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Jewish Spaces in a Topsy-Turvy Europe

If Ruth Ellen Gruber mentioned that she was not an academic, I can add that I am not even involved in Jewish heritage, Jewish culture, or in reporting on the very exciting developments in this field in the last quarter of a century. At heart I am an intellectual historian whose life work has been devoted to analyzing and spreading the "virtues" of pluralist democracy (its enemies would call it a "virus") in a postwar European perspective.

I do take credit for having coined the term "Jewish Spaces" but as always, one is never sure what happens to such a "child" once it is let loose in the public agora.[1] So it is perhaps useful to return to my original intentions when I looked at the new European Jewish presence in those buoyant and hopeful times. I was attempting at the time to examine the Jewish past, the Jewish present, and above all the Jewish future in what appeared back then as the ground-shaking fall of the Berlin Wall. I must be honest with you. My interest in "things Jewish" stemmed from my greater interest in "things European" or "Western". Confronting the long Jewish past and the Holocaust while planning a Jewish future were for me the key tenets for the building of a successful pluralist democratic life across the continent with voluntary Jews (since everyone could now leave and there were no longer any captive Jews) free at last to live their Jewish lives (whatever their content) in a reappraised past.

Jewish Spaces were thus meant to confront both the immense post-Holocaust Jewish absence and the far smaller post-war Jewish presence. Their specificity in the European context stemmed from the fact that unlike Israel which was its own Jewish Space and America where there were sufficient numbers of Jews to fill most positions in Jewish fields, Europe did not have enough Jews "to go around". Rather than seeing this as a uniquely post-Holocaust tragedy, I sought to define this situation as one full of possibilities. Namely, Jews and non-Jews could build such spaces together in a mutually beneficial intellectual and cultural interaction, that would place Jewish rooted themes inside (and no longer at the margins) of Europe's ever more pluralist societies. In such a reading, democratically "sick" countries were the ones who either chose not to confront the long past and the Holocaust, preferring to distort it or give priority to national and nationalistic narratives over historical truth. When I outlined the rise of "Jewish Spaces", such

1 I first introduced the concept of "Jewish Spaces" in "A New Jewish Identity for Post-1989 Europe", *JPR Policy Paper* 1 (1996): 1–15.

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sick nations seemed to be on the way out or at least ostensibly willing to reform themselves. We all knew that the path would not be easy but most believed that it was heading upwards toward historical truth and justice.

I need not tell you that we are hardly living in such a world today. Ruth's reference to an "augmented reality" struck me as the perfect description of a continent now at war, but also a continent where extreme right-wing rhetoric and parties, in power or vociferously on the margins outside with their populist accents, have become "normalized", no longer mere eccentric voices on the fringe. We now live in an augmented reality where Jews, the Holocaust, Nazism, are terms which are bandied about with nonchalance and ill will, and not just on social media in an ongoing historical revisionism which confuses past and present, or worse still *misuses* these references to suit its often shady present-oriented agendas.

This would be bad enough but it is only half the story. The other half is even more painful for a pluralistic democratic Jew like me: the rise of ever more strident ethno-nationalist voices not just in many European extreme right wings, but also within Israel. There are now ever more democratically deluded and religiously and culturally intolerant actors within a badly fractured Jewish world, where one can find today staunch supporters for Orban's illiberal democracy, for Trump's political stands, and even Israelis who do not totally condemn Putin's actions, while seeking to destroy the very underpinnings of democratic pluralism (in Israel the stakes concern the independence of the judiciary). Jews on this count espouse the same fractures as the worlds in which they live. They are not necessarily a light unto nations or always yardsticks with which to measure the positive values and developments of their own countries.

One example of such a democratic crisis was more than visible in 2022 in the country where I live, France. Eric Zemmour, who always actively assumed his Jewish religious and cultural identity, was the extreme/extreme right-wing French presidential candidate in the primaries to the Presidential election. He was so extreme in his ethnonationalist and historically revisionist positions that he made Marine Le Pen look like a social democrat. The only reason I mention him is that while he only obtained 7% of the votes in the national first round, he managed to garner nearly 54% of the votes of the French Jews who had moved to Israel. Zemmour was the candidate who dared claim that Vichy France had saved its Jews, and that there was a good chance that Captain Dreyfus was indeed guilty of treason and that one would never really know the full story. Need I say more?

Historical revisionism, like racism, is a beautifully shared evil around the globe, and one that you as professionals in the realms of Jewish Studies must be constantly aware of, lest its errors and shadows touch your own fields. You may ask yourselves at this point what these Cassandra-like lamentations have to do

with the ongoing life, creativity, expansion, and overall success story of Europe's Jewish Spaces in which most of you thrive both professionally and culturally. Why stress such obvious news headlines? Well, I want you to consider these few examples as a wake-up call for your best civic instincts and a plea to recast the Jewish Spaces in which you thrive into more "*engagé*" cores of the endangered pluralist world we all cherish. I do not mean by this to turn them into warring camps. I just want you to be actively aware that today's Jewish Spaces live on the razor's edge of both Jewish and non-Jewish democratic controversies and even attacks. To this one must also add the inevitable consequences of all institutional successes: a growing professionalization, bureaucratization, compartmentalization, and the rise of institutional rivalries and of course personal clashes and ambitions, not to mention national prerogatives.

But allow me to return to my own original understanding of what the Jewish Spaces I had coined were meant to represent in a post-1989 Europe. I had argued back then (and still do) that Jewish Spaces were the prime symbol of a renewed Europe that could also contribute significantly to a recomposed Jewish world whose two main poles were of course Israel and America. How so?

As the locus of the longest Jewish diasporic settlement, and also as the locus of the Holocaust, Europe, I felt, needed Jewish references and Jewish *topoi* in order to understand and come to terms with its own complex pluralist past. Such spaces were not *ends in themselves* but above all starting points for other pluralist understandings of Europe's many religious and cultural minorities. They were not to become professional or identity ghettos but central agoras for wider European debates. My idea was to turn the minority status of the European Jewish experience into an *asset* rather than a weakness. Europe, by the few Jews present in its midst, but also because of the need to reassess Jewish references in its past, was ideally suited to create Jewish Spaces in which Jews and non-Jews alike could embark in egalitarian terms in the research and dissemination of Jewish knowledge and identity. With a major proviso: there had always been students of Judaica and Jewish life in Europe, but these topics were dealt within the framework of non-Jewish epistemological concerns, Christian at first and later propelled by the (anti- or post-Christian) universalism of the Enlightenment. The new Jewish Spaces instead were to be based on a Jewish understanding of the Jewish past and its interaction with the wider European context. Jews as authors and co-authors, no longer as subjects of non-Jewish investigation, would ideally help define the perimeters of such Jewish Spaces where non-Jews, as equals, could also bring in their contributions, queries, and understandings. Not an easy balance when facing equally demanding Jewish communities with their own fears, needs and agendas, and intrinsic suspicions at having non-Jews "meddle" in their narratives. This brings me to my central point: an examination of what I consider to be

rarely stated issues and also questions concerning the value and importance of Jewish Spaces today for the *wider societies* in whose midst they have been erected.

In raising such doubts, I do not mean in the slightest to cast shadows on the very real success stories of Europe's Jewish Spaces throughout the continent. Several contributions in this volume celebrate such positive outcomes. But, now more than a quarter of a century after I coined the term "Jewish Spaces", there is room for some future oriented thinking with respect to these successes, which like all successes can carry their own unintended consequences.

Perhaps the first question that comes to mind is quite simple. Should "Jewish Spaces" in Europe serve as a buffer or protective barrier against the onslaught of antisemitic, conspiratorial, and political attacks leveled against Jews, and other minorities? Or should they remain neutral, by claiming that their mission is not to be involved in politics? This was already a burning question for me in the very early 2000s when I realized during a leisurely coffee break that a young non-Jewish museum curator in a Jewish museum in Western Europe was militantly anti-Israeli and quite indifferent to the growing antisemitic attacks on "living Jews" (as possible ersatz for Israel), mainly at the hands of the extreme left-wing groups plus Islamic movements. It was as if her brain were neatly divided between her job and her own political activism. Hers was a minoritarian position, but it did make me ask the question, given the general silence that seemed to dominate the newly emergent Jewish Spaces, as if an inevitably confusing present had no place in a world devoted to the pious study of the past.

Conversely, should such spaces also stand up for national settings or contexts that are unfairly labeled as "antisemitic" by fringe Jewish groups in ever more strident social media? If so, how? Can and should non-Jews and Jews in their midst take more public stands *together* when blatant lies and misinterpretations are bandied about? There is a further dimension to this dilemma. How should Jewish and non-Jewish actors in such Jewish Spaces handle the ever more vociferous public rifts inside Israeli society? Should they continue to consider Israel as a threatened little democracy inside a sea of Muslim hatred, thus deserving steadfast non-critical support? Or should they apply to an ever-strong state with growing ties to the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world the same criteria as in Western democracies? This is no theoretical question. Israeli critics do not feel at ease inside most European Jewish Spaces and in turn actors in such spaces do not feel at ease taking such radical Israeli voices into account.

Is the reference to the "educational importance" of these spaces sufficient given the world we live in currently where the past is just as swamped by lies, false news, misinformation, and malignant manipulation as the present? Who could have imagined that the Foreign Minister of Russia would announce that Hit-

ler was in part Jewish and that, as a consequence, Zelensky was a full-fledged Nazi? Or that pro-Putin Jews could actually exist? In this Orwellian world, can Jewish Spaces continue their nicely institutionalized life as before or should their members take more visible stands, *qua* specialists and citizens? You may, of course, disagree with me on these issues, but I do hope they will at least spur your own decisions.

Politics aside, allow me to briefly present some controversial institutional questions concerning Jewish Spaces today with respect to the three key institutional settings I had defined when I coined the term: Jewish Studies programs, Jewish museums, and Holocaust memorials. In raising these questions, I am acutely aware of the fact that non-Jews in these spaces do not feel comfortable in taking positions on Jewish topics lest they be accused of "meddling" in what is "none of their business". But between wishing not to "meddle" and thinking of work in Jewish spaces as a 9-to-5 routine job, with no repercussions on one's civic life, there is a major difference. So let me point to some structural problems.

Jewish Studies

The importance and expansion of this field has gone well beyond the wildest dreams of those who first envisioned such a university level Jewish presence across the European continent. At least two generations, perhaps even three, of specialists have been trained since the 1990s, all embarked on fulfilling careers.

My worry: What are the links between Jewish Studies and mainstream studies in each university? Can one skip such exposure to Jewish themes while obtaining general degrees in literature and history or politics or any other relevant subject? In other words, are Jewish Studies an "aside" trajectory or are they integrally interwoven (at least in terms of their main topics) into the wider curriculum? Conversely, what links exist between Jewish Studies and other new "identity" studies in current post-colonial studies? Is the context one of cross-fertilization or latent (or not so latent) combat? This is where calmer non-Jewish voices can make a difference, on the assumption that other minorities have the same notion of their "Spaces".

Friends and colleagues who are at the center of many Jewish Studies programs have often told me that they have a not insignificant number of Muslim students, many hijab wearing women. But they have also told me that they do not ask these students their reasons for taking courses in the field. Here I obviously speak as someone who has no academic appointment, but somewhere I consider such a perfectly ethical stance somewhat of a pity. By asking such questions or

even handing out a general questionnaire to all students at the end of the course, on how greater knowledge of the Jewish past impacted their understanding of Europe, one can perhaps begin to build unexpected bridges. I remember once giving a lecture on the questions Napoleon asked of the French Jews during the Sanhedrin. The Muslim students in attendance were astounded when reading the questions, for they had never realized just what kind of "identity" sacrifices had been asked of the Jews back then in the name of "emancipation" in order to become French citizens. The debates that followed were fascinating. It was the first time such Muslim students realized how external to political society Jews had been historically, and as one of them told me later, just how monstruous, *given the Jewish hopes and sacrifices made in the past*, the Holocaust had been.

I worry that such crucial issues are not necessarily addressed, bridges not built as one goes about doing one's professional work, in a situation of bland university-wide intellectual acceptance possibly hiding fundamental indifference. And since Jewish topics remain controversial, I can easily imagine that they can be kept in a bubble of their own, to the contentment of both insiders and outsiders.

Jewish Museums

Their building, expansion, restoration, and creation even at the smallest regional levels has been cause for major celebration and rightly so. Who would have thought back in the 1990s that publicity for special exhibitions inside Jewish museums would be so visible inside the Metros, U-Bahns, and Tubes of Europe? No country can afford not to have such museums or "Jewish routes" across its historical lands. But nagging questions remain: are they "status symbols" or genuine contributions to the wider social fabric?

My worry: What is the interaction between Jewish museums and their older and more prestigious national equivalents? Has the Jewish past been removed from collective responsibility since everyone can point to a Jewish museum "down the road" and therefore avoid treating national historical or artistic questions that should be enriched by the Jewish reference? Is there a ghetto-like (even when most pleasant) effect to such museums?

I can point to innumerable examples of this dilemma. In Paris in 2022, the *Musée Carnavalet*, the museum of the history of the city, devoted a major exhibition to Marcel Proust's Paris on the centennial of his death. In tracing his life, Proust's maternal Jewish identity and his many Jewish friends were barely evoked. Only his distant "Jewish origins" were mentioned. Right after the Carna-

valet exhibition closed, the MAHJ, Paris's Jewish museum, opened its own major exhibition on Proust with the title "Proust on his mother's side" (a reference to his first volume of *La Recherche, Du côté de chez Swann*) in which his Jewishness was dealt with extensively. Few people know to what an extent Proust was well versed in Biblical and Talmudic studies, how he was an early defender of Dreyfus (unlike his anti-Dreyfusard father), and even close to French Zionists.

With respect to these two exhibitions, most Jews saw both, but far fewer non-Jews made the trip to the Jewish museum to see the latter. Thus was a stereophonic dimension lost which in my view should have underpinned the very idea of a culturally open and enriching Jewish space. The same could be said about the Loevy exhibition in the Jewish Museum Berlin back in 2003 which traced the history and end of the Jewish foundry family that had cast the letters "*Dem Deutschen Volke*" on the Reichstag as well as the Quadriga on the then German Embassy in St. Petersburg. The exhibition was fascinating from all sorts of angles: esthetic, cultural, but above all political. It came with two counter-intuitive endings. The destiny of the brother and sister who were the last heirs of the family diverged. The daughter remained Jewish, married a cantor and moved to Britain in time, and the museum showed her British Jewish descendants. The son who had married a Protestant, not only changed his name but also managed to have it changed on his thesis, and was able to pursue a career in Nazi Germany, while slowly developing hidden Zionist thoughts. He was brutally killed by the Gestapo for having offered shelter to one of the conspirators of the July 1944 assassination attempt against Hitler.

The story of the Loevy family, their professional success as casters and their downfall lay at the very heart of late 19th- and 20th-century German history. In my opinion the exhibition should have taken place in the Reichstag itself (parts of it could also have become permanent displays) or in the *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, and not relegated to a Jewish "subculture". It was shown, instead, in the Jewish Museum Berlin, where most international visitors were unable to appreciate it since all the explanations were in German. In saying this I am in no way casting a shadow on the wonderful curators of the Jewish Museum, but asking how their German equivalents did not deem it appropriate to either co-sponsor or have the exhibition circulate elsewhere. A very important Jewish chapter inside German history was thus overlooked.

One final example: when the newly redesigned Rijksmuseum re-opened in Amsterdam, it made the choice to present works of art in the context of daily lives. For the "17th century" rooms, no mention whatsoever was made of the Marranos who returned to Judaism in Amsterdam or for that matter of Baruch Spinoza – how interesting it would have been to see the equipment with which he ground lenses to earn his living. The assumption was quite simple. One could

learn everything about this key Jewish presence, by going to the Jewish museum down the road. One further proof of the divorce of knowledge, rather than its creative fusion.

Holocaust Memorials

One of the major triumphs of the 1990s occurred when the Holocaust was brought to light in its own intrinsic essence, rather than going unmentioned, forgotten or diluted in other tales of national suffering, or canceled in Communist universalist narratives. Not just the narrative of the Holocaust but also its implications in terms of the visible voids (even if at times covered up) it left in mainly Central and Eastern European societies. By and large most European countries, many in Eastern Europe after some nudging, managed to rectify their previous readings or became aware of their own misinterpretations, and made great efforts to "get it right" – I am thinking in particular of contemporary Lithuania. No mean feat, even if in some cases it took decades, with, as in Poland today, at times clear regressions.

My worry: What is the future of these commemorative spaces of Jewish absence? Can we envision a time when compulsory visits, national remembrances, and feelings of contrition will slowly dwindle in the face of other more recent or immediate horrors as the Holocaust, like all meta-events, slowly sinks into the past? Who will be tending the restored cemeteries in the future and in the name of what ideal? How many times will gorgeous synagogues be *re*-restored in the coming decades? And by whom, decades down the line?

This is a burning symbolic issue in Ukraine where what were once the shtetls of the "Shoah by bullets" have now become new places of Russian horror and death wrought on living Ukrainians (some of whom, Jews). Not to mention the Holocaust memorials that were partially destroyed by Russian missiles such as in Kharkiv or on the edges of Babyn Yar. Are we heading toward a *palimpsest of suffering*, whereby past horrors are overlaid with current ones irrespective of the differences in quantity or "quality"?

On this count we may be at a conceptual crossroads. In the wake of the centrality Jews were accorded in national repentances through Holocaust commemorations, other groups across the Western world – Blacks, Muslims, Roma, colonized indigenous peoples – began demanding that their suffering also be recognized in what many Jewish activists feared would become a competition of suffering.

There is, however, a major difference between a "competition of suffering" and a "palimpsest of suffering". The former can be integrated into a historical narrative that incorporates Jews, but not just Jews alone, and makes the clear argument that such a competition is scandalous since all suffering must be respected and honored. Keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive in no way infringes on the suffering of other groups. There should be no historical "zero-sum" game. There is room for all in this narrative of horror. In my opinion, Jewish Spaces should pursue such a line of thought.

A "palimpsest of suffering" is a far more complex and delicate concept which contains its own inherent turning points, for it implies that the horrors of the past are *written over* by the horrors of the present, which will then be overwritten by future horrors. This is how humanity has managed to survive millennia of accumulated horrors by "feeling them less" with the passage of time. Will the Holocaust reach this point, in a foreseeable future, to be remembered and ritualized within the Jewish world, which still remembers the Fall of the First and Second Temples, or the near murder of all Persian Jews in Esther's Megillah? Can one imagine an ongoing Jewish religious grief over the Holocaust, while "everyone else" considers it as an ever more distant historical event? The recent Russian aggression against Ukraine seems to confirm such a "to each epoch its horrors" vision, for until 2022, Ukraine was not exactly considered one of the best pupils of the Holocaust commemoration class. Incidentally, it is important to note that the Jewish world has also participated in this palimpsest of suffering. Its nearly unanimous pro-Ukrainian stance in the war shows that present tragedies do take top priority to the commemoration of the horrors of the past. A new chapter is thus created in the realm of Jewish Spaces that contain within themselves universal spaces.

From a "Never Again" to a "Still Going On"

It could very well be that Jewish Spaces in the future, whether in universities, in museums, or in Holocaust Memorials will find their long term mission by moving beyond the increasingly meaningless "never again" toward a "still going on" by becoming early warning stations, precisely because of what happened to the Jews in their long history, with respect to the temptation of marginalization, violence, and expulsion of human groups. Without in any way minimizing the Holocaust, Jewish and non-Jewish voices can unite in such a two-pronged realm which can become an important aspect of future Jewish Spaces.

The questions I have raised here are by no means easy to confront. There are so many variables involved in each national setting that no approach suits all. Perhaps even more importantly, progress does not take place in a nice upward curve, but in dialectical spirals. Every shared Jewish memory or historical commemoration carries its own complexity and its own tensions.

I shall end this chapter with a very concrete example which took place in April 2023, one year after the conference. I am referring to the commemorations (in the plural) which took place in Warsaw on April 19, 2023, to mark the 80th anniversary of the beginning of the Warsaw Ghetto Insurrection. They vividly point to the inherent problems linked to the notion of a single "Jewish Space".

There were two ceremonies, one official and the other informal. The first took place in front of the grey memorial to the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto Insurrection, with the Polin Museum as a backdrop. It was held in the courtyard of the museum, therefore at the heart of Warsaw's Jewish Space of memory but in front of a museum meant to extol 1,000 years of Jewish life, rather than the years of extermination in Poland. The official ceremony was led by the President of Poland and his two guests, the President of Israel and the President of Germany – the first time an official representative of Germany was invited to participate in the commemoration. (When then Chancellor Willy Brandt memorably knelt in front of the Memorial in 1970, he did so in a private capacity and at a different moment of the year.) The 2023 official ceremony, which was attended by official Jews such as the Chief Rabbi of Poland and older members of the community, had a solemn national and above all military character. There were drums and clarions as an official roll call was made of the heroes of the uprising as well as the leaders of the Catholic underground who had helped Jews in hiding. Both were installed in the official pantheon of Polish heroism. For the highly nationalist Polish government, such a roll call was the best proof that Poland had integrated its Jewish heroes inside its national history, as full-fledged Polish patriots deserving full military honors. The accent was on their noble positive acts as well as of those who had helped them. In terms of Polish history, this was no mean feat. Polish nationalists (the ancestors of those in power today) and the Home Army during the war had been less than open, often frankly hostile, to any active unified resistance with the Jews against the Nazis. The Jews were not part of the Polish history of martyrology; they were considered separate and not part of the "true" nation. Nor should one forget the record of Polish denunciations and collaboration with the Nazis against the Jews – historical truths that the current government continues to deny as an "anti-Polish" attack. During Communist rule, Jews were not entitled to a special place in its ideological history: the Jewish three million were englobed in the six million Poles who had died during World

War II. After the end of Communist rule, as Poles sought to commemorate their own suffering, they did so as a zero-sum game with respect to Jewish suffering, casting an unpalatable light on the centrality of the Holocaust in international terms.

In the "glass half full" reading of history, one could consider that the ceremony made significant steps forward with respect to the past: it included the Jewish fighters into the roll call of Polish national heroes *without denying them their Jewishness*. In his speech, the Polish President accepted the fact that they belonged to the long Jewish narrative from Masada to the present, but he stressed that they were also the children of Polish history, literature, poetry – something that was rarely if ever mentioned in nationalist circles in the past. President Duda thus transcended the zero-sum game approach. That he did so within his own brand of nationalist politics marked a symbolic turning point. Critics can argue that he entered the Jewish Space on his own nationalist terms. His camp would argue that they expanded their understanding of Polish honor to include active Jews, thus underscoring the Polish-Jewish co-existence and even symbiosis that lay at the heart of Polin's museum mission. In other words, he accommodated Polish history to fit *one of the narratives* of Poland's Jewish Space.

The second informal commemoration took place practically at the same time. This commemoration was attended by the most vocal and visible Polish Jews active in progressive civil society and staunch political opponents of the right-wing government. The ceremony was also attended as always by non-Jewish friends who shared the same commitment to an open past and future. It also centered on a Jewish Space of memory beginning at the Mila 18 plaque where the insurrection began and heading out to the marble memorial at Umschlagplatz from where the Ghetto Jews were deported. As a symbol, living daffodils were carried along with the paper daffodils that have become the symbol of the Ghetto insurrection commemoration throughout Polish society, and which were particularly visible during the day not just in Warsaw but also in other Polish cities.

The boycotting of the official commemoration had its own pedigree, based on Marek Edelman's (one of the very few survivors of the insurrection and the only one to have continued to live in Poland) refusal to participate in the Polish Communist ceremonies with their subsuming of the Jews into the anonymous victorious "proletariat". The informal ceremony boycotted the official ceremony on multiple counts: first, because of the nationalist government's refusal to accept honest historical research on the role played by ordinary Poles in the abetting of the Final Solution, choosing to paint an idealized version of Polish-Jewish relations during the black years. Secondly, because of the right-wing policies that had curbed democratic life and civil society under the Polish version of illiberal democracy and the destruction of judicial independence. Thirdly, for most of the

participants, Polish racist treatment of Syrian, Afghan, and other migrants, and the closing off of the Byelorussian border, proved that the country had not learned any of the lessons of the past, with the exception of its hospitality toward the Ukrainians, perceived as brothers not "others". For this group, and on these three counts, the official commemoration was irrelevant and belonged to the "glass half empty" category.

For anyone trying to think about the future of Jewish Spaces, these two commemorations provide a formidable dilemma. Should one laud the attempt to fuse a nationalist vision with a new positive Jewish content in the name of a partially transcended past with the glorification of dead heroes subsumed in a widened national narrative? Or should one follow living Jews in their political stances linked to the present and the future? Can one, should one, try to reconcile both visions? Are they reconcilable in the long run? Do they form two sides of an active Jewish Space? And what if any positions should Jews and non-Jews take on these crucial political issues? In the best of possible worlds, these two commemorations would be seen as laying the groundwork for a solid bridge in the ongoing fraught Polish-Jewish relations. But they can also become amputated stumps leading nowhere in terms of possible future dialogue. I cannot give clear answers but can only raise questions on the interactions between national histories and specific identities. Obviously this issue does not concern Jews alone. But it may be that Jewish Spaces can be avantgardes in this interaction.

Conclusion

Since 2023 we have entered a new epoch that has little in common with the optimistic 1990s or even with the more distraught decades linked to the Islamic terrorism that followed. We are now witnessing a redrawing of the international map and the need for the West to stick together in face of an ever more frightening Russia and its internal European acolytes. The Jewish Spaces that were inaugurated 30 years ago have multiplied, spawning ever more diversified institutions. But in an epoch of national lies, bullying, threats, identity selfishness, and the major rewriting of the past with war as an apotheosis, Jews and non-Jews who populate Europe's Jewish Spaces must ask themselves tough questions of just what they are doing and in the name of what values and for whom. We must all go back to the original pluralist democratic ideal, and fight for it to the hilt for we have lost the comfort zone that accompanied the decades of pious commemoration in a setting of peace.

We must also distinguish between what remain open Jewish Spaces (of which Ukraine has given ample examples) and those that are "closed" in which today's court Jews, and their colleagues, be they in Byelorussia or in Russia itself, pretend to carry forth Jewish life and commemoration by accepting existential compromises that go against the very ideals such spaces were meant to represent. Jewish Spaces must thus reinvent themselves in a time of raw violence and war and if properly advocated by Jews and non-Jews together, can offer an important springboard for the value battles ahead.

Post-Scriptum

The attacks of October 7th in Israel followed by the war in Gaza, and above all the reactions they provoked in the Western world, have added another layer of complexity to the very idea of a Jewish space. Israel and the Jewish people have experienced at first hand both the "competition of suffering" and the "palimpsest of suffering" I had described above. When I wrote my text, I could never have imagined that both dangers could hit the Jewish world simultaneously. Mine had been a reflection on how the Jewish story could impact other sufferings in other lands. Instead, the trauma of the terrorist attacks in Israel was relativized by an ever-growing shock at what happened in Gaza. Gaza's siege, its ruins and the displaced Palestinians were equated in many minds with the fate of the Jews during World War II, minus the death camps. But the notion of "genocide" was bandied about in a clear desire to cover the Holocaust with Israel's deeds, in a planetary palimpsest that has left the Jewish world in shock and fear. It is still unclear how Europe's Jewish Spaces (and America's as well) will weather this storm. It could very well be that the importance of these Jewish Spaces will turn out to have been historically time-bound. In the future, one cannot exclude that the world by 'moving on' to other sufferings, and especially to those of the Palestinians, will turn against Jews and Israelis alike, perceiving them as once upon a time victims now showing their 'true colors.' Their "Spaces" no longer serving either as an educational or political/moral function. Those who inhabit such Spaces professionally must prepare themselves for such a transformation, by ensuring that the past not be confused with the present or the future, in order words by holding the fort of Jewish memory against those who seek to destroy it. This is a civic/moral commitment that transcends the halls of academia—in other words, an existential choice.