

Open Forum

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Representations of the Holocaust in the Jewish Museum in Kaliningrad

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Abstract: In November 2018, the reconstructed synagogue was inaugurated in Kaliningrad (Russian Federation) on the site of the house of worship destroyed on the night of the pogrom of 1938, Kristallnacht. Since 2022, a small Jewish Museum has also opened in the active synagogue, the centerpiece of which is a thematically conceptualized permanent exhibition. In the following article, the initial situation, mission, and thematic expectations for the creation of the permanent exhibition are described. It was desired that it should have an identity-forming and identity-promoting effect on the Jews of the Kaliningrad congregation and the entire region. Furthermore, it should be educational and entertaining for the population and tourists of the area, but also represent a place of remembrance of the former Jewish life and the Holocaust for the Jewish visitors of the region. Subsequently, the chosen exhibition media are described, as well as the selection of narratives and their respective media implementation. The text also sheds light on the object from the perspective of Jewish cultural heritage: The Kaliningrad region is one of the Eastern European post-displacement areas in which German traces (including German-Jewish traces) are regarded as a dissonant heritage. The authorized heritage discourse does not accept the consequences of the Holocaust here and ignores the city's Jewish heritage. How can Jewish cultural heritage be made visible under these conditions? How can the new museum contribute to a change?

Keywords: Kaliningrad; museum; core exhibition; Holocaust; narrative; Jews

It is relatively rare for historians to have opportunities to disseminate research findings outside of publications and make them accessible to the public. In the following, the author's concept for a permanent exhibition and its realization in a new museum in the rebuilt synagogue in Kaliningrad (2021–2022) is presented. To

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outline this complicated process, which spans national borders, the initial situation and brief, thematic expectations, are described here. This is followed by theoretical considerations on how this museum fits into the landscape of the new Jewish museums in Eastern Europe, but above all, on the question of how the dissonant cultural heritage can be adequately presented in the permanent exhibition,¹ i.e. how the contents can be made appealing and adaptable to visitors. Next comes a description of the exhibition media, the selection of narratives, and their media implementation. One focus lies on the representation of the Holocaust in graphic novels, as well just as in the stories of the students of the Jewish school. Included are considerations on the conception and execution, as well as observations among the visitors (Figure 1).

1. Locality and inhabitants

Today's Kaliningrad Oblast, which covers an area of about 15,000 km² and has a population of slightly more than one million, is part of the Russian Federation. Formerly it



Figure 1: The opening of the rebuilt synagogue in Kaliningrad in 2018.

¹ Together with Ulrich Knufinke, the author is leading a project on such questions entitled “Appropriation and Revitalization. Negotiation Processes of the German-Jewish Cultural Heritage in Poland” as part of the DFG priority program 2357 “Jewish Cultural Heritage”, in which research is being conducted on dissonant heritage in Polish post-displacement areas. <https://spp-juedisches-kulturerbe.de/1-phase/#toggle-id-1> [2024.04.27].

was part of the East Prussia region then known as Königsberg. It is an enclave near the Baltic Sea between the Republic of Lithuania and Poland. It was conquered by the Red Army in 1945 and placed under Soviet administration as a result of the Potsdam Treaty. The remaining German civilian population was forcibly resettled in Germany in 1947/48. Since 1946, systematic settlements of citizens from numerous regions of the USSR have taken place. It is noteworthy that among all the various population groups, the soldiers of the Red Army, the forcibly resettled Germans and the settled Soviet citizens, there were also Jews, who, however, were not united by any formal congregation or community of interests at that time. This fact is worth mentioning especially because among the present members of the Jewish congregation there are descendants of the soldiers of the Red Army and the new settlers of the late forties. The grandfathers, who occupied Königsberg with the Red Army in the spring of 1945, often decided to settle in what is now Kaliningrad after a short return to their former homeland in small towns in Belarus. When they returned to Belarus, they found that the members of their family had been murdered by the Germans. Other members of the Jewish congregation came from Ukraine, after being evacuated there by the Soviet administration to the interior of the Soviet Union. They also did not find neither their extended family members nor their homes upon their return in 1945 and decided to build a life in a new place. They responded to the general calls of the Soviet government to resettle the newly formed Kaliningrad Oblast. In 1949, when the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the Soviet metropolises began to have its effect, culminating in the doctors' plot in 1951–1953, Jewish Soviet citizens also preferred to flee to the periphery, to the “westernmost” regions.

Other congregation members arrived in the area only after 1990. They had previously lived in Grozny, Tashkent, or other places where their families had fled from the Holocaust. The original places of residence of the ancestors had often been in present-day Poland and Belarus, and the relatives who had remained there had perished. In this respect, one could almost say that the Kaliningrad Jews represent the diversity of post-Soviet Jews. Different elements of identity coexist in the community. These include: Being a descendant of Jewish soldiers, being the conqueror of Königsberg, being a descendant of Jewish resettlers after the war, being proud to belong to a widespread family with relatives in Western Europe, the USA, and Israel, etc. What unites the members with their very different religious needs is their pride in having initiated the commemoration of the Holocaust in this region and in the rebuilding of the synagogue. The congregation members feel they are part of the continuity of the Königsberg Jewish congregation. This aligns with the observations of Zeev Khninan, who recently described how local Jewish identity is rising.² The community belongs to the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the umbrella organization of Chabad–Lubavitch in Russia.

2 Z. Khanin, Zeev, *The Jews of contemporary post-Soviet states. Sociological insights from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Kazakhstan* (Berlin, Boston 2023), p.44.

Thus, it can be seen that a large number of Jewish families have private memories of victims of the Holocaust. In Kaliningrad, there was no place for public remembrance of the Holocaust until 1989. This phenomenon was based, as everywhere in the USSR, on the fact that “in the USSR the Holocaust was not presented as a unique, separated phenomenon,” as Zvi Gitelman stated.³ There was only the fact that the fascists and their accomplices had murdered Soviet citizens. The murder of Jews was treated as a small part of the fact that 20 million Soviet citizens (according to Soviet sources) lost their lives during WWII.⁴ The term Holocaust itself was utterly unused until 1990. As a result, no museums commemorated the Holocaust. All in all, one can summarize that there was a great silence about the victims of the Holocaust, even in the private sphere, as commemoration could not be ritualized. Today, the annual participation in the “March of Life” to Yantarny⁵ on the anniversary of the massacre continues to be an important manifestation of the Jewish community. Many members of the community also commemorate their family members who were murdered in the Holocaust on the occasion of this event or others that take place in the synagogue.

2. Why Kaliningrad needs a Jewish museum?

In the Kaliningrad region, a decidedly atheistic policy had prevailed since the end of the 1940s, which had been deliberately initiated by Stalin.⁶ It was not until 1989 that a Jewish cultural association was founded and in 1992 a religious Jewish congregation was established. November 1989 also saw the first public commemoration of the 1938 November pogrom and the arson attack on the synagogue at its former site. Jewish activists then began to connect commemorative work with local history. Since the 2000s, the congregation has organized an annual large memorial event at the site of a death march of Jewish prisoners to the Baltic Sea, to Yantarny (formerly Palmnicken). There, the congregation also had a memorial built in 2011, designed by Frank Meisler. This memorialization is inseparable from how today's

3 Gitelman, Z.Y. ‘Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union’, in Z.Y. Gitelman (ed), *Bitter Legacy. Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (1997), 14–42, here 18.

4 Gitelman, Z.Y., ‘Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union’, in Z.Y. Gitelman (ed), *Bitter Legacy. Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (1997), 14–42, here 20.

5 Yantarny (formerly Palmnicken) is a settlement on the Baltic Sea, 40 km from Kaliningrad. The SS carried out a massacre of Jewish prisoners here at the end of January 1945. A memorial has commemorated the event since 2011.

6 See more: Leiserowitz, Ruth. 2004. “Rekonstruktion von Identität und Imagination. Neue jüdische Gemeinden in Klaipeda und Kaliningrad.” In *Der Ort des Judentums in der Gegenwart: 1989 – 2002*, edited by Hiltrud Wallenborn, 47–62. Sifria 7. Berlin: Be.bra Wiss.-Verl.

Jewish congregation views its identity. This is an expression of a phenomenon that Diana Pinto describes precisely, in which she explains the interactions between the reconstruction of Jewish cultural life and Holocaust remembrance after 1990,⁷ The development in Kaliningrad was similar, but with a time lag.

The cultural heart of today's Kaliningrad includes Cathedral Island where the cathedral and the tomb of Immanuel Kant are located. The large synagogue stood adjacent to the cathedral. It was set on fire in November 1938 and destroyed. Members of the Jewish congregation were forced to demolish its remains. In 1940, barracks for Jewish workers from the Bialystok district were built on the territory. In the 1990s, a circus tent stood on the remains of the synagogue's foundations.

Members of the Jewish congregation, mainly entrepreneurs, established a foundation under the name "Fond stroitel'stva Sinagogi v Kaliningrade" [Synagogue Construction Foundation in Kaliningrad], further Synagogue Foundation, in 2011 to rebuild the synagogue on the historic site. One of its members, an architect, drew up the plans to rebuild the synagogue. The Synagogue foundation sees itself as the legal successor of the former Jewish congregation of Königsberg and laid claim to this historical site. Only as a result of a court case against the operators of the circus tent could the building project be set in motion. The Synagogue Foundation's strategy was also bold, given the fact that the city and regional administration repeatedly tried to ignore the undesirable and, therefore, dissonant heritage of the German period.

It should also be mentioned in this context the cathedral was itself bombed in 1944 and, was in ruins until it was rebuilt in 1993. Today, it houses a museum, a concert hall, and several chapels. When the synagogue reopened in 2018 on the 80th anniversary of the pogrom, it drew the attention and sympathy of neighboring institutions and the city's population. This also included joy at the successful redevelopment of a significant gap in the city center and the hope that this example could serve as an incentive for activities by other religious groups.

Since the re-opening of the synagogue, a kosher cafeteria with affordable prices has been functioning on the ground floor. As a result, a large number of people, including tourists, come to the building every day. These visitors would otherwise have no contact with Jewish food or Jewish culture and religion. On the second and third floors are located the synagogue and administrative offices. The synagogue is first and foremost a place of worship. There is a daily minyan, services, and a Sunday school for children. The active congregation is made up of all age groups. Apart from the services, however, there are also regular guided tours for tourists, which are well

7 Pinto, Diana. 1996. "A New Jewish Identity for Post-1989 Europe." *JPR Policy Paper* (1). https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/a_ne/A%20New%20Jewish%20Identity%20For%20Post-1989%20Europe.pdf. [2024.04.27]

attended. Synagogue Foundation members had wanted to set up a museum on the first floor already since 2016.

The Synagogue Foundation's representatives discussed the idea of a "tolerance museum". The idea served as an inspiration for the Moscow museum of the same name. That museum is officially called the "Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center". It was established in 2012 in the building of a former bus depot.⁸ The idea of copying the Moscow model was poorly thought out, especially as the museum and the Tolerance center are separate institutions under one roof.⁹ The idea did not catch on. This was also because state and government circles were not financially involved in the project and there were no requirements from this side. But the desire for a museum undoubtedly existed, and was in line with the trend described by Olga Gershenson and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.¹⁰ Why did the builders of the synagogue also want a Jewish Museum, even if they did not know how it would be designed? The general answer would have reflected precisely what David Shneer and Anna Shternshis have already formulated: „Perhaps the answer lies in the need to claim physical space for public display [...] every museum is a public statement about this story being worthy of spending lots of money [...]“.¹¹ The Kaliningrad-specific answer is the author's conclusion from all the talks with Jews in and around Kaliningrad during 2017–2022. The congregation commemorated the Holocaust in the region with a memorial, and marked Jewish space with the synagogue in the city center. The task now was to fill both positions with further historically underpinned narratives. It should be added that this constellation was special and unusual in several respects, and that it is difficult to draw general conclusions for Jewish museums.

3. How to find adaptable narratives of local Jewish heritage?

In the run-up to the reconstruction of the synagogue, representatives of the Synagogue Foundation had approached the Berlin association "Jews in East Prussia – History and Culture Society" [Juden in Ostpreußen – Verein zur Geschichte und Kultur e.V.]. This

⁸ Gershenson, Olga, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. 2015. "New Jewish Museums in Post-Communist Europe." *East European Jewish Affairs* 45 (2–3): 153–57, here 154.

⁹ Nathans, Benjamin 'Inside the Museum. Torahs, Tanks, and Tech: Moscow's Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center', *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, 2–3 (2015), 190–199, here 190.

¹⁰ Gershenson, Olga, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. 2015. "New Jewish Museums in Post-Communist Europe." *East European Jewish Affairs* 45 (2–3): 153–57, here 154.,

¹¹ Shneer, David, and Anna Shternshis. 2015. "Why Jewish Museums?" *East European Jewish Affairs* 45 (2–3): 151–52.

association was founded in 2004 by the author of this article, Dr Ruth Leiserowitz, and husband, Michael Leiserowitz, with friends from all over the world. It aims at bridge-building between two groups of people: Those descendants of Jews who lived in the region during that time and who are attached to their history and culture, as well as those people in today's Lithuania and those in the Polish and the Russian parts of the former East Prussian region who share the same concerns. The first of such activities took place in the region when, in 2009, the Sovetsk City Museum staff was invited to an exhibition about the history of Jews in the former Tilsit. In research and discussions, it became clear once again that even almost 20 years after the dissolution of the USSR, Jewish history is still being rewritten within the confines of a conformist ideological narrative which means that their Jewishness has as little role to play as possible. For this reason, Jewish heroes are often invisible even in museum exhibitions.¹² In the context of pre-war local history, Jews were just as invisible as a separate group, because German Jews were counted as part of the German population. Post-war historians did not want to deal specifically with this group. While it was difficult to tell stories of Jewish heroes as they were confined to the old familiar Soviet narratives, there was a free slate to tell stories of German Jewish protagonists after 1989, when representations of German history were finally allowed. In addition, the interest to gain information about the region's pre-war history grew, especially among the second generation of immigrants. The first exhibition "Jews in East Prussia" was shown in Kaliningrad in 2000 in what was then the German-Russian House. It was a traveling exhibition conceived by the director of the East Prussian State Museum, Dr. Ronny Kabus. The presentation met with friendly interest, but not a great response. This was mainly due to the fact that it primarily presented important political and university protagonists of Königsberg's German-Jewish society from the 19th and 20th centuries, to whom the Kaliningrad audience could not relate. The content was not perceived as a heritage that could be adapted.

In the summer of 2015, the Synagogue Foundation and the Jewish congregation of Kaliningrad requested the association's assistance in the retrieval of documents and records for the reconstruction of the congregation's history. As a result, various archival materials were located and made available. From numerous conversations, it became clear that there was no knowledge about Königsberg's Jewish society at the turn of the 19th century, neither in the congregation nor in the memories of the city's residents. For this reason, the ~~our~~ association organized an exhibition about this history in the Museum of History of the city of Kaliningrad in November/December 2017. Under the title "The

¹² This phenomenon has been described in the literature on various occasions. Baranova, Olga. 2015. "Politics of Memory of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union", In *Dimensions of Modernity. The Enlightenment and its Contested Legacies*, edited by Paweł Marzecwski and Stefan Eich, Vienna: IWM https://files.iwm.at/jvfc/34_2_Baranova.pdf; [2024.04.28]. Gitelman, Zvi. 1997. "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union", In *Bitter Legacy. Confronting the Holocaust in the USSR*, edited by Z.Y. Gitelman, pp.14–42. Bloomington: IUP.

Jews of Königsberg at the turn of the 20th century (Evrei v Königsberge na rubeže stoletij) photos and documents were displayed. These documents are an illustration of the Jewish congregation at the time of the construction of the synagogue. They also record the sponsorship for its construction and many of the activities in the region.¹³ Many general questions that were relevant to the Jewish community at the time and are now playing a role again were touched on here. In other words, the visitors were introduced to many analogous situations that the Jews of Königsberg experienced at the turn of the century. These historical parallels opened up much understanding of these periods of history and their protagonists. The positive response to the exhibition showed once again how significant the deficit of local Jewish history was in the city and the region.

4. A Jewish place and thematic expectations

The synagogue was built exclusively from donations by the congregation members. Various foreign institutions had refused a request to subsidize the project. The Foreign Office in Berlin had also been approached. The Foreign Office's response was that no building measures could be financed, but funds for an exhibition could be provided. The Synagogue Foundation and the congregation decided to pursue the idea of financing the planned museum with the help of funds from the Foreign Office. To this end, an impact study had to be submitted. The request for such a plan had been made to better: the association. The question then arose: Which topics should be represented in a Jewish Museum? Religion, Customs, History, and/or the Holocaust? The challenges were many: What were the expectations of the patrons? What were the expectations of the sponsors? And finally and importantly, how to develop a modern and meaningful permanent exhibition, which would have its reach beyond the congregation and the synagogue? Bear in mind, there is no memorial to victims of the Holocaust in the area, with the exception of the monument in Yantarny. There is also no exhibition of this complex array of topics in the vicinity. In contrast to other Jewish museums, no explicitly religious themes had to be considered for the exhibition. As since the opening of the synagogue, regular guided tours for tourists have taken place, in which knowledge about Jewish religion is imparted. The brief was to create a permanent exhibition that would be very modern and would not contain any classical objects. The core exhibition of the Polin Museum was recommended as an excellent example by the synagogue's architect, a member of the synagogue's foundation and the community.

¹³ The following catalog was published for this purpose: Leiserowitz, Ruth. 2017. *The Jews of Königsberg at the turn of the 20th century. Evrei v Königsberge na rubežec stoletij*. Berlin: Juden in Ostpreußen.

The Synagogue Foundation handed over the entire application and the financial administration to the Berlin association. This increased the workload for the association, but the administration became more efficient. The application together with the conceptual framework was submitted in close consultation with the Synagogue Foundation and the board of the congregation, in 2020. These were approved in the spring of 2021. The preliminary approval of the exhibition was finalized by the donor on February 22, 2022, and the opening in Kaliningrad took place on October 9, 2022.

The expectation of the members of the board of the congregation, all donors for the synagogue building, was that the events pertaining to the Holocaust in the region would be addressed (in this context, the phrase “Kaliningrad is the only place in the Russian Federation where Kristallnacht took place in 1938” was often mentioned). Furthermore, there was a strong desire to memorialize the history of the Jews in Königsberg. Among them were the names of famous personalities, who it felt that should be mentioned. The sponsor did not explicitly define his expectations, but it was clear that the history of the German Jews in Königsberg should be presented. And that the crimes of the Nazi period, the deportation and extermination of the Jews should be remembered. Another relevant factor was the recognition of Jewish survivors from Königsberg such as Michael Wieck and Nechama Drober, who had written memoirs that had also been published in Russian.¹⁴

All of these factors are, of course, too few for creating meaningful narratives. Herein lay the first major challenge of the project. In the course of numerous conversations and discussions, three goals and three target groups were then identified:

- 1) Strengthening Jewish identity through the encouragement of a positive self-image for the Jews of the congregation of Kaliningrad and the entire region.
- 2) Educating and enlightening the population and tourists of the region about its Jewish history.
- 3) Particularly for the Jewish guests of the region, the Centre should be a place of remembrance of the former Jewish life in Königsberg, and it should memorialize the Holocaust in the region.

To fulfill the first goal, it was necessary to select and recount examples in which Königsberg Jews had made significant and still recognizable contributions to the city and region. For the second goal, it was necessary to tell a short, coherent, and understandable story of the Jewish community of Königsberg from its beginning to its end. For the third goal, the events of the Holocaust were to be told on-site under the three essential aspects of deportation, forced labor, and murder, and

¹⁴ Drober, Nechama. 2015. *Ich heiße jetzt Nechama. Mein Leben zwischen Königsberg und Israel*. Berlin: Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas. Wieck, Michael. 2003. *A childhood under Hitler and Stalin. Memoirs of a “certified” Jew*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press.

contemporary witnesses were to have their say. Two contemporary witnesses from Königsberg in Germany, who visited the community in Kaliningrad at regular intervals after 1990, played a prominent role. One was the Stuttgart violinist Michael Wieck (1928–2021), who had lived in Königsberg and witnessed the first deportation from there in 1942. The second eyewitness was Nechama Drober (1927–2023), who had also seen two deportations. Both eyewitnesses had opened their memories, first in German, later also in Russian. Wieck's memoirs were first published in Russian in 2004 and Drober's in 2013. Both books became very well known.

5. How to translate the goals into meaningful narratives?

Narratives could be developed relatively freely, as they did not necessarily have to be based on objects.¹⁵ A great model for this was the core exhibition at the Museum Polin in Warsaw, particularly the twelve principles of the curator Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett.¹⁶

In this context, the author visited many different Jewish museums, discussed with various experts and museum educators and drew on her own experience as a curator. A general narrative about immigration and the community's growth that would appeal to community members, residents and tourists, could easily be developed. A second three-part narrative about forced labor, deportation, and the Holocaust in the region was also, to a certain extent, already predetermined. Contrary to all plans, the third narrative emerged when the idea arose to include an object in the exhibition. One reason for this was to listen to experienced museum curators and to add an emotional aspect to the exhibition with an object.¹⁷ This is the only object on display in the exhibition.

How could the above-mentioned contemporary witnesses be effectively integrated into the exhibition? The idea was to actively commemorate the location and position of the Jewish school between 1935 and 1942 in the synagogue (after the November pogrom in the neighboring building) within the exhibition and thus also

15 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 'Inside the Museum. Curating between hope and despair: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews', *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, 2–3 (2015), 215–235, here 227.

16 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 'Theater of history', in B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, A. Polonsky, and D. Gajewska (eds), *Polin. 1000 years history of Polish Jews* (Warsaw 2014), 19–36.

17 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 'Inside the Museum. Curating between hope and despair: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews', *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, 2–3 (2015), 215–235, here 227.

allow Michael Wieck and Nechama Drober to have their say. This made it possible to tie in with the historical location in a suitable way.

Four narratives were thus crystalized. These were presented in the following manner, clustered around the following topics:

- 1) Königsberg as a city of Jewish immigration,
- 2) Jewish forced labor | deportation | Holocaust in the region,
- 3) Relations of the descendants to the present congregation,
- 4) The synagogue as a place of education and encouragement - the history of the Jewish school and its students.

These defining themes made it possible to clearly determine the central messages of the planned permanent exhibition. With the elaboration of these themes, it was clearly defined that it is about a concept in which information transfer has priority and learning processes are to take place through content-related and aesthetic experiences. How could cultural or artistic mediation processes now be conceived? The selection of media was decisive for this.

6. Selection of media for storytelling

After six months of work on the concept and the application for funding from the German Foreign Office, the tender for implementation was submitted. The Leipzig-based company KOCMOC,¹⁸ the largest design agency in central Germany, was awarded the contract. In the following six months, a team led by the exhibition designer, Alexander Fleischmann, worked on the media implementation. The collaboration began with discussions with a museum educator, an interior designer and other specialists. Designer Bertil Brahm, who created all the illustrations, also played an important role. All the necessary documents, photos and video materials had already been researched in advance by the association, which also obtained the necessary licensing rights, wrote the exhibition texts and had them translated and edited. The exhibition was then produced within six months in Leipzig and the surrounding area. Fifty people were involved in the entire process.

Here is a brief description of the different media, which is necessary to understand that the exhibition is designed with a multitude of display formats, and not (as is unfortunately the case in some other museums) with the same screens lined up next to each other. As a result of the discussions, a decision was made for the utilization of appropriate languages as explanatory and descriptive tools in the exhibition. The entire museum is presented in four languages: Russian, English, German and Hebrew.

¹⁸ The name of the company means “cosmos”, the spelling with the Cyrillic letters is an allusion.

(Russian for the congregation, English for the common tourists, Hebrew mainly for Israeli tourists, German for German tourists, mainly former inhabitants of the region, who never heard about the Jewish life there because in their childhood Jewish history was obscured). QR codes¹⁹ in individual areas also serve this purpose. There were also decisions for the use of very different exhibition media. Each of these has its own special function and “speaks” in its own way to the visitors. There are panels on the walls with images and text, for presenting facts for overview understanding. A single traditional source, a replica of an historical document from 1712, is used in the exhibition. Seven different short video clips consisting of collages of photographs, drawings and documents are shown on a touch screen to narrate migration patterns.

On the opposite wall, eight different three-minute videos are shown, allowing contemporary witnesses to speak to the visitors. Three graphic novels placed on custom-made tables that create three museum islands were included to retell those stories. Audio files (sounds as well as spoken voices) were installed in those islands to complete the presentations. These also reflect and accentuate the visitors’ impressions. A specially made model embedded in a showcase in a museum island serves as further clarification. In the same manner, an original object made of silver, is presented in a small wall-showcase. Its authenticity impacts the visitor. On the right-side wall are five small replica houses with “peep” windows, the majority of which are equipped with a motion detector. When visitors approach them, sequences of images or audio files are triggered. One small house is equipped with an odor trigger (Figure 2). All media fulfill specific functions. In a way, the four narratives are intertwined. The right-hand wall shows Königsberg as the center of immigration in terms of content and graphics. The third narrative with the object is integrated here. The opposite wall illustrates the flight movements in all directions using the narratives of the schoolchildren. The islands with the depictions of the Holocaust are arranged in the field of tension between the convergent movements on the right and the divergent ones on the left.

7. Position of the representations of the Holocaust in the museum

As previously mentioned, the memory of the massacre in Palmnicken plays an extremely important role in the understanding of the community. During the discussions concerning the envisioned permanent exhibition, it was repeatedly emphasized

¹⁹ QR codes (quick-response codes) consist of black squares arranged in a square grid on a white background. It may be used to display text to the visitor, to open a webpage on the visitor’s device.



Figure 2: Visitors discover stories.

by community members that the memory of the mass murder in Palmnicken had to be represented. However, the topic of the Holocaust which had to be presented included several themes, which could not be clearly formulated by the client. Historically, the point of view of the descendants of survivors and of contemporary witnesses on the deportations from Königsberg also had to be presented and remembered. Furthermore, it was imperative to include the topic of forced labor in the region, thus to generate a hitherto barely existing memory of those events.

The designers of KOCMOC first suggested positioning the commemoration of the Holocaust in a quiet corner, for example in an adjoining room, where silent remembrance could be observed. An opposing approach was that the Holocaust was such a central theme that it needed to be highlighted, since the overriding message of “never again” should always be conveyed in this space. Practically, however, there was a challenge to overcome: The exhibition was to be set up in the largest hall of the synagogue, which is also being used by the community for festivals and should continue to be used on such occasions. The team of KOCMOC then proposed to place the three themes on three mobile islands, on tables that can be rolled out when needed. The display areas of the islands are to be filled with representations of the three themes in the form of graphic novels. To this end, the designers referred to one of their previous projects, the field barn of Gardelegen, where they had used graphic

novels extensively.²⁰ The depiction of the events of forced labor, deportation, and murder in the region occupies a central place in the room. Visitors cannot avoid it. As the museum islands are relatively large, several people usually look at one of the graphic novels simultaneously, which leads to conversations and discussions in which what has been seen is processed. This is an essential part of the exhibition visit.

8. How do the narratives overcome the dissonant heritage?

Concerning the arrangement of the exhibition, a brief description is in order: The first half of the wall on the right hand side narrates the Jewish migration to the city over several centuries. Many Jews migrated to the port city. The narrative of the influx is graphically presented. On the next part of that wall, Jewish life in the city, is documented in exemplary cases from the end of the 18th century up until the 20th century. On the opposite side of the room is told the story of emigration from the city from 1933. It is told through the prism of Jewish schoolchildren. The process of dispersion to all parts of the world is also graphically illustrated by the design of the wall. Thus, the representations of the two walls placed opposite each other, are in a state of tension: On one side there are multiple movements towards the center of Königsberg, and on the other side, a dispersion is depicted. In the center of the room are grouped the museum islands which demonstrate the means of destruction: Deportation, forced labor, and murder of the Jews.

How can it deliver adaptable narratives that are not perceived as dissonant? All stories are told in the historical present tense and from a Jewish perspective. Personal experience is always at the center. The concept thus adheres to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's twelve principles mentioned above. The focus is always on Jews. This narrative perspective is new in this city and, therefore, has a surprising effect on visitors.

Why was the topic of migration currently so appropriate? The Kaliningrad Jewish community is strongly influenced by migration. Many members come from Belarus, Tajikistan, Grozny, Lithuania and Ukraine. Their story will be told in another space during a future phase of the project. Diverse patterns of migration provide a context that can connect both sections of the story. It is important to draw attention to, and strengthen, the narrative of origin since it strengthens the sense of diversity and acts as a creator of identity. This is especially so under the circumstances of globalization, worldwide migration, and technological change. Spaces

²⁰ Busche, Lukkas and Andreas Froese. 2022. *Gardelegen 1945. The massacre and its aftermath: catalogue of the permanent exhibition at the Isenschibbe Barn Memorial Gardelegen*. Gardelegen, Leipzig, Magdeburg.

such as this museum, which foster self-understanding and identity formation, assume even greater importance.

In the exhibition, paradigms of Jewish migration to Königsberg in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries are conveyed. There are seven small films to choose from on a touch screen. Here visitors are allowed and encouraged to touch and choose one or more stories. Narratives of different examples of migrants are available.

The exhibition intentionally does not focus on famous personalities. Rather, it presents different types of migrants and their motives for setting out to Königsberg. The stories ~~book~~ illustrate, for example, the migration routes of the innkeeper (from Belarus), the banker (from Silesia), the herring trader (from Ukraine), the grain merchant (from Lithuania), the student (from Belarus), the rabbi (from Poland) and the cantor (from Belarus). All these stories are based on lived experiences and are told by means of photographs and documents, as well as by tracing the routes of the journeys on a map.

The second narrative is devoted to the Holocaust in the region. In this context, three different processes are to be presented: Deportation, Forced Labor and the Murder of Jews. Each island is dedicated to one of these topics.

The model mentioned above depicts the first deportation of the Jews from Königsberg and Tilsit, which took place on June 24, 1942 from the Königsberg North Station. The model has been created in a motif of white shade. It references, obliquely, the model at the United State Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington. The USHMM's display represents the extermination at Auschwitz. The white model was chosen also as a form of expression to describe the indescribable. Furthermore, it is important that this island, with the theme of deportation, is in a dialogue with the city of Kaliningrad, as there is already a memorial plaque at the North Station commemorating the deportation. The graphic novel on this island tells of the preparation for this deportation from the point of view of contemporary witnesses mentioned earlier. An audio file with recollections by Michael Wieck supplements the account of events. The graphic novel also portrays related events described on the other islands.

For the representation of the third narrative, which includes the connection of today's Jewish community to the descendants of the city and the region, a silver *besamim*, a ritual spice container, was donated by a community of descendants living in Israel, of banker Marx's family. This small object is a sign of the bond between past and present city residents. It is also a symbol of gratitude for the commitment of local Jews who rebuilt the synagogue. This spice box comes from a well-known Königsberg family. It was in their emigration luggage and has now been returned to the city after long discussions and deliberations with the heirs. It tells its own specific story. Both the ritual significance of the object and the symbolic power of the gift are presented briefly and concisely in the display. (This single object thus stands in clear contrast to

exhibitions, also in Kaliningrad, in which glass cabinets with Jewish ritual silver are shown. But what meaning do these objects convey, which were misappropriated several times: first by the Nazis, then as loot from Soviet soldiers, and later as merchandise?)

The heart of the exhibition includes the fourth narrative. It presents the synagogue as a place of education and encouragement and depicts a place of the history of the Jewish school and its students, which personified this institution in the years 1935 and 1942. It seeks to address the powerful aura of this place. The video presentation commences with a school photograph that was taken at Hanukkah in 1937 in the synagogue. Here we are reminded that there was a Jewish school in this place during the time of National Socialism, a school in which people spoke and thought differently than was customary in the official institutions at the time. The synagogue is documented here as a place of education and spiritual encouragement; as a place of “empowerment.” The stories of the children, which visitors can see and hear, show this clearly. The short statements by former schoolchildren clearly show that they found a place of refuge and education in the synagogue during the time of persecution at the Jewish school. They tell how the community of over 160 pupils and the teachers strengthened their Jewish identity. They report how they learned languages and were thus prepared for emigration. They also emphasize that they made friends for life here and that these connections lasted.

Visitors learn from this that the Jewish community was very active in supporting its children during the Nazi era and gave them educational opportunities in the synagogue, literally conditioning them for the future, albeit a very uncertain one. Under today’s political conditions, and especially since October 7, 2023, this story is also read as a parable by Jewish visitors. For this installation, the design company KOCMOC has created a special light wheel, which stands in the space in front of the installation, and with the help of which the individual short biographies can be controlled and one of the four languages of the presentation can be selected. The light wheel navigates through the history of the Jewish school and, through its round shape, also symbolizes the globe on which the former students were scattered (Figure 3). An introduction is presented prior to the selection of the individual biographies, which refers to the following fact: Every Friday in the school of that era, there was a common school hour for all, the Shabbat hour. During this hour, the students who were about to emigrate were saying goodbye. The brilliant principal David Kälter urged the students to keep in touch with each other - he spoke of invisible threads connecting their hearts. This principal seems to have had anticipated the idea of virtuality, of the future social media. Students corresponded and met with each other. Even up to 20 years ago, school meetings were still taking place around the globe.



Figure 3: The light wheel navigates through the history of the Jewish school.

The individual short video clips of no longer than 3 min in duration, consist of sequences from original interviews, supplemented by documents, photographs and drawings (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Today's schoolchildren learn about the fate of Jewish children.

9. About the graphic novels

Why was the form of the graphic novel chosen for the presentation of deportation, forced labor and the mass murder during the Holocaust? For two reasons: Firstly, it was clear that especially for the children and young persons among the visitors, but also for tourists who do not know the specific history of the region, there would have to be a mediation of these extremely difficult historical events, which, however, should be designed in a striking manner.

It should be remembered once again that due to the void in Holocaust remembrance in the Soviet Union, there is little factual knowledge about the local events of the time. It was, therefore, also important to impart knowledge using graphic novels. The graphic representations stimulate creative thinking. Empty spaces can be supplemented and filled by one's own imagination. The second consideration is that visitors should be able to acquire these representations independently by viewing, reading and listening to them, without the need for the assistance of a museum guide.

The themes of the three graphic novels were clear from the outset. They were to be stories that were largely based on eyewitness accounts. Based on these, a storyboard was created that on the one hand remained very close to the source, but on the other hand condensed the narratives and left room for an arc of tension to develop in the story. Since it was clear from the outset that at least two of the islands would also contain audio stations that would provide eyewitness voices that would enrich the graphically presented narratives, strict attention was paid to ensuring that the content did not simply repeat itself, but had a complementary effect, and that each content could also be understood coherently on its own.

Since each of the storylines of all three graphic novels begins in the former Königsberg, care was taken to include in the drawings significant buildings that still exist today and are relatively easy for local museum visitors to identify. It must be emphasized that these memoirs are based on eyewitness accounts. These are both first-person accounts of Jews, but also accounts of Germans who had observed these events. Documents from the *Reichsbahn* concerning the deportation, are also included. Both these “narrators” can be partially recognized in the drawings. However, great importance was also attached to showing observers and bystanders in different postures. Of course, the illustrator also depicted policemen, soldiers, SS and SA men during their operations. Each of the three picture series contains between 12 and 17 illustrations. Balloon words have been deliberately omitted. Each image has a Russian/English caption; the other two language versions can be accessed via QR code.

The narrative on the subject of deportation describes the first major *aktion* that took place in Königsberg on June 24, 1942. It begins with scenes showing the preparation by a couple for the alleged journey to the work assignment and the writing of a last letter to their children (The facsimile of the original letter is inserted next to this letter). Scenes of the way to the assembly point and from there to the train station follow. The station, cordoned off by soldiers, is shown, as are those of the passengers on a passenger train. The narrative is personalized by a boy who carries his old teacher's suitcase to the train and thus almost gets caught in the transport. Only with difficulty can he leave the station again. The train departs, but the baggage car has been uncoupled beforehand and remains in the station. Next, passengers are shown as they are herded off the train at a train station (already outside the German Reich) and having to board freight cars. This is followed by depictions of the passengers leaving the train in Minsk, and boarding a truck. Then follows a brief segue to the rifle barrels. The last picture shows the dead.

A map with explanations on the left-hand side of the second island makes it clear that between 1939 and 1945 East Prussia was a territory where a non-yet investigated number of forced laborers, Jewish and non-Jewish, from all over Europe, were concentrated in this area.²¹ The graphic novel on this island recounts encounters with Jewish forced laborers from the point of view of Nechama Drober the witness mentioned earlier. It begins with the glimpses of two girls (Drober and her sister) looking out of the window onto the former synagogue grounds (i.e. the place where the rebuilt synagogue and the Jewish Museum are located today). There, on the foundations of the synagogue, are barracks for Jewish forced laborers. The girls begin to communicate with the prisoners over the fence of the property and in exchange for bread a worker makes shoes for the girls. Shown further on is forced labor in a soap factory and an encounter with a transport of women from the concentration camp. Here the witness has brief eye contact with a person whom she thinks she recognizes as a former classmate. The transport is driven to a military airfield in the woods where a satellite camp is located. An audio file with an excerpt from her memories adds depth to some of these aspects. One message of this island is that there are still many places of forced labor in the region that have not yet been considered in commemorative work and where initiatives can be located in the future.

The third island deals with the murder of Jews in the East Prussian region, using the example of the place today called Yantarny (former: Palmnicken). Thanks to the above-mentioned initiative of the Kaliningrad Jewish community, the subject is well known. For the graphic novel on this island, memories of survivors were evaluated

21 Scheck, Raffael. 2021. *Love between enemies Western Prisoners of War and German women in World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, esp. 2.

and compiled.²² Once again, descendants of hitherto unknown survivors were found in Israel by a researcher. As a connection to the monument in Yantarny, the motif of the monument appears, seemingly, as a quotation in the illustrations. As a result, there is a form of a dialogue, a visual connection to the monument. This will be further developed in the educational work of the museum. Here, too, perspectives for future commemorative work unfold.

10. Learning effects on the Holocaust

As a contemporary presentation, the islands supplement the generally known information about the events of deportation, forced labor and mass murder and add many facts to the local context. While these factors for the first and second islands are still new to the visitors, facts about the history of the death march to Palmnicken and the massacre on the beach in Kaliningrad is relatively well known. The graphic novel now also conveys narrative strands that have not previously existed in Russian literature. In this respect, this story-telling also has a (temporary) unique selling point.

The narrative serves, firstly, the need felt by the community for memorializing these events. Secondly, it is addressed to those tourists in the city who come as visitors to the exhibition. The graphic novels are carefully viewed by the visitors. In a way, visitors almost stumble upon them. These representations do not correspond to their usual points of view. Hardly any of the usual photographic icons of the Holocaust are served in these depictions. The depictions of the bystanders and the respective areas of tension between them and the Jews at the center are also an important factor. There are always discussions about this between viewers. As a result, there are also frequent comments among the visitors about these depictions. The placement on so-called museum islands or tables invites visitors to look at the images with other viewers and exchange ideas. This also initiates processes of social and emotional learning (Figure 5).

The short videos with the stories of Jewish schoolchildren have been unexpectedly successful. They illustrate very vividly the processes of disenfranchisement and oppression that preceded the Holocaust. In the first person, they tell of their parents' loss of employment, their ousting from middle-class life, the November pogrom in Königsberg, forced labor, emigration, but also of arrest and the loss of parents in concentration camps. In a way, these are face-to-face messages that speak very strongly and directly to the visitors.

In November 2023, the teachers' seminar of the "Russian Research and Educational Holocaust Center" (Moscow) took place in the museum for the first time,

22 Blitz, Maria. 2013. *Endzeit in Ostpreussen. Ein beschwiegene Kapitel des Holocaust*. Berlin: Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas.



Figure 5: Audio files underline the message of the graphic novels.



Figure 6: The graphic novels attract a lot of attention.

focusing on teaching units about the Holocaust in the region. In January 2024, on the occasion of Auschwitz Remembrance Week, workshops for Russian schoolchildren between grades 3 and 10 took place in the museum, which was requested by teachers and initiated by the director of the museum. The majority of these work-units dealt with the content of the graphic novels, as well as the stories about the students of the Jewish school in Königsberg (Figure 6).

11. Conclusions

After only a short time, the Jewish Museum was included in all cultural information of the city of Kaliningrad and listed in the tourist promotional material. As a result, the institution very quickly took its place in the city's cultural landscape. Especially in the current war situation, religious and cultural life in the synagogue has become more relevant. This has become even more so since the events of October 7.

The audience visiting the permanent exhibition in Kaliningrad usually has only a very general knowledge about Jewish history and about the Holocaust. The museum's media convey knowledge with new images, using sometimes unusual perspectives. The facts presented always relate to, and focus on, the locality. It should be emphasized that many of the narratives chosen are from the point of view of people who were children or young people at that time. This makes them seem particularly accessible. After one-year's activity, the museum director assumes that the facts and narratives presented will spread into the local society. She bases this statement on the observation that many of the city's and region's state-licensed tour guides regularly visit the exhibition with their clients and also participate in the museum's monthly historical lectures. Meanwhile, protagonists and narratives from the exhibition are also incorporated into the texts of the general city tours. It can be stated that the museum has developed as a place of learning about local Jewish history between the years 1700 and 1945. For visitors, many impulses arise to engage with the larger context of history, or to contextualize their family stories. However, the need to create a second gallery in the museum, in which the story of the first generation of Jewish immigrants after the war is told, becomes clear. In it, the war and Holocaust experiences, stigmatization in the postwar period, decades of silence about family experiences of loss during the Holocaust, and the handling of Jewish identity during the Soviet era will play essential roles.

In summary, the museum serves its three target groups (as far as possible under the conditions of the war). Dignitaries of the community like to come with their guests to present "their" museum to them. These gestures show that heritage can also be an arena for identity. The permanent exhibition's contents have partly filled the gap in information about the events of the Holocaust in the city and the region. The

German-Jewish heritage has been localized and thus also made public. There are legitimate prospects that the new narratives will replace “dissonant” heritage elements. If the initial question was to what extent Jewish cultural heritage can be made visible, it can now be concluded that a first step has been taken. With its core exhibition, the new museum has contributed to a change, and thus further anchored the memory of the Holocaust in public memory.

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