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# Institutions of difference and disappearance: reinterpreting the Łódź Ghetto's planned Jewish religious and cultural exhibition in global comparative perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Between 1941 and 1943, German authorities in the Łódź Ghetto oversaw plans for a Jewish Museum with an exhibition on Jewish religious and cultural life. Curated by ghetto inhabitants, the project was never realized. While historians have speculated on how the exhibition might have fit into National Socialist ideology and propaganda, key questions remain unresolved. This article traces the exhibition's development and revisits earlier interpretations in light of new and rarely discussed sources. It concludes that a broader perspective, which considers the problematic role of museums in producing cultural hierarchies, offers an additional angle for interpreting the planned exhibition.

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In the autumn of 1941, the German Ghetto Administration (*Ghettoverwaltung*) in the Łódź (Litzmannstadt) Ghetto were overseeing the creation of a Jewish Museum. One planned museum exhibition would focus on the ghetto's industries, while the other would showcase religious and cultural aspects of Eastern European Jewish life. Jewish ghetto inhabitants employed in the *wissenschaftliche Abteilung* (Scientific Department) led by Rabbi Emanuel Hirschberg undertook the collection of religious and cultural objects for this exhibition and the creation of other exhibits like paintings. The establishment of a Jewish Museum, which contained a religious and cultural exhibition, is notable given the wider events occurring at the time. By the summer of 1942, the German authorities were deporting Jews from the Łódź Ghetto to the nearby town of Chełmno nad Nerem, where, in the first extermination center of the Second World War, thousands were murdered in gas vans. The Museum ultimately never opened but, given that the Holocaust was already underway during its planning, historians have raised questions as to why the German ghetto authorities were interested in exhibiting elements of Jewish religious and cultural life. Despite the unusual nature of the case, an in-depth investigation of the topic has not appeared in English-language literature. It has, however, been discussed in German-language publications by scholars such as Tanja Kinzel and Dirk Rupnow, in

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Polish by Irmina Gadowska and briefly discussed in English by Gordon J. Horwitz, as well as being mentioned in certain edited source collections.<sup>1</sup>

While these scholars have reconstructed the planning of the Museum and proposed theories for understanding the impetus behind its creation, I argue that by reassessing these arguments, revisiting the sources and introducing rarely discussed and new source material, it becomes apparent that many questions still remain open. The aforementioned source material relates to photographic evidence of several objects destined for the exhibition which have either not featured or have not been prominently discussed in literature to date.<sup>2</sup> Evidence of other exhibits which feature in a postwar documentary and a postwar survivor interview which references the exhibition have also not yet been analyzed, as far as the author is aware, in other investigations of the Museum.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, reexamining the case also offers an opportunity to employ analytical perspectives which have recently become more commonplace in Holocaust Studies, namely the application of broader global contexts. I argue that by reading the case outside the category of National Socialist exhibitions and by analyzing it alongside a theoretical investigation of museums, specifically those with ethnological and colonial collections, new light can be shed on the case of the planned religious and cultural exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I first introduce the plans for the Jewish Museum in the Łódź Ghetto and outline the central figures involved. Though early correspondence about the Museum indicates that it was planned to have at least three rooms for exhibitions, including one for economic and administrative materials and one for Eastern European Jewish religious and cultural life, this article will focus on the latter. The impetus of the economic exhibition is obvious from the sources; it would showcase the production capacity of the ghetto industries and the variety of equipment already installed there. By doing so, companies from Germany which manufactured products for the *Wehrmacht* and for private customers could better decide what products could be more efficiently produced in the East.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the Ghetto Administration's reason for including an exhibition on Eastern European Jewish religion and culture and its narrative are more ambiguous. I highlight this by reexamining known sources, the newly uncovered evidence of the exhibits and the conflicting opinions of individuals who witnessed the exhibition preparations. Next, I engage with the historiography on the Museum and reassess previous scholarly interpretations in light of the newer material. I consider how the Museum project and what can be known about the religious and cultural exhibition compares or differs from examples of other National Socialist exhibitions and museums. This investigation highlights a number of open questions about the impetus behind the exhibition and its role. To help better answer these questions, I go on to provide a theoretical examination of the historical role of museums in general, specifically how they operated as institutional producers and facilitators of cultural hierarchies. By placing the planned exhibition within this wider context, I argue that scholars can gain an additional avenue of interpretation and form a more complete picture of the case.

## **A Jewish museum in the Ghetto**

The German authorities officially established the Łódź Ghetto on 8 February 1940 and on 30 April, they sealed it, thus isolating its Jewish inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> The ghetto became the second-largest next to the Warsaw Ghetto; by August 1940, an estimated 160,000 Jews

were living there.<sup>7</sup> As the German authorities filled the ghetto, survival became increasingly difficult. It lacked sufficient food supplies and medication. Diseases such as tuberculosis, typhus and dysentery, whose spread were facilitated by overcrowding, caused the mortality rate to rise. Over 40,000 Łódź Ghetto inhabitants died of starvation and disease.<sup>8</sup> Throughout its existence, the ghetto became an industrial center supported by the availability of cheap Jewish labor. Ghetto inhabitants manufactured such items as clothes, shoes and textiles, and military uniforms, weapons and equipment. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski (1877–1944), Head of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council), justified his efforts to create work for as many people as possible with the argument that the productivity of the ghetto and the high employment figures contributed to survival.<sup>9</sup>

The first mention of plans for a museum in the Łódź Ghetto seems to have occurred in a letter from Hans Biebow (1902–1947), the Head of the German Ghetto Administration, to his deputy Friedrich Wilhelm Ribbe (1902–1948) on 23 September 1941.<sup>10</sup> Although it provides no background information on the timing or nature of the instructions, Biebow's letter indicates that Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), Head of the NSDAP Office of Foreign Affairs, the *Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage* (Institute for Research of the Jewish Question) and the *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg* (*Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce*, ERR), had 'allegedly' (*angeblich*) ordered the creation of a museum. Biebow wrote that Herr Barek (first name unknown), from the municipal library, could provide more information. Biebow added that Ribbe should call Barek about the establishment of the 'Jewish Museum' and mentioned that they wanted to create an exhibition within their department which dealt with the Jewish religion, addressed statistical and criminal ghetto matters and should connect to a model room about the items manufactured in the ghetto.<sup>11</sup>

A few weeks later in October 1941, Walter Genewein (1901–1974), the Ghetto Administration's Head of Finance and an avid photographer now known for his series of ghetto photos, provided similar details. The Museum was initially envisaged to have three rooms: one for religious items, one for profane and criminal exhibits and one for economic and administrative materials.<sup>12</sup> Although correspondence appears to be missing after October 1941, later letters reveal that the collection of objects and preparation of museum exhibits was already underway in late spring and early summer of 1942. In April, Biebow wrote to Rumkowski requesting extra food rations for Professor Emanuel Hirschberg (also spelt Hirszberg or Herszberg), the employees collaborating with him on the Museum and his two daughters. He additionally instructed that Hirschberg should receive the support of all ghetto departments so he could do what Biebow had asked him to on the topic of statistics.<sup>13</sup> No further context was provided on what kind of statistics Hirschberg was to work on. The same day, 28 April, Biebow issued an attestation for Hirschberg stating that he was working in the Ghetto Administration on the establishment of a museum. To this end, Biebow permitted Hirschberg to bring cultural and religious items in and out of the ghetto.<sup>14</sup>

On 5 May, Biebow officially designated Hirschberg's group of workers as *Arbeitsresort des Ältesten der Juden, wissenschaftliche Abteilung* (Workshop of the Jewish Elder, Scientific Department).<sup>15</sup> Hirschberg wrote to the Ghetto Administration on 19 May and mentioned that on that day, Rumkowski had brought him in as the academic leader of the Scientific Department.<sup>16</sup> A few weeks later, the *Ghetto Chronicle* entry on 22 June 1942 noted that 'effectively no one in the ghetto' was aware of the department.<sup>17</sup> The entry explained that the department was preparing exhibits for a museum in the city

and was planning a second museum in the ghetto with duplicate exhibits. It described the museum's task as portraying 'the life of the Jews of Eastern Europe.'<sup>18</sup> As will be discussed later, this was perhaps an error given that plans for two museums were not mentioned in the Ghetto Administration correspondence.

The head of the Scientific Department, Emanuel Hirschberg, born in 1894 in a village west of Warsaw named Aleksandrów, was a rabbi, writer and poet who lived in Łódź before the war.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, he was already in contact with Rumkowski in September 1941 in an apparent dispute with Rumkowski's representative Leon Rosenblatt (commander of the Jewish Police) regarding where Hirschberg would be employed within the ghetto.<sup>20</sup> Hirschberg's protests against a physical labor placement were successful because by the end of May 1942, he was leading the Scientific Department. Earlier documents from the end of April 1942 reveal the names, birth years and addresses of the department employees working on preparing the museum exhibits in Hirschberg's apartment. Those listed were Hirschberg's daughter, Lotte (also known as Złata, 1919-?), Izrael Lejzerowicz (1902-1944) and three German women from Hamburg.<sup>21</sup> Lejzerowicz, an established painter who lived and worked in Łódź before the war, led an artistic-literary salon in the ghetto for painters, sculptors, poets and writers.<sup>22</sup> Investigations of ghetto housing lists reveal the recorded occupations of the three women; Nelly Kuppermann (1920-?) was a tailor, Rebecca Rothschild (1897-?) was a teacher and Anna Cohen (spelt Kohen in Hirschberg's list, 1885-1944) was a painter.<sup>23</sup> Cohen, who also went by the name Cohn-Schwerin, trained at the *Münchner Künstlerinnen-Verein* (Munich Female Artists' Society), the *Académie Ranson* in Paris and was a member of the Hamburg and Munich *Kunstverein* (Arts Society).<sup>24</sup> In early May, Hirschberg named two more female employees who were working with him.<sup>25</sup> One was the Polish poet and sculptor Melania Fogelbaum (1911-1944) from Łódź whose ghetto poems survived the war and the other was named Carmela Tenenblum (1921-?).<sup>26</sup>

Oskar Rosenfeld (1884-1944), the Austrian-Jewish writer, publicist and contributor to the *Ghetto Chronicle* and *Ghetto Encyclopedia*, reported that overall there were two painters, two graphic artists and 18 artistically trained, mainly German, female employees working with Hirschberg.<sup>27</sup> A complete employee list has yet to be located in the archival material, but, in addition to Lejzerowicz, Rosenfeld provided the names of the two graphic artists, Jakob Schwarz and Hirsch Feldman, and the second painter, 'Hersch Schilis,' also known as Tzvi-Hirsch or Zvi-Hirsch Szylis (1909-1987).<sup>28</sup> Szylis was born in Bełchatów, Poland and was a former student of the well-known Polish-Jewish artist Maurycy Trębacz who died in the Łódź Ghetto in 1941.<sup>29</sup> As will be discussed later, although his name does not appear in any correspondence, the artist and sculptor Yitzchak (also known as Vincent, or Icchok) Brauner (1887-1944) was also working with the department.

### Collection of religious and cultural objects

Lists from the end of April 1942 detail the extensive range of items which the department had collected presumably for the religious and cultural exhibition. The items included Jewish religious objects such as Hanukkah menorahs, besamim boxes, an etrog holder, a Torah plate, Torah scroll fragments, prayer shawls (tallit), hats and four pairs of tefillin. There were also personal objects such as books, a family photo album, pictures, a coffee set, sugar bowl, snuff box and savings book.<sup>30</sup> The Jewish painters and graphic

designers were commissioned to create paintings and drawings of scenes of Jewish life in and out of the ghetto and to make sculptures and models for display. For example, Hirschberg mentioned that Lejzerowicz was working on a piece titled 'Reception of the Queen Sabbath' (*Empfang der Königin Sabbath*).<sup>31</sup> In an unpublished volume of his diary, Rosenfeld described other religious paintings created by the Scientific Department such as 'Koirim during Yom Kippur' by Lejzerowicz and paintings depicting subjects of ghetto life such as the Jewish Police, a city silhouette and the sewage transport workers by Szylis.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps most interesting was the department's creation of figurines for display in different thematic scenes. Rosenfeld described the glass vitrines housing them as approximately '2 meters long, 80 cm high and 70 cm deep' while 'the figurines are about the size of figures in a puppet theater.'<sup>33</sup> Photographic evidence of a Jewish wedding scene (described by Rosenfeld as 'A Hasidic Wedding in Poland') survive to this day in the Yad Vashem Archive, albeit with no details of their origin in the online archive descriptions. The photos demonstrate how detailed the figurines were, as well as their elaborate clothes and props (Figures 1–2).<sup>34</sup> These photos also appear as negatives in an album titled '*Art-Reproduktionen, Passaufnahmen, Wissenschaftliche-Abteilung, Studia*' (Reproductions, Identification Photos, Scientific Department, Studies).<sup>35</sup> Although the date of the photos and the photographer cannot be determined, given their presence in this album alongside several portrait photos, they were potentially taken by Mendel Grossman (1913–1945), Henryk Ross (1910–1991) or Lajb Maliniak (1908–1945). All three were employed by the ghetto Statistics Department to record ghetto workshop products and take identification photos.<sup>36</sup> In the surviving photos, the wedding scene is arranged atop a wooden table and the photos, which are a mixture of wide and close-up shots, appear to have been taken outside given the condition of the background wall but also the lack of shadows caused by a flash or indoor lighting. This suggests they were set up outside specifically for the photos.



**Figure 1.** Figurines in a simulation of a wedding scene, Łódź, Poland. (Source: Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem 7317/3817, Item ID: 5740054).



**Figure 2.** (Clockwise from top left): Close-ups of figurines in a simulation of a wedding scene, Łódź, Poland. (Source: Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem 7317/3823, Item ID: 5740060, 7317/3818, Item ID: 5740055 and 7317/3825, Item ID: 5740062).

Other photos exist of figurines in various scenes, which were most likely also designated for the Museum, and a diorama with one-dimensional figures depicting a resettlement to the ghetto. The diorama, made of plywood, fiberboard and sheet metal, survived the war and is held in the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw.<sup>37</sup> Newly-uncovered footage of both the figurines and the diorama, as well as paintings and sculptures (of which some were presumably made or collected by the Scientific Department) appear in the Yiddish-language documentary *Mir Lebngelibene* (*We Who Remain*), produced in the immediate postwar period. The narrator mentions that the items were collected after the war by the ‘Historical Commission Łódź’ and notes that the figurines’ creator was Yitzhak Brauner (mentioned in the previous section).<sup>38</sup> Despite not being listed as an employee of the department in Hirschberg’s lists or by Rosenfeld, it is almost a certainty that Brauner was one of the figurine sculptors given that he was a founder of the first Yiddish puppet theater, *Chad-Gadya* (also spelt *Khad-Gadya* or *Chad-Gadyo*), in Łódź in 1923 and created puppets for performances there.<sup>39</sup>

Although the figurines are, at least based on the photos and documentary, well-made and finely detailed, Rosenfeld’s opinion of them hints at his fears regarding the intentions of the German authorities and the planned exhibition. Rosenfeld criticized the figurines, noting how they appeared ‘as partly caricaturist, partly symbolic’ for several reasons. These included that the figures were *en masse*, for example in the Hasidic wedding set-up, thus the scenes ‘exhausted the given theme.’ The costumes, which would usually come to life through movement, appeared stiff resulting in a ‘mummy-like,’ ‘comical,’ ‘caricaturist’ effect. Similarly, he criticized how the figures appeared crowded together and

touching off each other. Characters were included who ‘are socially completely different.’ According to Rosenfeld, this appeared ludicrous.<sup>40</sup> He described how the ‘exaggerated finery, the obtrusiveness of the colors, the pathos of the gestures, the muteness – movement without a word – creates the impression of the grotesque.’<sup>41</sup> Referring to the German authorities’ role and their assumedly negative motivations behind the figurines’ creation, Rosenfeld concluded; ‘the person responsible for the groups of figures has taken into account the taste and intentions of those who want to use this exhibition for their own purposes.’<sup>42</sup> In his *Encyclopedia* Scientific Department entry, Rosenfeld revealed that ‘suspicion arises that such a figurative presentation was created deliberately in order to justify, or even to give reasons for the annihilation of the compelling folklore world.’<sup>43</sup> As Gadowska points out, Rywa Kwiatkowska, who visited the Scientific Department several times, and Bernard Ostrowski, a Polish contributor to the *Encyclopedia*, had similarly negative opinions. Kwiatkowska noted that one should not discuss political issues with Hirschberg and that even criticism of his ‘graphomaniac scribbblings’ was enough to risk the attention of the Gestapo. Then, she speculated, ‘tomorrow each of us may be nothing more than a type in his display case.’ Ostrowski described how the exhibition was intended to represent ‘Jewish types’ but they ‘reinforced stereotypical images of *Ostjuden* [Eastern Jews]: none of their faces had human charm, no face was pretty.’<sup>44</sup>

The negative opinions and Rosenfeld’s apparent fear that the Germans would use the exhibits for detrimental purposes is certainly understandable; yet some of the criticism seems puzzling when one closely examines the photos of the figurines. For example, although the wedding scene does appear somewhat crowded, the figurines wear delicate accessories such as hats, socks, shoes and bows. Standing under a *chuppah* (wedding canopy), the bride wears a long veil and a child holding flowers accompanies her.<sup>45</sup> Other figurines hold small musical instruments. The scene does not appear particularly absurd and, as noted in the 22 June 1942 *Chronicle* entry presumably not written by Rosenfeld, ‘the execution of these dolls demonstrates a very high artistic level and precision’ in the heads and hands, which were made of modeling clay, and also the garments.<sup>46</sup>

Abraham Biderman also saw the wedding scene first hand and similarly described it in a positive light. He stated that the figurines were ‘artistically and beautifully made’ and ‘their clothing had been sewn in the most minute detail, cleanly and precisely in the traditional Eastern European style.’<sup>47</sup> In a newly discovered postwar interview, Leon Kowner also discussed his impressions of the figurines. Kowner, nephew of the Polish artist Josef Kowner, worked as an assistant in the Scientific Department for six months where he became friends with Melania Fogelbaum who was also working there. He recalled approximately eight to ten display cases with posed scenes including the wedding and Passover eve. When asked about the goal of the Museum, he said it was clear to those there that Jews would not come to see it as it had ‘no educational purpose.’ However, he pointed out that the scenes were not ‘built in any antisemitic or anti-Jewish way,’ that it was ‘really life as it was let’s say fifty or maybe forty years ago ... before the World War.’ Members of the German military and SS personnel would visit the department from time to time. Kowner thought of the figurines in the same way as Biderman; as far as he could remember, they were ‘very beautiful.’<sup>48</sup>

Rosenfeld was not an Eastern European or Orthodox Jew and while Kwiatkowska and Ostrowski were Polish, it may be the case that they identified less with the Orthodox, or specifically Hasidic, culture which the figurines supposedly represented. Their criticisms were also likely fueled by suspicions surrounding the use of what they considered to be

likenesses of *Ostjuden*. Yet, Biderman and Kowner appeared to find this less problematic. Perhaps because, as Kowner explained, the scenes were meant to represent historical not contemporary scenes. Nevertheless, if one compares the wedding figurines to those which feature in *Mir Lebngelibene*, some do appear to be more offensive. Specifically, one set of figurines depicts the ghetto sewage transport (potentially based on the painting by Szyllis mentioned by Rosenfeld). These bent over figurines, along with another which appears in the documentary, wear rags and are notably haggard looking.<sup>49</sup> Apart from these examples, however, the other two scenes do not appear to portray Jews in a conspicuously negative way. In one scene, two figurines sit at a wooden table opposite one another with books in front of them. One sits on a carved wooden chair and the other on a wooden bench, posed as though they are deep in conversation.<sup>50</sup> The other scene features five men gathered around a table (Figure 3). Open books lie in front of them, a picture hangs on the wall and one man peers behind what may be a *parochet* (curtain covering the Torah scrolls) in the background.<sup>51</sup> This scene is potentially 'Monday Torah Reading at the Bet Midrash' mentioned by Rosenfeld.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the photos of the wedding scene, this photo was likely taken after the war, potentially by the Jewish Historical Commission, given its appearance in *Mir Lebngelibene*.<sup>53</sup>

In Figure 3, at least one sitting figurine wears a somewhat tattered coat; however, the scene appears ordered and the outfits are highly detailed. Similarly, in the wedding scene, the figurines on the right of the scene (Figure 2), specifically those holding the musical instruments, wear simpler clothes than those on the left. For example, the ladies wear ornate dresses or coats trimmed with fur (Figure 2). Rosenfeld was correct that characters from different social classes are oddly placed in a scene together. The intention behind this, according to Rosenfeld, was negative. From another perspective, however, it is possible that the artists were attempting to represent a wide variety of Jewish social classes and



**Figure 3.** Figurines of people sitting and learning, Łódź, Poland. (Source: Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem 3331/136, Item ID: 71011).

utilized artistic license by placing representatives of Jews from all walks of life together. As the *Chronicle* noted, the painters, sculptors and assistants were making figurines which represented ‘the most diverse figures in the Jewish world.’<sup>54</sup> It could also conceivably be the case that the scene distinguishes the finery worn by wedding guests from the clothing worn by the musicians.

Aside from Rosenfeld’s negative perceptions, even more perplexing questions exist about the exhibits given the backdrop of the Holocaust. By the summer of 1942, while the preparations for the Museum were underway, the German authorities in the *Reichsgau* Wartheland were already perpetrating mass murder. From early 1942, the *Sonderkommando Lange*, stationed at the newly erected extermination center at Chełmno, began to receive transports of Sinti, Roma and Jewish inhabitants from the nearby Łódź Ghetto and later from surrounding districts. While the Germans murdered an estimated 150,000 people during the initial phase at Chełmno between December 1941 and March 1943, Biebow was simultaneously planning to exhibit, and therefore preserve, elements of Jewish religion and culture in a museum for German visitors.<sup>55</sup>

### The end of the planning

During the summer of 1942, Biebow’s representative Ribbe exchanged letters with the Reich Propaganda Ministry (*Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*) in a failed attempt to obtain official approval for the planned Museum. In June 1942, an advisor working in the Trade Fairs and Exhibitions Department of the Reich Propaganda Ministry named Maiwald (first name unknown) dismissed not only the plans for the religious and cultural exhibition but also the one on ghetto industries. He doubted the economic value that the industrial exhibition could bring and expressed concern about the potential competition it would pose to other factories in Łódź.<sup>56</sup> Regarding the religious and cultural exhibition, Maiwald made his views expressly clear. In no way could he agree with the plan. On the one hand, he argued that other large exhibitions and traveling exhibitions had dealt with the Jewish question. On the other hand, given the removal of Jews from the *Volksgemeinschaft*, they or their lives should not be interesting or an object of curiosity to onlookers who ‘should be satisfied that through the establishment of the ghetto, the Jew has disappeared from their sphere of life.’<sup>57</sup> In a letter to the Wartheland Reich Propaganda Office in August 1942, Ribbe attempted to defend the religious and cultural exhibition noting it would be a ‘condensed overview’ intended ‘to answer questions that were raised about the Jews living in the ghetto.’ He went on to list some items which would be included and noted that the illustrations would demonstrate such aspects as ‘the primitive methods of human waste disposal’ and ‘the poor housing culture.’ He verified that ‘such an exhibition is by no means intended to be interesting to the viewer, but only repulsive.’<sup>58</sup>

Despite the German Ghetto Administration’s best efforts, Maiwald and the Reich Propaganda Ministry remained unconvinced. On 28 January 1943, Maiwald made clear in a letter to the Propaganda Office, which Biebow received a copy of, that ‘whether one wants to exhibit Jewish customs, Jewish misery or ‘unculture,’ such an exhibition has nothing to do with an economic exhibition and cannot be successful.’<sup>59</sup> The Museum’s creation had previously seemed certain given the consistent planning throughout much of 1942. Biebow had even decided on a location for it (the former hospital at *Hanseatenstraße*

37) in November of that year.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, a few months after Maiwald's correspondence, the work of the Scientific Department stopped on 13 April 1943 on Biebow's orders.<sup>61</sup> The *Ghetto Chronicle* recorded the reason for the closure was Hirschberg required wire for the figurines, but wire was rationed and reserved for war-related production. The entry included the opinion that 'the closure of this department is not in itself lamentable.'<sup>62</sup> On 24 June, the *Chronicle* noted how an official letter on 2 May to Rumkowski from the Ghetto Administration confirmed the department's closure and it was disbanded by Rumkowski on the day of the *Chronicle* entry, 24 June 1943.<sup>63</sup> The next day's entry clarified that the department had 35 employees of which 28 were reassigned to other workshops while seven, including Hirschberg, would remain working until the department was liquidated.<sup>64</sup> In July 1943, Rosenfeld recorded in the *Chronicle* how Biebow visited the Scientific Department to view the figurines set up there. Hirschberg requested permission to finish approximately two hundred figurines with the help of five workers; one of whom was Lejzerowicz and another was Szylis. Biebow agreed to Hirschberg's request 'so that all the Eastern Jewish groups that had been envisaged would now be completed.'<sup>65</sup> The work was expected to take three months; however, the *Chronicle* does not mention it again and further updates have yet to be found in Biebow's or Rumkowski's correspondence. Hirschberg and the employees of the department all appear to have avoided deportation from the ghetto until its liquidation in August 1944 when they were transported to Auschwitz. Szylis was the only one of the listed employees to survive; the others all appear to have been murdered there in 1944.

### **Reassessing interpretations and categorizations**

The planning of the exhibition on Eastern European Jewish religious and cultural life is undoubtedly interesting and unusual, especially given the exhibition's timing and its location. The Germans were murdering hundreds of Jews from the ghetto and destroying not only their lives but also their cultural presence. Yet, at the same time and place from where trains were transporting ghetto inhabitants to the extermination center at Chelmno, the German Ghetto Administration employed Jews to collect objects and create new ones representing Jewish religion and culture. The German plans for the exhibition were certainly driven by antisemitism but a complete picture of exactly what role such an exhibition would fulfill is missing from the available source material. In an effort to better form a complete picture, historians have proposed various theories as to where the idea for the exhibition came from, what were the motivations behind its creation and how the planned Museum and exhibition related to other National Socialist exhibitions. In the following subsections, I discuss several of these interpretations and reassess them in light of the aforementioned analysis of older and new source material and visual evidence. In doing so, I highlight where ambiguity about the exhibition still exist.

### ***Personal ambitions and competition?***

In her article, Tanja Kinzel suggests that Biebow's career ambitions were potentially a driving force behind the Museum plans. Showcasing the ghetto's economic output with an exhibition on ghetto industries and securing new business opportunities could personally enrich him as head of the ghetto. The Scientific Department's Jewish workers undoubtedly needed, like the rest of the ghetto inhabitants, to keep the ghetto

as economically productive for as long as possible to secure their survival and this was likely the reason behind their involvement.<sup>66</sup> Thus, economically speaking, creating an exhibition on ghetto industries for the Museum overlapped with some of Biebow's potential motivations. Additionally, based on certain correspondence, Kinzel suggests that Biebow wished to get closer to Reinhard Heydrich, Head of the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, RSHA). To do so, Biebow attempted to portray himself as an expert on the 'Jewish Question' and this desire may have been his reason behind the inclusion of the religious and cultural exhibition in the Museum.<sup>67</sup> While Kinzel's interpretation certainly offers a potential explanation for Biebow's involvement and, indeed the involvement of the Jewish workers, the theory of financial motivation better aligns with the ghetto industries exhibition than the religious and cultural one. Moreover, it seems unlikely that Biebow's motivation behind including the religious and cultural exhibition can be attributed to attempts to get closer to Heydrich. Heydrich died in Prague on 4 June 1942, but as correspondence shows, the Museum planning continued until April 1943 and Biebow and his representatives made a clear effort to resist the shelving of the plans.

Another potential interpretation is that Biebow may have been influenced by the SS-led Jewish Central Museum in Prague, a well-known example of a museum during National Socialism staffed by Jewish employees. This museum could have posed competition for Biebow's Ghetto Museum and, unlike the Ghetto Museum, the Jewish Central Museum did not require the approval of the Propaganda Ministry as it was located in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>68</sup> Though Jan Björn Potthast, the author of the main publication on the Prague Central Museum, mentions that the planned Łódź Museum was a Jewish initiative, as discussed in this article, the sources indicate this was not the case. Furthermore, as Kinzel has also pointed out, the first mention of the planned Łódź Museum occurred before the idea of the Central Museum in Prague, which first appeared at the beginning of 1942, and so the Prague Museum could not have been inspiration for the Museum in Łódź.<sup>69</sup>

### ***A Schandausstellung?***

In his discussion of the Museum planning, Dirk Rupnow does not discuss the potential of Biebow's personal ambitions as a motivation behind the Museum, as Kinzel does. However, he does also suggest shared interests behind the Jewish and German involvement in the planning. While some wished to help sustain the economic viability of the ghetto, others may have seen it as an opportunity for historical documentation which would survive even if the ghetto and those in it did not.<sup>70</sup> Indicating the contradiction between exhibiting and destruction, Rupnow highlights the struggles the Ghetto Administration faced in proving the value of an antisemitic exhibition to the Propaganda Ministry given that the deportation and murder of Jews, which was ultimately the end goal of the antisemitic propaganda, was already underway.<sup>71</sup>

Rupnow places his analysis of the Łódź Museum in a section titled '*Schandausstellung – Museum,*' where he discusses a number of other antisemitic propaganda exhibitions and the Prague Central Museum. *Schandausstellungen*, loosely translating to shame or derogatory exhibitions, were National Socialist propaganda exhibitions aimed at humiliation. One of the best known *Schandausstellungen* was *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*), which

opened in Munich in 1937. Here, the artwork was messily displayed in dimly lit, overfilled rooms with accompanying inflammatory captions and offensive jokes written on the walls.<sup>72</sup> This particular type of exhibition may initially appear helpful in pointing to a propaganda motivation behind the planned religious and cultural exhibition. However, upon closer inspection, a number of factors do not align. While the exhibits destined for the religious and cultural exhibition could have been displayed in a chaotic way, the sources do not clearly indicate if this was planned. The *Degenerate Art* exhibition's purpose was to openly ridicule and humiliate both German non-Jewish and Jewish artists but also assumedly to dissuade the public from any future appreciation of such art. It was as much about rejecting modernist and progressive art movements, such as Expressionism, Cubism and Dadaism, as it was about racial policies. Conversely, the sources from the Łódź Ghetto show that the Scientific Department were creating art depicting Jewish religious subjects which, based on the known style of the painters involved, did not fall under the modernist art category.

Another prominent example of a *Schandausstellung* was *Der ewige Jude* (*The Wandering Jew*), which opened in Munich in November 1937. As Rosemarie Burgstaller describes, the exhibition was set up with dramatic lighting, color effects, wallpaper-like photo montages, sloping walls and low ceilings to create an oppressive atmosphere. It featured photographs and wax figures displaying supposed racial and biological signifiers of Jewishness, as well as portraits of several Jewish personalities from the sciences, politics and cinema, for example Charlie Chaplin. Freemason ritual items such as skeletons and skulls were also included. Burgstaller argues *The Wandering Jew* exhibition can ultimately be understood as similar to *Degenerate Art*, it aimed at openly humiliating the groups by 'staging' threats.<sup>73</sup> Though it perhaps better aligns with the planned religious and cultural exhibition than that of *Degenerate Art*, *The Wandering Jew* still differed from the planned exhibition in several ways. The display included a racial-biological element and purposefully aimed to produce feelings of uncanny in the visitors given its layout and structure. Similarly, it featured numerous portraits, attempting to demonstrate the infiltration and influence of Jews within European and American society. Based on the proposed Ghetto Museum rooms and from a reading of the items collected for the planned exhibitions, such displays do not appear to have been envisioned for it. The two examples can be understood as deliberate attempts to humiliate Jews and spread antisemitic propaganda. While the antisemitic motivations of the Ghetto Administration were certainly a factor, the aforementioned nature of the planned ghetto exhibition objects, for example the finely detailed figurines, and the recruitment of professional artists and sculptors demonstrate a level of professionalism and respect in the planning of the displays. This indicates that the planned exhibition cannot be easily categorized as a stereotypical *Schandausstellung*.

### ***Institutional collaboration and Judenforschung?***

Jewish employees of the Scientific Department collected and created exhibits and this reveals another fundamental difference between an exhibition such as *The Wandering Jew* and the planned religious and cultural exhibition. Namely, *The Wandering Jew* was created in collaboration with institutes directly responsible for so-called *Judenforschung* (Research of Jews) such as *Institut zum Studium der Judenfrage* (Institute for

the Study of the Jewish Question), *Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage des Reichsinstituts für Geschichte des neuen Deutschland* (Jewish Question Research Department of the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany) and *Institut zum Studium von Judentum und Bolschewismus* (Institute for the Study of Judaism and Bolshevism). A connection between the planned ghetto exhibition and institutional *Judenforschung* has been proposed by the historians Lucjan Dobroszycki and Gordon J. Horwitz. In *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto, 1941–1944*, the footnote to the 22 June 1942 entry mentions the planning of a city museum and a ghetto museum and that the Scientific Department was created directly by the Frankfurt *Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage*.<sup>74</sup> The Institute is not, however, directly mentioned in that *Chronicle* entry. The institute in question was founded in April 1939 in Frankfurt am Main under the leadership of Alfred Rosenberg and was responsible for researching Judaism (also known as ‘*Gegnerforschung*’ or research on the enemy) for antisemitic propaganda. Until its closure in 1945, the Institute collected thousands of looted books and cultural materials from Jewish archives and libraries with the help of the ERR. The Institute formed a department for research on ‘*Ostjudentum*’ (Eastern Jewry) in Łódź for the ‘discovery and securing’ of Jewish ethnological materials and Adolf Wendel, a professor of biblical studies, was appointed as director.<sup>75</sup> A connection between the Institute, its *Ostjudentum* department and the Museum would certainly offer an insight into an institutional impetus behind the inclusion of the religious and cultural exhibition. This theory would be further strengthened if Wendel was also planning a museum in the city that could have been the inspiration behind the ghetto exhibition.<sup>76</sup>

Two tentative indications of an institutional link do exist; first, the reference by Biebow to the initial order for the Museum ‘allegedly’ coming from Rosenberg who was the Director of the Frankfurt Institute at the time, and second, the mention of two museums, one in the city and one in the ghetto, in the 22 June 1942 *Chronicle* entry.<sup>77</sup> Despite these indications, definitive evidence that proves a connection between the planned Ghetto Museum and the Institute’s *Ostjudentum* department or that Wendel’s city museum was an inspiration for the Ghetto Museum has yet to be found. Moreover, the timing of the Ghetto Museum plans seem to contradict both theories. The *Ostjudentum* department was founded on 1 July 1942, months after the Scientific Department began its work on the planned Museum and the religious and cultural exhibition in 1941. It ceased activities in November 1942, months before the Scientific Department ceased its preparation of museum exhibits.<sup>78</sup> The 3,000 books Wendel and his staff collected in Łódź were sent to Frankfurt upon the *Ostjudentum* department’s closure.<sup>79</sup> They were not kept for the future Ghetto Museum or a city museum and there is no evidence that the Scientific Department received a transfer of any items. None of the available correspondence from Biebow to Rumkowski, or the later correspondence in August 1942 between Ribbe and the Propaganda Office mentions the Institute or an *Ostjudentum* department. Had there been an official institutional collaboration, one would assume Ribbe would have mentioned this as at least one of the reasons as to why the planning for the Ghetto Museum should proceed.

A link to the Rosenberg and the ERR activities could also help in understanding the impetus behind the planned exhibition; however, such a link cannot be ascertained. Ribbe did not mention either Rosenberg or the ERR in his defense of the planned Museum. Additionally, well-known ERR cases demonstrate clear differences between

ERR activities and the Łódź case. For example, while ERR authorities forced Jewish inhabitants of the Vilna (Vilnius) ghetto, such as Abraham Sutzkever and Szmerke Kaczerginski, to sort, catalogue and pack books and other Jewish religious and cultural items from the renowned Strashun Library, the task of the ERR was collecting, or looting, Jewish cultural property.<sup>80</sup> After the items were collected, the ERR brought them to Germany for research, not for display. Therefore, despite some minor similarities, the planned exhibition in the Łódź ghetto does not fit within patterns of these activities.

### ***A Heimatmuseum?***

Though Alon Confino does not discuss the planned Ghetto Museum in his work *A World Without Jews*, he emphasizes the cultural and symbolic dimensions of the Holocaust. These dimensions are relevant to investigations of the simultaneous timing of the collection and display of Jewish religious and cultural items and the Holocaust. Specifically, Confino explores ideology, fantasy and propaganda. He shows how Nazi Germany created a narrative of Jews being everywhere, while simultaneously building an image of a future without Jews. One particular topic Confino discusses that initially appears relevant to better understanding the planned religious and cultural exhibition is the role of *Heimattmuseen* (Heimat museums) in the Third Reich. These museums focused on the daily life, religious practice and folk material culture of local communities. They thus provided an insight into the history and culture of German regions and towns and, at the same time, collected and preserved items. Confino points to how National Socialism utilized the notion of *Heimat* (home or a place of belonging) in constructing ideological narratives of national identity and belonging.<sup>81</sup> In his analysis, he highlights cases of *Heimattmuseen* retaining or obtaining collections of Jewish items, even after the National Socialist rise to power. For example, Johannes Dürkop, the Director of the Regional Heimat Museum in Braunschweig, blocked the transfer of items from the synagogue to Palestine in 1935. He planned to integrate them into a Jewish section of the permanent exhibition as the synagogue was a 'foreign body' which illustrated the role of Jews in the area. Confino argues that the preservation as opposed to the removal of Jewish items was a form of the German appropriation of national and religious memory for National Socialist aims.<sup>82</sup> Simultaneously, relegating Jewish items to museums while Jewish people were to disappear, signaled that Jewish culture and religion, and indeed Jewish life, were things of the past.

The planned religious and cultural exhibition in the ghetto did appear to share some similarities with *Heimattmuseen* in that it would specifically display parts of daily religious and cultural life. Similarly, *Heimattmuseen* were not antisemitic propaganda events, like that of *Schandausstellungen*. However, while the *Heimatmuseum* category may have been applicable if the Jewish employees were creating a museum for fellow ghetto inhabitants, as evidenced by Kowner's postwar interview discussed earlier, this was not the case.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, despite the thematic focus, key similarities between the planned exhibition and standard *Heimattmuseen* are also missing. Firstly, *Heimattmuseen* were usually founded by private initiatives, such as amateur historians or regional groups.<sup>84</sup> The planned Ghetto Museum was, however, a German initiative and not a Jewish project. Secondly, *Heimattmuseen* shared the aim of fostering a sense of regional belonging or communal unity based on the historical cultural lineage of the community. As demonstrated

by Confino, the inclusion of Jewish items in such museums was not to strengthen notions of Jewish historical or cultural ties to German identity. Rather, it was to portray the Jews as long-standing ‘Others,’ within German communities. Unlike the examples discussed by Confino, the planned exhibition would not display Jewish objects alongside those from, for example, the ethnic German communities living in Łódź. Additionally, through its focus on Eastern European Jewish life and perhaps Jewish stereotypes, the planned exhibition would undoubtedly seek to further differentiate Jews from Germans. Given the contradictory eyewitness accounts of the exhibits from ghetto inhabitants, it seems that, even from a Jewish perspective, the exhibition was certainly not fostering a sense of unity.

### **A broader perspective? Museums as institutions of difference and disappearance**

By reassessing the previous interpretations of the planned Ghetto Museum and the religious and cultural exhibition, as well as the potential ways of categorizing it, the ambiguous nature of the case becomes more evident. The exhibition was not a stereotypical tool of National Socialist antisemitic propaganda. It did not appear to have institutional connections or serve the purpose of disseminating antisemitic research. Moreover, it cannot be compared to other examples of Jewish cultural items intentionally procured by Germans for display. How then can historians better explain the reasons behind this particular example of the collection, creation and display of Jewish religious and cultural objects given the concurrent events of the Holocaust? To better answer this, I propose a perspective shift. Instead of a narrow reading of the exhibition within the sphere of National Socialism, a wider theoretical reading of the exhibition which aligns it to the role of museums in a global historical context may be more fruitful.

Scholars to date have certainly been correct in understanding the planned Ghetto Museum as antisemitic considering the circumstances and context which gave rise to it. However, by too strongly aligning the motivations behind the religious and cultural exhibition with private ambitions, propaganda or *Judenforschung*, questions remain unanswered and the overall problematic nature of museums and exhibiting cultural material is potentially obscured. As recent discussions on the provenance and repatriation of colonial objects and the decolonization of European museums have highlighted, museums produce and reproduce cultural hierarchies and narratives of difference.<sup>85</sup> While cultural objects were, and frequently are, not necessarily displayed in derogatory ways, they often existed as museum pieces by virtue of being perceived, categorized and exoticized from an external perspective.

The display of ethnographical objects in museums has been commonplace within European history for centuries and is intrinsically linked with colonialism and imperialism. Increased expansion, access to foreign territories and new opportunities for exploitation allowed private individuals, traders, administrators and explorers to indulge in the hobby of collecting and selling so-called curiosities, trophies and souvenirs for private display and collections.<sup>86</sup> From the eighteenth century, through increased scientific and intellectual interest, collection gradually transformed from a hobby into an institutionalized research discipline which focused on ethnographical objects, plants, animals and human bodies. This research was disseminated to the public through museums

which donations from private collections often supplemented. Thanks to their diverse and often vast collections, museums stood as physical representations of both the power and magnitude of empire. They fulfilled numerous roles including attempting to convince opponents of colonial expansion of its benefits, to advance the civilizing mission in foreign territories, to educate the public about the empire and to encourage participation in it.<sup>87</sup>

Despite what may appear as straightforward practices of collecting and displaying objects from across the globe, museums were not neutral institutions and had numerous inherent problems. Questions are increasingly raised by scholars today as to how museums obtained their collections; for example, were the objects looted or bought at unfairly low prices? Under what contexts or power dynamics were objects gifted to European collectors? Similarly, scholars are asking questions as to the nature of the objects themselves. Should items with religious or cultural significance, or indeed human remains, be displayed in European museums with no connection to the land and communities from where the items originated?<sup>88</sup> As James Clifford has argued, museums were and are 'contact zones,' a concept coined by Mary Louis Pratt. A 'contact zone' was 'the space of colonial encounter ... in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict.' For Pratt, though there may be processes of mutual exploitation, these relations are not relations of equality.<sup>89</sup>

Scholars working on the topic of ethnological museums and colonial collections have also pointed out that, once held and displayed within a museum, items from colonial territories were taken from their context and they 'irrevocably mutated' into museum objects.<sup>90</sup> By being removed from their place of origin and extracted from their intended use, the items lost their cultural, religious or political function and were integrated into a new classification system, giving a supposed order to their unfamiliarity.<sup>91</sup> Detached from their usual place in the world and disconnected from the cultural meaning ascribed to them, objects on display in museums could not offer their own history or context.<sup>92</sup> Instead, these details and meanings were provided by the classification system, the display, signs, tour guides or museum catalogues often solely in the language of the collectors and curators. The uses or origins of cultural objects may have therefore been incorrectly described or their original names mistranslated. Conversely, museums could also display objects with little to no context in dark rooms, emphasizing their otherworldliness. As Arjun Appadurai notes regarding dioramas, '... in their effort to capture the living environments, in which various objects of material culture may have had a social life, ... their effect is to create strange spaces which look more like cartoons or caricatures of non-modernity.'<sup>93</sup> Similarly, items from different territories and populations groups which resembled each other, such as masks, bows and arrows, were placed together even if the items' original use or cultural and religious significance differed.<sup>94</sup> Objects and images which fed into notions of supposed exoticism, primitiveness and barbarianism such as fertility statues, photos depicting naked women or certain types of weapons and clothing were also common.

Though there was no historical standardized display format present across all European museums, the very process of collecting ethnological items from one group and ordering, contextualizing and displaying them for another was inherently problematic. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said discussed the imagined idea of the 'Orient,' or the

East, was one which ‘has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.’<sup>95</sup> This is perhaps best explained through Said’s discussion of how texts written from a Western perspective ‘can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.’<sup>96</sup> Similarly, in museums, a predominantly European perspective was used to ‘make sense’ of items which previously only existed outside of Western European understandings of culture, religion, communication and traditions. This ‘making sense’ of foreign cultures through the display of objects in turn conveyed information to the visitors. Museums and their collections thus undoubtedly played a fundamental role ‘in the construction and visualisation of power relationships between coloniser and colonised.’<sup>97</sup> They could reproduce narratives about cultural difference and hierarchies while simultaneously creating the reality in which these differences and hierarchies existed through the medium of display. The displays did not need to be overtly racist to support this; the very process of exhibiting alongside unequal power dynamics simply allowed for this. Museums were thus institutions which not only collected and preserved but also legitimized forms of domination.

In his article on the Jewish Central Museum, Rupnow highlights another key factor which relates to general museums practices; the complimentary relationship between collection and annihilation. Though he does not explicitly utilize the wider lens of colonial collection and museums, Rupnow alludes to the philosopher Manfred Sommer’s argument that collecting can be ‘a postponement of disappearance.’<sup>98</sup> Objects were collected and preserved for a certain amount of time, but as space became limited, they would ultimately be disposed of. Rupnow further argues that even objects kept permanently were in a ‘disposal site of the museum, “an institution of harmless presence,” where they could be ascribed a new use of ‘representing something bygone.’<sup>99</sup>

The simultaneous preservation of certain cultural items alongside the disappearance, ‘natural’ or otherwise, of their owners was a common feature in the display of items from colonial territories. From the initial establishment of museums as institutions of science, the collection of objects from foreign cultures continuously linked to the perceived decline or extinction of these cultures due to the spread of European ‘civilization.’ This civilization, by nature of being supposedly superior to lower cultures, would slowly wipe out differences between cultures and, thus, the ability to research the primitive beginnings of mankind.<sup>100</sup> As Tom Lawson argues regarding British museum culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, museums constructed a sense of British national identity which represented Britain as a beacon of progress. However, this construction relied on genocide, or the extermination of Indigenous peoples.<sup>101</sup> Museums were historically ‘the messengers, benefactors and monuments to colonialism.’<sup>102</sup> Though they preserved and displayed objects from diverse population groups, including groups which may not have existed anymore, this was not to honor them. Rather, the preservation was to honor the expansionary and often racist projects that facilitated the objects’ collection, the demise of their original owners and the spread of Western culture.

### **Aligning perspectives**

In the case of the planned exhibition, the figurines’ detailed artistic appearance, their future preservation in glass vitrines and the collection of Eastern European Jewish

religious and cultural objects for display align with common museum patterns. Despite their artistic representation of human life, the figurines were immovable and they would be eternally encased behind glass. Similarly, the other religious and cultural objects would lose their context as soon as they became museum artefacts. Instead of remaining functional parts of Jewish life, once integrated into the exhibition they would become untouchable and isolated symbols of a foreign world, cut off from their usual setting, significance and place. The figurines and the objects, as was the case with museums featuring cultural material from colonies and colonized peoples, would allow visitors to view the world of the dangerous Jewish 'Other' without being in danger.<sup>103</sup> Though no information has been found, it can be assumed that descriptions of the Museum displays would not have been in Yiddish, Hebrew or Polish since the intended audience was German.

Through the Museum and particularly the religious and cultural exhibition, Biebow and the Ghetto Administration could both produce and reproduce antisemitic ideology without having to stage a stereotypical National Socialist propaganda event. As the discussion of wider museum practices tell us, such an event was not needed to convey narratives of difference and domination. Although the Germans permitted the collection of Jewish religious and cultural objects, thus preserving elements of Jewish life, the purpose behind this act reveals a stark power dynamic. While thousands of Jews were dying in the ghetto or being deported to their deaths, it was the Germans who ultimately oversaw the Museum project. The objects were not collected to commemorate or safeguard the history of Eastern European Jewish life, but rather to signify its annihilation. Museums were, and are, places where death is 'omnipresent;' both in the sense that they often display human or animal remains, but they also display artefacts of people, groups and cultures which may no longer exist.<sup>104</sup> In their displays' physical embodiment of European discourses, that other cultures were inferior, primitive and uncivilized, museums facilitated not only differentiation but also legitimized disappearance. Through such a lens, the display of the finely detailed Jewish wedding scene figurines, for example, which contrasted with Nazi Germany's often extreme and overt antisemitic propaganda and the violence of the Holocaust, can be understood as significantly less unusual, if not completely normal.

By reading the planned exhibition through the global lens of museums, I do not seek to imply that the National Socialist and antisemitic contexts should be abandoned. Rather, by aligning diverse perspectives, I argue that scholars can gain a more complete picture of the religious and cultural exhibition. While it does not fit alongside other more well-known National Socialist practices of antisemitic display, the often problematic nature of museums in general demonstrate that the exhibition could still fulfill a nefarious ideological role, just as museums in other contexts did. I similarly do not suggest that the planned exhibition, the ghetto or indeed the Holocaust should be understood as solely colonial. However, in this particular case, museums with colonial collections provide an apt example for comparison for two main reasons. Firstly, as pointed out by Bruno Brulon Soares and Andrea Witcomb, 'the museum, an institution embedded in European modernity, was invented when a perception of 'the Other,' or colonized populations, was being disseminated: this 'Other' represented a necessary exterior, or alterity, to be conquered.'<sup>105</sup> Therefore, the wider history and role of museums cannot be separated from the colonial and imperial view of the world from which they first developed. Secondly, the link between colonialism and museums strongly connects

with global histories of expansion, racism, dehumanization, othering, exploitation, violence and murder. Though the exact circumstances of the perpetuation of Holocaust were not identical to all of these different histories, there are undoubtedly recurring patterns, similarities and entanglements between instances of mass-killing and genocide.<sup>106</sup> Museum collections, no matter how non-violent the content or displays appeared, were still often linked to systems of oppression, murder and annihilation.

While I applied the investigation of museums to better analyze a particular historical case study, within such fields as Museum and Heritage Studies, crossing the disciplinary boundaries between colonial history, Jewish history and Holocaust Studies is not unusual. Scholars are increasingly showing that the efforts to decolonize museums and create new Indigenous peoples' museums can also be utilized in reimaging contemporary Jewish and Holocaust museums. As mentioned previously, decolonization approaches raise practical questions about provenance and how objects are displayed, as well as the ethics concerning the display of objects outside of their territory of origin and often without the permission of the original owner or their descendants. Such broader inquiries also raise ethical considerations relating to photographs of both living and deceased individuals, families or communities. Paul Morrow points out that Holocaust museums are not unique and are 'fully eligible for the sorts of inquiries philosophers have lately launched into art museums, natural history museums, and museums of other kinds.'<sup>107</sup> Similarly, questions can be raised about who 'owns' museums; the community represented within them, those involved in the museum creation or the intended audience? Yaniv Feller has suggested that bringing together the topics of Indigenous theory and Jewish museums helps highlight both the actors and the stakes involved in museum creation, as well as the limits of certain actors claiming to speak on behalf of a community.<sup>108</sup> Locating the planned religious and cultural exhibition within the history of museums at large does not therefore only reflect historical similarities and patterns. It also speaks to how the very concept of museums and their practices of collecting, preserving and displaying cultural material should be submitted to critical inquiry, regardless of whether they focus on colonial history, Jewish life or the Holocaust. This critical inquiry can undoubtedly be interdisciplinary.

## Conclusion

The inclusion of an exhibition on Eastern European Jewish religious and cultural life in a planned museum in the Łódź Ghetto raises several questions. What objects would the exhibition display? Who participated in its creation? Who was the exhibition and Museum for? An examination of source material provides answers to these questions. However, a significant one remains, why was such an exhibition in the ghetto necessary given the simultaneous mass murder of Jewish ghetto inhabitants? Historians have previously attempted to answer this by investigating the planned Museum and the exhibition within the context of National Socialism. While these investigations have their merits, I argue that the motivation behind the exhibition remains ambiguous.

The article introduced new visual evidence and witness testimony concerning the exhibits. By reassessing previous scholarly interpretations of the motivations behind the Museum alongside this new material, the differences between the planned religious and cultural exhibition and examples of other National Socialist exhibitions become

apparent. Unlike *Schandausstellungen*, the objects were not overtly antisemitic and the exhibition creators were Jewish. Unlike the Prague Central Museum, the Ghetto Museum was a German initiative. However, the planned exhibition appears to have had no institutional backing or links to *Judenforschung*. Unlike *Heimatismuseen*, the exhibition would neither foster a sense of belonging nor would it display Jewish and German cultural items together to illustrate the supposed 'foreign' nature of the Jewish historical presence. Furthermore, while Biebow's personal motivations and ambitions may have played a role, this cannot be conclusively proven.

When read strictly within the National Socialist context, the exhibition is unusual and this complicates a more complete understanding of the impetus behind it. This article therefore introduces an additional approach, a wider reading of the exhibition through a theoretical investigation of historical museum patterns. When examined as part of this broader global framework, the exhibition can be understood as much more conventional. Though it appears that it would not be overtly antisemitic, like museums displaying cultural material from colonial territories, it would still contribute to narratives of racial and cultural hierarchies. Objects would be placed behind glass and decontextualized from their origins, significance and use. Jewish workers participated in its creation; however, the Ghetto Administration was ultimately in control. Moreover, the intended audience was German, not Jewish. The exhibition would not simply have preserved a static image of Jewish life, nor functioned as a warehouse or dumping ground. It could actively construct and legitimize exclusion as well as rationalize destruction, just like museums displaying items from supposedly 'primitive' or 'vanishing' peoples and cultures. As research on museums with colonial collections has shown, museums reinforced the mutual relationship between exhibition and cultural destruction; disappearance justified collection and collection justified disappearance.

By applying this wider perspective, I do not argue that the planned exhibition can solely be understood through a comparative postcolonial lens or that the case is colonial. Nonetheless, I maintain that this does not limit the exploratory and explanatory power of utilizing examples from the history of colonial collection and display. Such investigative crossovers can also shed light on how contemporary discussions related to decolonizing museums can be applied to Jewish and Holocaust museums. These discussions critically engage with objects, displays and narratives but also problematize questions of ownership in both a literal and symbolic sense. At the same time, these contemporary considerations further expose the problematic historical role of museums as institutions of difference and disappearance, a context in which the planned Łódź Ghetto exhibition and Museum also belong.

## Notes

1. Kinzel, "Ein Museum für das Ghetto Litzmannstadt," 119–42; Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern*, 125; Horwitz, *Ghettostadt*, 185–8; Horwitz, *Ghettostadt: Łódź and the Making of a Nazi City*, 185–8; Gadowska, "Warunki działalności artystycznej plastyków w getcie łódzkim," 95–9.
2. Neither Kinzel, Rupnow nor Gadowska mention the photographs nor the documentary. Horwitz mentions the wedding scene photos and describes the scene but does not include them in his book, see Horwitz, *Ghettostadt*, 187–8. One photo ([Figure 1](#)) accompanies the 'Scientific Department' entry in Stark and Wiatr, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto*, 234.

3. The documentary mentioned is *Mir Lebngelibene* (1946-1948), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxLJilb9yW0>, accessed 9 Jan. 2024. Also available at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, RG-60.4916, Film ID: 2892. The testimony is by Leon Kowner, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), 2005.603.2, RG Number: RG-50.637.0002, Transcript of Interview, 14–5.
4. For an overview on recent debates, see Bajohr and O’Sullivan, “Holocaust, Kolonialismus und NS-Imperialismus,” 191–202; for overviews of earlier debates, see for example: Fitzpatrick, “The Pre-History of the Holocaust?,” 477–503; Kühne, “Colonialism and the Holocaust,” 339–62.
5. APŁ 39/221/31254, 311–2: Letter Ribbe to Reich Propaganda Office Wartheland (27 August 1942).
6. Epstein, *Model Nazi*, 169–70.
7. Aly and Heim, *Architects of Annihilation*, 186–7.
8. For more on Łódź ghetto inhabitants, see Löw, *Juden im Getto Litzmannstadt*.
9. For employment figures, see for example Klein, *Die “Ghettoverwaltung Litzmannstadt,”* 268.
10. Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (APŁ) 39/221/29221, 916: Letter from Biebow to Ribbe (23 September 1941). All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise stated.
11. APŁ 39/221/29221, 916 (refers to scan number): Letter Biebow to Ribbe (23 September 1941).
12. APŁ 39/221/29216, 304: Letter Genewein to Ribbe (11 October 1941).
13. APŁ 39/221/31254, 334: Letter Biebow to Rumkowski (28 April 1942).
14. APŁ 39/221/31254, 336: Attestation from Biebow (28 April 1942).
15. APŁ 39/221/31254, 333: Letter Biebow to Rumkowski (5 May 1942).
16. APŁ 39/221/31254, 337: Letter from Hirschberg to Ghetto Administration (19 May 1942).
17. Nr. 62, 22 June 1942, Feuchert, Leibfried and Riecke, eds., *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1942*, 311.
18. Nr. 62, 22 June 1942, *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1942*, 311.
19. Note on Prof. Emanuel Hirschberg in Feuchert, Leibfried and Riecke, eds., *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt: Supplemente und Anhang*, 363.
20. APŁ 39/221/31361, 593: Letter Hirschberg to Rumkowski (28 September 1941); see also *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto*, 235.
21. APŁ 39/221/31254, 320: List signed by Hirschberg (30 April 1942); Złata Hirschberg, Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/4533837>, accessed October 20, 2025. Unfortunately, there is not a recorded death year in victim databases for every employee.
22. See “In Memory of Izrael Lejzerowicz,” <https://www.jhi.pl/en/articles/in-memory-of-izrael-lejzerowicz,54>, accessed July 25, 2023.
23. USHMM Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database: Nelly Kuppermann, [https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_view.php?PersonId=8173449](https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=8173449); Rebecca Rothschild, [https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_view.php?PersonId=6827149](https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=6827149); Anna Cohen, [https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person\\_view.php?PersonId=6362489](https://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=6362489), all accessed October 20, 2025. Cohen’s date of deportation is listed as 28 June 1944 and so it can be presumed that she died in Auschwitz.
24. Anna Cohen, “Stolperstein Hamburg,” [https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/en.php?&LANGUAGE=EN&MAIN\\_ID=7&BIO\\_ID=4423](https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/en.php?&LANGUAGE=EN&MAIN_ID=7&BIO_ID=4423), accessed October 20, 2025.
25. APŁ 39/221/31254, 319: List signed by Hirschberg (1 May 1942).
26. Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names: Melania Fogelbaum, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/13974355>; Carmela Tenenblum, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/names/4654603>, all accessed October 20, 2025. No further information on Tenenblum’s occupation has been found.
27. “Wissenschaftliche Abteilung,” *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto*, 234.
28. Yad Vashem Archives (YVA) O.6, 234/15, 33, 39: Łódź Ghetto Diary, Heft 12, Oskar Rosenfeld (June 1942). Further information on Schwarz has not been found. A number of individuals in ghetto lists share Feldman’s first and second name and therefore, further

- biographical details have yet to be conclusively determined. For more on artists in the ghetto, see Gadowska, "Warunki działalności artystycznej plastyków w getcie łódzkim."
29. See *Kunst aus dem Holocaust*, 49.
  30. APŁ 39/221/31254, 329–31: List of items, unsigned (29 April 1942).
  31. APŁ 39/221/31254, 318: List of employees from Hirschberg (1 May 1942).
  32. YVA O.6, 234/15, 34, 37.
  33. YVA O.6, 234/15, 36; YVA O.6, 234/15, 37.
  34. YVA O.6, 234/15, 36; for original, see APŁ 39/278/1124, 7.
  35. APŁ 39/278/1124, 7. Only one page features the "wissenschaftliche Abteilung." It shows the wedding scene pictures and two pictures of a sketch of a man.
  36. For more on ghetto photographs, see Löw, "Documenting as a 'Passion and Obsession,'" 387–404. See also Kinzel, *Im Fokus der Kamera*.
  37. The diorama can be seen here: <https://delet.jhi.pl/pl/library/item/1156057>, accessed July 31, 2023. The Jewish Historical Institute (JHI) displayed it at the inaugural exhibition from 19 April 1948. It is on loan to the Stacja Radegast Museum in Łódź. Email from Marta Kapelań (JHI) to author (26 July 2023).
  38. They can be seen from 45:17 and the figurines from 45:43. *Mir Lebngelibene* (1946–1948): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxLJilb9yW0>, accessed January 9, 2023.
  39. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection, RG 8, Box 69, Folder 615: Khad Gadyo (Yiddish puppet theater; Łódź). For more on Brauner, see Quint, "Visual Artists and Yiddish Avant-garde Theater" and Gadowska, "Warunki działalności artystycznej plastyków w getcie łódzkim," 106–8.
  40. YVA O.6, 234/15, 37–8.
  41. YVA O.6, 234/15, 38.
  42. YVA O.6, 234/15, 38.
  43. "Wissenschaftliche Abteilung/Scientific Department," *Encyclopedia of the Ghetto*, 234.
  44. Kwiatkowska, "Czym było w rzeczy wistości „Wissenschaftliche Abteilung” and Central Jewish Historical Commission testimony of Bernard Ostrowski (1947) quoted in Gadowska, "Warunki działalności artystycznej plastyków w getcie łódzkim," 98–9.
  45. In **Figure 2**, the *chuppah* is missing with only the posts visible. In **Figure 1**, it is visible.
  46. Nr. 62, 22 June 1942, *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1942*, 311.
  47. Biderman, *The World of my Past*, 81 quoted in Kinzel, "Ein Museum für das Ghetto Litzmannstadt," 136.
  48. USHMM, 2005.603.2, RG Number: RG-50.637.0002, Transcript of Interview with Leon Kowner, 14–15. Translation from Hebrew by the author.
  49. *Mir Lebngelibene*, 45:43; the figurines on the bottom left depict the sewage transport, [https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item\\_id=73911&ind=155](https://photos.yadvashem.org/photo-details.html?language=en&item_id=73911&ind=155), accessed July 31, 2023.
  50. *Mir Lebngelibene*, 45:53.
  51. *Mir Lebngelibene*, 45:55.
  52. YVA O.6, 234/15, 36.
  53. *Mir Lebngelibene*, 45:18.
  54. Nr. 62, 22 June 1942, *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1942*, 311.
  55. Alberti, *Die Verfolgung und Vernichtung der Juden*, 451; see also, for example, Montague, *Chełmno and the Holocaust*.
  56. APŁ 39/221/31254, 314: Letter Maiwald to Reich Propaganda Office Wartheland (24 June 1942).
  57. APŁ 39/221/31254, 314: Letter Maiwald to Reich Propaganda Office Wartheland (24 June 1942).
  58. APŁ 39/221/31254, 311–2: Letter Ribbe to Reich Propaganda Office Wartheland (27 August 1942).
  59. APŁ 39/221/31254, 307: Letter Maiwald to Reich Propaganda Office Wartheland (28 January 1943).
  60. 39/221/31254, 310: Letter Biebow to Rumkowski (9 November 1942).
  61. Nr. 88, 13 April 1943, in Feuchert, Leibfried and Riecke, eds., *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1943*, 148.

62. Nr. 88, 13 April 1943, in *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1943*, 148.
63. Nr. 159, 24 June 1943, in *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1943*, 274.
64. Nr. 160, 25 June 1943, in *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1943*, 277.
65. Nr. 191, 26 July 1943, in *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1943*, 335.
66. Kinzel, "Ein Museum für das Ghetto Litzmannstadt, 132–3.
67. *Ibid.*, 130–2.
68. Potthast, *Das jüdische Zentralmuseum der SS in Prag*, 180. Rupnow also discusses the Prague Central Museum in detail. Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern*, 127–36.
69. Kinzel, "Ein Museum für das Ghetto Litzmannstadt," 123.
70. Rupnow, *Vernichten und Erinnern*, 124–5. Rupnow notes the planning for the Museum began in early 1941 and implies that whether the initiative for the Museum came from the German side or the Jewish side is unclear. There is, however, no evidence for this earlier timeline in the correspondence and as discussed, the material available points to the Museum being a German initiative.
71. *Ibid.*, 124, 126.
72. For an in-depth description, see for example Brantl, *Haus der Kunst, München*, 90.
73. Burgstaller, "Verhöhnung als inszeniertes Spektakel," 351–4.
74. Footnote 70 on entry for 22 June 1942, Dobroszycki (ed.), *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto*, 209.
75. Schiefelbein, "Das Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage," 65.
76. Horwitz, *Ghettostadt*, 185–6.
77. APŁ 39/221/29221, 916: Letter Biebow to Ribbe (23 September 1941); Nr. 62, 22 June 1942, *Die Chronik des Gettos Lodz/Litzmannstadt 1942*, 311.
78. Kinzel also flags this problem, but only in relation to Horwitz's argument. See footnote 12, Kinzel, "Ein Museum für das Ghetto Litzmannstadt," 123.
79. Schiefelbein, "Das Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage," 69.
80. For more, see for example, Rabinowitz, *The Lost Library*.
81. Confino, *A World Without Jews*, 72–5.
82. *Ibid.*, 168–71.
83. USHMM, 2005.603.2, RG Number: RG-50.637.0002, Transcript of Interview with Leon Kowner, 14–5.
84. Jannelli, *Wilde Museen*, 42, 44.
85. See for example, Brulon Soares and Witcomb, "Editorial: Towards Decolonization," iv–xi; Shimrit Lee, *Decolonize Museums*; Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*.
86. See for example Turnbull, "Collecting and Colonial Violence," 453.
87. Aldrich, "Colonial Museums in a Postcolonial Europe," 138.
88. See for example Garsha, "Expanding *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*?" the special issue: Giblin, Ramos and Grout (eds.), "Exhibiting the Experience of Empire"; Macdonald, "Pausing, Reflection, and Action."
89. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel and Transculturation*, 6–7 quoted in Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, 192.
90. See for example Von Oswald, "Troubling Colonial Epistemologies in Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum," 110.
91. Sturm, *Konservierte Welt*, 42, 54.
92. Breckenridge, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Colonial Collecting," 205.
93. Appadurai, "Museums and the Savage Sublime," 46.
94. See for example the early criticism by Franz Boas of the ethnological displays in the US National Museum. Kuper, *The Museum of Other People*, 151.
95. Said, *Orientalism*, 10. For more discussion, see Burney, "Chapter One: Orientalism," 23–39. For a discussion on museums and postmodernism, see Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," 47–56.
96. *Ibid.*, 94. Emphasis in original.
97. Barringer and Flynn, "Introduction," 5.
98. Sommer, *Sammeln: Ein philosophischer Versuch*, 41 quoted in Rupnow, "Ihr müßt sein, auch wenn ihr nicht mehr seid," 29. In his book, though he also refers to the interplay between museums and annihilation, he does not explicitly set the case of the planned Museum in the

ghetto against this backdrop but rather, as discussed earlier in this article, more so aligns it to *Schandausstellungen*.

99. Rupnow, "Ihr müßt sein, auch wenn ihr nicht mehr seid," 30.
100. Glynn, *Objects of Culture*, 31.
101. Lawson, "The Holocaust and Colonial Genocide at the Imperial War Museum," 164.
102. Macdonald, "Pausing, Reflection, and Action," 10.
103. Sturm, *Konservierte Welt*, 58.
104. Pazzini, "Tod im Museum," 124 cited in Sturm, *Konservierte Welt*, 56.
105. Brulon Soares and Witcomb, "Editorial: Towards Decolonization," iv.
106. On such discussions, see for example Gordon and O'Sullivan, *Colonial Paradigms of Violence*.
107. Morrow, "Are Holocaust Museums Unique?," 133.
108. Feller "Whose Museum Is It?" For further discussions, see also Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*.

## Disclosure statement

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