

B'nai Gombin

Newsletter of the Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society



Gombin Synagogue. Painting by Miles Zhang. With permission, Minna Packer.

The Gombin Jewish Historical & Genealogical Society (GJHGS) is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization that seeks to educate the public about the history and genealogy of the Jews of Gombin. To achieve this goal, the GJHGS collects and publishes relevant materials, encourages historical and genealogical research, and undertakes activities aimed at preserving documents and relics of the culture and history of Jewish Gombin.

B'nai Gombin is the newsletter of the GJHGS. Everything published in *B'nai Gombin* is meant to provide information for Gombiners and their descendants. Articles, stories, poems, or other genres about Jewish genealogy, Poland, Gombin, or other subjects of interest to Gombiners may be published in *B'nai Gombin*. The views and opinions expressed in *B'nai Gombin* are not necessarily those of the Gombin Society. For further information, contact the Gombin Society by mail at 185 Skyline Drive, Highland Mills NY 10930 or by email.

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Polish Museum of Ethnography exhibit highlights Jewish Gombin

This issue of *B'nai Gombin* is both a trip-report and an encouragement for all Gombiners to visit Poland. The Guyer family – my sister Marilyn and her husband Michael Rice, Jane and I – spent 3 days in May, retracing the footsteps of our 1999 Gombin Society visit. Gombin is modernized, and the cemetery beautified by an avenue of plum trees along the walk from the gate to the memorial. Warsaw has regained its place as a cosmopolitan Eastern European capitol, with grand boulevards, fine restaurants, flower markets and first class hotels. The new museum to the history of the Polish Jews, *POLIN*, is full of visitors. Plock has renovated its only surviving synagogue into a charming small museum to the history of Jews in the Mazovia region. Chelmno, the site of the murder of Gombin's Jews in 1942, remains cold and foreboding; a site of pilgrimage and grief.



Here are some of our observations about each place, starting with the Ethnographic Museum, which will certainly become one of the centerpieces of our history and a destination for visitors.

Gombin at Ethnographic Museum

The Polish State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw features all the groups of historic Poland: their costumes and arts, and their ways of life- region by region. Most of this collection was destroyed during World War II, but little-by little the Museum's collections have been replaced and exhibits reconstructed.

Gombin at Ethnography Museum (continued from p1)

Arthur Stupay and Minna Packer provided connections to the Museum Director, Adam Czyzewski, and Assistant, Kamila Gogolewska, Set and Costume Designer for the Jewish Exhibit; they gave us a personal tour of the Jewish exhibit.



The Museum Director selected Gombin to represent the lives of small-town *shtetl* Jewish communities where people made modest livings and created communities side-by-side with others. They made this decision, in part because of Adam's personal connection to Gombin and because our websites have so much information and source material. It was a remarkable experience, especially to see their meticulous reconstruction of our shul, destroyed in 1939, as the centerpiece of the exhibit (below).



Wojciech Wasilewski, Michał Sikora, Adam Czyżewski: The Model of the Gąbin Synagogue

Among the images of the Synagogue are interior reconstructions of the seating, the location of the *bima* and *aron kodesh*, wall decorations, and other items.

In addition to the synagogue-related items, the exhibit shows a video loop of the 1938 Rafel film of Gombin, provided by the Gombin Society. There are numerous family and organization photographs that have been provided by Gombiner families, including spectacular photos donated by Aida Cutler (née Guyer), of Detroit, from the collection of her parents, Max (Chaya) and Zelda (née Teifeld).

The group photo of Gombin's *Hashomer Hatzair*, 1933, includes Meir Holtzman, father of Ada Holtzman. In addition, there are several photos of the Gostynski family including Ada's mother, Rifka.

The Museum is a treasure trove of all of our Gombiner families and a tribute to their lives before the War and the Shoah.

The State Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw

Conference Announcement- September 1-3, 2015

Jewish Ethnography and Folkloristics in Poland before 1945

“Before World War II, Jewish life and culture in Poland and Eastern Europe was studied by scholars from different countries and disciplines. They published in various languages: in German – in magazines like "Am-Urquell", "Globus" and "Mitteilungen zur Jüdischen Volkskunde"; in Polish – in "Izraelita", "Wisła" and "Lud"; in Russian – in "Voshod" and "Evreyskaya Starina"; and in Yiddish – in "Yidishe Filologye" and "Filologishe Shriften." We aim to restore the awareness of what these academics achieved, and thus present the full picture of how Jewish ethnography developed in Eastern Europe. It was precisely here, in Warsaw at the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries, that this group of folklorists used to meet. The Museum's section devoted to Jewish culture was an important part of the collection. During the Second World War the Museum's collection was completely destroyed.

“Remembering about this important time in its history, the Ethnographic Museum aims to recreate the Jewish collection by acquiring items still surviving in Poland, as well as by reconstructing them based on existing documents or creating replicas of selected artifacts found in other museums.” This scientific conference is part of that effort.

Program excerpts particularly relevant to Gombiners:

Michael Joseph Schudrich: Lecture on Abraham Gąbiner

Wojciech Wasilewski, Michał Sikora, Adam Czyżewski: The Model of the Gąbin Synagogue

Bella Szwarzman-Czarnota: Rejzl z Gabina. The Poet Rejzl Zychlinskiej



POLIN- Museum of the History of the Jews of Poland- “A journey of a thousand years”

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Program Director, Core Exhibition, POLIN

Shotcrete, steel, and glass meet handhewn wood at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Present meets past. The Museum's organic interior is interrupted by the reconstructed roof of the wooden synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec, near Lviv. Two buildings in one, two different stories, together they tell the story of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Visible from the main floor of the building, the synagogue roof is only partially shingled in order to expose its internal construction. Visible only from the exhibition level below, the painted synagogue ceiling is a celestial canopy. It expresses the spiritual yearnings and visual imagination of the Jews who prayed beneath its zodiac signs, messianic animals, and Hebrew texts.

There were once hundreds of such magnificent wooden synagogues in the historic territories of Poland. None of them have survived. The original object can never be recovered, but the knowledge of how to build it can – by actually building it. That is precisely what the Museum of the History of Polish Jews did, in collaboration with Handhouse Studio and the Timber Framers Guild. Handhouse Studio, an educational organization based in Massachusetts, is dedicated to the recovery of lost objects.

Together we enlisted almost 300 students, craftsmen, and scholars. Using traditional tools, techniques, and materials, they hewed logs and painted the ceiling in nine workshops across the length and breadth of Poland. The timber framing was completed at the Museum of Folk Architecture in Sanok. Each section of the painted ceiling was created in a workshop held at



synagogues in Gdansk, Sejny, Kazimierz Dolny, Zamość, Wrocław, Szczepleszyn, and Kazimierz (Kraków). The result is a new kind of artifact. However exquisite it may be, its value is exponentially greater because of the way in which it was created – a collective process that recovered the knowledge of how to build it.

The synagogue on which our reconstruction is based once stood in Gwoździec, near Lviv. It was first built in the 17th century, renovated in the 18th century, destroyed during World War I, and brought to life again at 85% scale in the 21st century. We chose this synagogue because it is so well documented, thanks to the efforts of such historians of synagogue architecture as Karol Maszkowski, Alois Breier, Szymon Zajczyk, and Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka. Its creation is the centerpiece of the gallery dedicated to Jewish life in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and points to the architectural nature of the exhibition as a whole.

Unlike many other museums, which begin with the building and then consider what to put in it,

the Museum of the History of Polish Jews was built from the inside out. The brief to the architects who entered the competition for this museum included the Masterplan for the exhibition, which was completed in 2003. As a result, the exhibition sits snugly in the lowest level of the building, and visitors will navigate it intuitively. At several points, the gallery space soars from the very bottom to the very top of the building.

When visitors enter the exhibition from the main floor, they descend a grand staircase and enter a poetic forest, a space of historical imagination, a space of time before time. Here, visitors encounter the stories Jews told themselves about how they came to Poland and why they stayed. A voice from heaven called out: “Po-lin,” which sounds like “Rest here” in Hebrew. This, according to Jewish legend, is how Poland got its name. Visitors will leave their 21st-century world and release themselves into the space of our story.

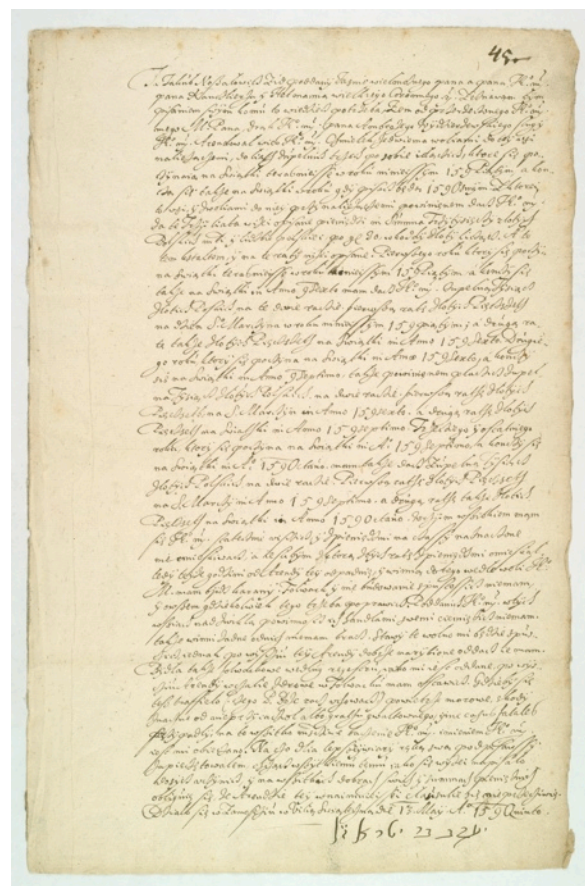
More a theatre of history than a display of objects in vitrines, the exhibition uses the principle of narrative space to present the 1000-year history of Polish Jews. An exhibition is not only a visual experience. Above all, it is a spatial experience. Only if the visitor moves does the story unfold – in a particular place, in a specific moment, not simply in the abstract space of a gallery. Scenography plays a vital role in defining the space of the story. Our approach is more black box than white cube, more theatre than gallery. Each of the seven historical galleries has its unique architecture and scenography.

When visitors enter the hand-painted medieval gallery, they will cross the threshold between legend and history. They experience a shift from night to day, from forest to clearing, from the first signs of Jewish presence in the 11th century to the creation of complete Jewish communities,

at least 50 of them, by 1500. The entire gallery will be hand painted.

As they enter the next gallery, Paradisus Iudaeorum, visitors have a spectacular view of a 50 square metre topographical model of Kraków and nearby Kazimierz. The city is animated by a panoramic multimedia projection directly onto its three-dimensional surface, inviting the interaction of visitors, who become walkers in the city.

Exiting this open plan gallery, which presents the rise of Jewish civilization in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, visitors then enter the intimate space of the private noble town. This story is set in the period following the 1648



Original contract dated 1595 between a Jew, Jakub Nossalowicz, and a landowner, Jan Zamoyslin, for the lease of land. With permission POLIN; from Central Archives of Historical Records, Warsaw.

Khmelnitsky uprising and other cataclysmic events that decimated Jewish communities and left the Commonwealth in ruins. It was in these towns, where Jews made up a large percentage of the population, that a distinctive form of Jewish settlement emerged. Never a literal recreation, such settings are composed from projections of period images on facades of thematic spaces – marketplace, tavern, home, and church.



In contrast with the intangible media of light, sound, and projection, the painted ceiling and roof of the wooden synagogue that are the centerpiece of this gallery are tangible. Every mark on every timber tells the story of the specific tool, specific building tradition, and the unique hand that held the tool. The timbers are “signed” thanks to these marks. The names of donors have been inscribed on the pegs that hold the whole structure together.

With the partitioning of the Commonwealth, modernity challenged the integral Jewish way of life that flourished in the Jewish towns of the Commonwealth. A multimedia railway station symbolizes the rapid pace of change. The story of Jewish life in the partitions during the long 19th century comes to an end with World War I and the collapse of the empires.

The centerpiece of the interwar years gallery that follows is a multimedia interwar street created with projections on relief street facades. Some historians have described this short period as a “second golden age”, despite economic hardship and rising antisemitism during the late 1930s.

Perhaps the clearest example of story space expressed architecturally is the Warsaw ghetto section of the Holocaust gallery. “Life in the shadow of death” is set in claustrophobic spaces dedicated to various themes – the walls are slanted, the atmosphere disorienting and anxious. Visitors climb stairs and stand on a bridge like the one that lead joined two parts of the Warsaw ghetto. Like those in the Warsaw ghetto, they look down on the “Aryan street” and see what seems like normal life. Visitors will encounter the reality of that world – occupied Poland under German terror – only when they exit from the second part of the Warsaw ghetto, “life in the face of death”, and enter the “Aryan street” from below. They then see what they saw from the bridge, but from a new perspective. What seemed normal is suddenly revealed as a terrifying reality – up close and on the ground.

The story of Poland’s 3,300,000 Jews does not end with the Holocaust. For those few who survived, the dilemma was whether to stay or to leave. The two options confront each other on opposing walls that line the gallery. By 1989, although there were very few Jews in Poland, there were also signs of the renewal of Jewish life on a small scale and growing Jewish presence in Polish consciousness. Again visitors experience the historical moment architecturally. They now find themselves in the very space of the building itself – a space that soars from the lowest to the highest level, a space filled with natural light and hope.

Update on Plum Trees at the Gombin Cemetery

We returned to the Gombin Jewish Cemetery to find that the two rows of plum trees had survived the harsh Polish winter and were flourishing as young saplings; thanks to the Florkiewicz family.

Plum trees were selected for this project because they are traditional in the Gombin area. Plum-tree orchards were located on the estates of Polish land-owners, usually aristocratic families.

Commemorative plaques will be placed at in the cemetery. Gombin Society members can honor a relative with a dedicated plaque. Contact Arthur Gertzman www.gombinsociety.org to make a donation to support the project.



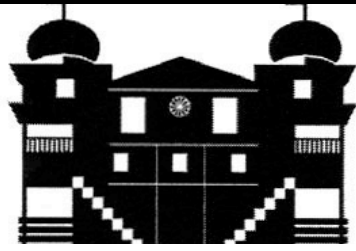
Visits to Plock Museum and Chelmno Memorial

We visited the old synagogue in Plock (pronounced Pwotsk), whose renovation as a museum to the history of Jews of the Mazovia region is now complete. The last time we saw this building it was an abandoned, derelict warehouse that had survived the War. The interior contains the *Aron Kodesh* of the original synagogue that was discovered during the renovation.

We said Kaddish for those buried at Chelmno. The site is as foreboding, cold and windy and as overcast as ever. Too many of our ancestors are buried there. The Gombin monument is in good shape; there are even more plaques to Gombiner families on the wall of remembrance. We recalled the work of Leon Zamocz and others who organized the first Gombin trip. More research has been carried out by our friend, the Chelmno Archeologist, Krysztof Gorczyca.

The people we met were generous and interested, everywhere! We were especially grateful to the Florkiewicz family for hosting us for lunch at the farm in Grabie Polski, outside of Gombin.





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MAILING ADDRESS: 185 Skyline Drive, Highland Mills NY 10930

WEBSITE URL: www.gombinsociety.org



**305 Tuscany Rd.
Baltimore MD 21210**