities of designers, what historians know to be true, what we think the visitors should learn, and what the owner of the museum wants and could tolerate. In the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, this balance was perhaps most challenging for Risa Levitt Kohn, who developed content for the museum’s 4-D “Beginnings Theatre.” Because this studio presented the cornerstones of Judaism (and the other monotheistic religions) based on scriptures that described events and belief systems up to the destruction of the Second

¹¹ The reference here is to “Tevye the Milkman,” an iconic literary character created by the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem in the late nineteenth century and popularized worldwide during the second half of the twentieth century by the music-theatre production and Hollywood film titled, “Fiddler on the Roof.” I could not determine the origin of the term “Tevye-ization.” Seth L. Wolitz (“The Americanization of Tevye or Boarding the Jewish Mayflower,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 4 [1988]: 520–527, n. 4, n. 30) analyzed the sources and contours of cultural transference in this case.

Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish population from the Land of Israel, she had to struggle with formulating an exhibit that adequately balanced history and faith, whereas all other studios in the museum based themselves on the best historical scholarship. Given the profile of the owner of the museum, this was no small feat.

Confronting Barriers, Finding Solutions

Engagement with the museum brought multiple professional challenges, some more obvious than others. For starters, this was the first time in my scholarly career during which I had to surrender considerable control over materials that eventually evolved into textual displays. The final texts and imagery in all of the studios are a result of collaboration among graphic designers, architects, engineers, and scholars. As all members of the Content Committee learned, because space is limited in every part of an exhibit, one had to prioritize specific events and people within vast historical sweeps. This necessitated hard choices about what to include and exclude. Perhaps most difficult of all was the presentation of complex concepts or people in 50 to 150 words, which was the range allowed for almost all of the displays. For historians who usually work alone on their research and publications, doing so by committee made this task even more difficult. Additionally, we discovered deep into the writing process that the owner and designer of the museum vetted our final texts multiple times, in some cases with non-historians. In the latter case, I do not know why this was done but surmised at the time that the owner wanted our texts to be reviewed by individuals with whom they were familiar and shared religious orthodoxy. That being said, I believe that all of the final texts in the museum retained scholarly integrity and did not undergo significant editing by anyone other than the Content Committee members themselves.

A challenge facing any historian trying to do justice to the totality of the Russian-Jewish past is deciding how to present “unpleasant facts,” those persons or details that might reflect poorly on Jewish history. In the case of East European Jewry, this comes with an added complication: the purported role of Jews in destructive movements or moments, reports of which have been fodder for generations of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. These lethal myths, at times loosely rooted in grains of truth, have been tied to Jews since the emergence of radical socialism in the second half of the nineteenth century, and are still present today in popular anti-Semitism. The truth, however, is complicated: research publications in recent decades have revealed the subtleties of Jewish life in these tumultuous times; Jews have been not only powerless victims but also perpetrators, or at the very least, equipped with a measure of agency. We realized that accurate presentation of the role of Jews in these events—all of them controversial in Eastern Europe today—was crucial for the historical integrity of the museum. This honesty would also demonstrate to visitors—many of whom hold living memories and strong beliefs

about some of these events—that the museum’s content would “pull no punches” when illustrating the spectrum of Jewish life. Russia’s President Putin invoked that part of the Soviet-Jewish past in his remarks around the opening ceremony of the museum in November 2012. Among the exhibits for which I was responsible, these issues were most acute in the Interwar studio, titled “Soviet Union, 1922–1941.” Why? It was no secret at the time, nor is it today, that men and women of Jewish origin held senior leadership posts until the mid-1930s in elite Bolshevik politics, the command economy, cultural and intellectual hierarchies, and the regime’s notorious secret police (known as the Cheka and NKVD).

A third delicate area surfaced around visualizations of Jewish life since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Debate arose with the owner of the museum over the selection of images to illustrate the post-Soviet rebirth of the Jewish community in the FSU. Visual imagery in this studio—“From Perestroika to Our Days”—held special importance because it featured few texts. As the member of the Committee responsible for this studio, I found myself at the forefront of this struggle. Two parallel interpretations of this recent history emerged in our debates. The museum’s owner preferred the depictions of Jews in post-Soviet space to be mainly Orthodox and male. I insisted, together with the other members of the Committee, that an accurate representation of contemporary Jewry in the FSU had to reflect its diversity in gender, leadership, religious orientations, cultural and educational institutions, as well as important social service functions that criss-cross all these parts of the community. This debate was not about the Jewish past but rather about the Jewish present and future, where scholarly expertise butts up against pre-determined views—including those of historians themselves—in determining what is real versus what is desired. Eventually the museum owner accepted our position; the images in the exhibit illustrated the multifaceted character of post-Soviet Jewish life.

Work on the museum required some compromises. We were, after all, “only” academic consultants. The most challenging compromise came at the start of our participation in the project. When asked by the designer about the proposed name of the museum, the term and concept of *Tolerantnost’* (“Tolerance” in Russian) raised eyebrows. The owner of the museum believed that *Tolerantnost’* had to be included in the museum’s name and be embodied in its studios. For members of the Content Committee, this seemed problematic on multiple levels. First, the word itself is a cognate, with no precise Russian translation and sounds odd to the Russian ear. This meant that the name of the museum would suggest a kind of foreignness. Secondly, we felt that the western concept of tolerance would be hard to digest for much of the Russian-speaking audience and would seem misplaced for many Russians and foreigners given contemporary realities in the Russian Federation, characterized by increasing authoritarianism from the Kremlin alongside growing Russo-centric nationalist rhetoric “from above.” Consequently, for us the use of the word “tolerance” for the museum in Moscow would invoke unnecessary public cynicism before its actual contents could be judged. Lastly, the term

Tolerantnost' in the name of the museum suggested that the history of Jews in Russia was one characterized mostly by tolerance, which would be misleading. Whatever the force of our arguments, in the end the owner decided on the name "The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center." In terms of its internal layout, there is clear separation inside the building between the Beginnings Studio, the eight chronological studios, and the relatively small Tolerance Center that is situated at the exit from those exhibits. Thereby, it seems to me that a reasonable—if imperfect—balance was reached around the use and presence of *Tolerantnost'* in the building.

A fascinating and painful question at the intersection of scholarly integrity and the owner's beliefs cropped up during the design of the Holocaust studio, located in parallel to the studio dedicated to the Second World War on Soviet soil. Here we engaged in deep discussions around the visual images of the Holocaust. From the historian's perspective, few if any barriers existed in terms of what should be used to illustrate the horrors of the times. We also knew that Holocaust museums display images of naked victims, particularly in the Soviet Union, where Nazi murderers and local collaborators marched millions of Jews to their deaths in nearby forests and ravines (versus ghettoization, concentration, and extermination camps elsewhere in Europe). By contrast, the museum owner—as Orthodox Jews—felt strongly that photographs and film footage of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe should be respectful of the physical modesty of victims of the Holocaust, most of whom were religious Jews before their murder and would never have agreed to public displays of nudity. Eventually we reached what now seems like a respectful, reasonable consensus around what images could, and could not, be shown; the suffering of those years is depicted without photographs or footage of exposed victims. Holocaust scholars or others might find this resolution unacceptable. I readily recognize the right to criticize the Content Committee on this point. Nevertheless, at the time that these decisions were made and still today (and as a child of a refugee from Nazi Germany and a Holocaust survivor) I believe that the exhibit effectively illustrates the Holocaust on Soviet soil. As I learned from this chapter in the museum design, "less" can be sometimes be powerful without being "lesser" in essence. Some critics may remain unconvinced.

Post-Opening Developments and Ongoing Questions

The Content Committee completed its work in the winter of 2012–13. I last visited the museum in January 2013 and have not been involved with it since then. Through consultation with colleagues who have more recently visited the museum, it appears that in the ensuing years no significant changes were made to the permanent studios. In recent years the museum has organized temporary exhibitions that have been well received.¹²

¹² For example, Anthony Austin, "The Avant Garde and Aviation," *QED Rarities*, June 24, 2014, qedrarities.com/review-avant-garde-flight-jewish-museum-moscow; "Freedom for All? The History of One People in the Years of Revolution: The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre, Moscow,

As the museum moves forward, I see a number of possible challenges. For one, the museum formed an academic board that includes a number of international scholars. It is difficult to know, however, whether the board has had an active role—a frequent question at institutions of this kind elsewhere in the world. The need for engaged, ongoing academic oversight in the spirit of the original content is acute in the case of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, particularly because most of the displays are digital. Digital formats can be revised relatively easily and inexpensively compared to doing so with physical objects and printed texts that constitute the backbone of permanent exhibits in other museums. Lesser concerns that came to my attention, common among similar institutions in Eastern Europe, were some unfortunate post-opening features, such as poor English on the museum’s website and the turnover of four directors of the museum since 2013. Since its initial opening, the museum received press reviews ranging from warm to chilly.¹³ Overall, the public and the media have applauded its historical content. The negative critiques of the museum focused mostly on the near absence of artifacts. But as stated above, the Content Committee never considered the owner’s and designer’s digital approach as a deficiency.

The dilemmas we faced when creating balanced content for a contentious history in a problematic modern political environment emerged in a piercing exchange in 2015–16, sparked by the publication of a highly critical essay by Olga Gershenson in the scholarly journal *East European Jewish Affairs*.¹⁴ Although she found no factual errors in the museum’s content, Gershenson argued that because the museum was created in Putin’s Russia, it seemed obvious that it—and by extension the work of the Content Committee—were influenced by the proximity of the owner to President Putin and his enthusiasm for the museum. According to Gershenson, the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center therefore reproduced a Sovietized or sanitized version of the Jewish past that blurred difficult relations with the Russian state or with its non-Jewish population. Angered by the implications of that article and those in at least one nearly identical essay by Gershenson

17 October 2017–14 January 2018,” *Russian Art and Culture*, October 7, 2017, www.russianartandculture.com/freedom-history-one-people-years-revolution-jewish-museum-tolerance-centre-moscow-17-october-2017-14-january-2018; and, Ciara Haley, “The Remarkable Life of Sholom Aleichem on Show at Moscow’s Jewish Museum,” *The Moscow Times*, December 9, 2016, themoscowtimes.com/articles/the-remarkable-life-of-shalom-aleichum-on-show-at-moscows-jewish-museum-56488.

13 For example, “The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center,” *Museum Studies Abroad*, April 5, 2018, museumstudiesabroad.org/jewish-museum-tolerance-center; Natasha Shalina, “Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre in Moscow,” *Russian Art and Culture*, February 9, 2016, www.russianartandculture.com/review-jewish-museum-and-tolerance-centre-in-moscow-by-natasha-shalina; Barry, “In Big New Museum, Russia Has a Message for Jews: We Like You,” *New York Times*, November 8, 2012, p. A 14; and, Sergei L. Loiko, “Russian Jewish Museum Opens in Moscow,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 11, 2012., articles.latimes.com/2012/nov/11/world/la-fg-russia-jewish-museum-20121111.

14 Olga Gershenson, “The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the masses,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 43, nos. 2–3 (2015): 158–73.

published in the *Forward*,¹⁵ two members of the Content Committee, Benjamin Nathans and Oleg Budnitskii, scathingly rebutted her criticism in a subsequent issue of *East European Jewish Affairs*. Their response corrected factual inaccuracies in Gershenson's critique about the creation of the museum's content; they also pointed out her basic misunderstanding of current scholarship on Russian-Jewish history. Nathans and Budnitskii likewise refuted Gershenson's argument that the owner and/or the Russian government shaped the narrative content of the museum.¹⁶ These tensions spilled over into a public event held in New York City dedicated to discussion of new Jewish museums in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁷ None of these disagreements ever reached resolution. This epilogue to our work illustrates the dangers inherent in participating in such a sensitive project. In no way, however, does it detract from my certainty that the content of the permanent exhibits effectively merged cutting-edge scholarship and public education.

The museum has also inadvertently been a backdrop for diplomatic tensions since its opening. One of these involved the acquisition of archival materials from the Lubavitch Chabad movement in Russia and from the library of the late Rabbi Joseph Schneersohn. In short, Chabad, like other Hassidic movements in Judaism, developed rapidly in Eastern Europe for centuries before the Bolshevik revolution. For reasons that are still somewhat contested, Rabbi Schneersohn and his inner circle fled the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, permanently resettling in Brooklyn, New York in the early 1940s. The local Chabad movement, however, survived in the shadows of the Soviet Union until the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. In the years thereafter, this "original" East European branch of Chabad underwent a meteoric renaissance, quickly emerging as dominant force on the Jewish institutional scene in the former Soviet Union. Chabad's leaders in Moscow played a key role in initiating the establishment of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. The old organizational archive of Chabad and the personal library of the Schneersohn rabbinic dynasty (containing important Judaic texts) remained under Soviet and post-Soviet control. Amid ongoing legal battles with the New York branch, the Russian government allowed several thousand books from the Schneersohn library to be transferred to the museum in Moscow shortly after its opening, where a special department houses and digitizes them. The archival materials, however, remain in

¹⁵ Olga Gershenson, "How Russia Created a Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center that Even Vladimir Putin Could Tolerate," *Forward*, January 8, 2016, forward.com/culture/art/328682/how-russia-created-a-jewish-museum-and-tolerance-center-even-vladimir-putin. With roots stretching back more than a century to the large wave of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe to the United States as a mass-circulation daily, the *Forward* today is still a widely read and respected online newspaper in the American Jewish community.

¹⁶ "Oleg Budnitskii responds to Olga Gershenson's 'The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the Masses,'" *East European Jewish Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2016): 211–13; "Benjamin Nathans Responds to Olga Gershenson's 'The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the Masses,'" *idem*, 213–16.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Denlinger, "Jewish Museums Leave Nostalgia in the Dust," *The New York Jewish Week*, January 13, 2016, jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/jewish-museums-leave-nostalgia-in-the-dust.

a Russian state military archive. To date, the New York branch claims rights to the archival materials. To the best of my knowledge it still has a case pending in US courts against the Russian government, supplemented by sanctions from the US government and American institutions on cultural exchanges with Russia.¹⁸ For scholars of East European Jewry, the release of any of the Chabad/Schneerson collection to Jewish institutions is a welcome development. One hopes that the Russian government will allow more of these materials to be transferred. In the meantime, at least in my opinion, the housing of released parts of these collections at the Moscow museum, where they are accessible to researchers, is a better solution than if they were to be relocated to the New York branch of Chabad, where legacies of insularity would probably result in these materials being out of reach to non-Orthodox researchers.

The museum has inadvertently been drawn into political strains since its opening, in part because it challenges an older historiography and popular memory among Jews that preached unrelenting repression by regimes in Eastern Europe. These narratives gained greater force in the Jewish world after 1948 because Israel promoted a version of the past focused on the powerlessness of diasporic Jews, particularly in Europe and in Muslim lands, remedied only through the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state. This tension between history and ideological narratives persists today in discourse among major figures, including the former head of the Jewish Agency for Israel, Natan Sharansky, an iconic Soviet-era “refusenik” who entered formal politics after emigrating to Israel. In response to then-President of Israel, Shimon Peres, thanking Russia for one thousand years of “hospitality” during his remarks at the opening ceremony of the museum in 2012, Sharansky publicly railed against Peres in the Israeli press, insisting that the history of Jews in Russia was characterized entirely by repression.¹⁹ Perhaps this episode most clearly affirms the need for this museum’s role in correcting popular memories about Jewish-Russian history and the crucial part to be played by historians in rebalancing that consciousness.

As work on the museum has demonstrated, telling the story of Jews in Russian-speaking territories must confront popular memories and historical narratives that continue to see the Jewish experience as almost wholly negative. Surprisingly or not, the museum continues to generate fresh illustrations of this friction among both Jewish and non-Jewish publics. In January 2018 Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu toured part of the museum with President Putin during a state visit to Russia. Evidently, they did not view the main galleries, but only a temporary

¹⁸ For an initial reaction about the transfer of the Schneerson library and its accessibility, see Paul Berger, “What I Found in Library Rebbe Schneerson Claimed as His—and Why Chabad Feud Rages,” *Forward*, April 18, 2014, forward.com/news/192846/what-i-found-in-library-rebbe-schneerson-claimed-a. See also Julie Masis, “Look But Don’t Touch: Moscow’s Schneerson Collection Goes Online,” *Times of Israel*, June 27, 2017, www.timesofisrael.com/look-but-dont-touch-moscows-schneerson-collection-goes-online.

¹⁹ Raphael Ahren, “Sharansky Rails Against Peres for Thanking Russia for ‘Thousand Years of Hospitality,’” *Times of Israel*, November 13, 2012, www.timesofisrael.com/sharansky-rails-against-peres-for-thanking-russia-for-thousand-years-of-hospitality.

exhibit dedicated to the 1943 uprising of prisoners in the Sobibor death camp. In the press reports, Netanyahu spoke solely about the Holocaust on Soviet soil, without a word about the rich history of Jews embodied by the museum that surrounded that ancillary installation.²⁰ Whatever his comments, the truth remains: the museum in its totality offers an important corrective to this kind of selective reading of the East European Jewish past; whether leaders or laypeople chose to interact with that holistic picture is beyond our control.

Concluding Thoughts

Work on the museum was among the most rewarding experiences I have had as a historian. This cut two ways. It was an unequalled opportunity to pair knowledge with cutting edge-technology, not just with the written word. Furthermore, notwithstanding the concerns described above, thousands of weekly visitors will learn from the museum's exhibits, far more than will probably ever read whatever members of the Content Committee publish during their careers. In hindsight, this project underlined for me contemporary dilemmas in our field, particularly the significant differences between how western-trained scholars interpret Russian-Jewish history versus understandings of that same past among many of our colleagues from Eastern Europe; these gaps emerged mainly in our work with scholars brought onto the project in more temporary roles. Part of this is probably a product of a generational divide; most senior scholars in Eastern Europe completed their studies while still under the control of sovietized regimes and their official historiographies. It is surely true that we are all exposed in some measure to national narratives in the countries where we live. While I believe that the members of the Content Committee worked hard to neutralize their own biases during the design and writing processes, it is safe to say that the content of the museum reflects the western orientation of the Content Committee and the museum designers.

A prickly question hovered above our work, before and after the opening of the museum: would Chabad's religious conservatism, proximity to the Russian president, and financial support from powerful funders skew the scholarly integrity of the museum? Despite my apprehension at the start of this project—and the suspicions of some critics following the museum's inauguration—the owner, funders and Russian state were not obstacles to presenting Jewish history with scholarly integrity. Yes, some issues arose and are discussed above. My understanding from scholars who have participated in creating content for other historical museums leads me to believe that a measure of friction between scholars, designers, and owners is unavoidable. In the case of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, however, there were no significant interventions from Chabad or last-minute

²⁰ See Itamar Eichner, "Netanyahu: 'Neshek miduyak – iyum hamur; nifal b'Levanon im nitzarekh,'" *YNET*, January 29, 2018, ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340, L-5077906,00.html; Raphael Ahren, "Netanyahu Threatens to 'Stop' Iran if it Tries to Entrench Itself in Syria," *Times of Israel*, January 29, 2018, timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-threatens-to-stop-iran-if-it-tries-to-entrench-itself-in-syria.

changes to content before the museum opened. Looking into the future, however, evokes circumspection. One hopes that with the help of oversight and vision from an empowered academic committee, the museum will continue to embody the best of international scholarship on Russian Jewry delivered in new and intriguing ways to a growing and varied audience. As for the balance of power between historians and owners, private ownership of a worthy museum bestows rights upon those who initiate the project. I have no doubt, however, that whatever the ups and downs of its relationship with the owner, the Content Committee for the Moscow museum created a balanced, responsible, and thoroughly engaging narrative through a collegial planning process. I also have no doubt that this level of scholarly integrity would most certainly have been lacking in the museum's exhibits without our work. Scholars hired to consult on the content of a museum will not always enjoy an upper hand vis-à-vis owners or perhaps even designers. Rather, this experience demonstrated that to be successful in maintaining the integrity of a museum's content, scholars must be wise enough to minimize confrontational scenarios during the planning process and maximize the impact of their historical knowledge tempered by recognition of the overall goals and mechanisms of the project. In the end, good historical museums are built through the work of level heads, not egos.

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I would like to thank the Center for European Studies & Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University, where I first discussed the ideas contained in this essay during a lecture in 2016. I also thank Benjamin Nathans for his thoughtful comments on this essay.