



## Research Article

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# Competition of Memories? The Memory of the Łódź/Litzmannstadt Ghetto in Contemporary Museums in Łódź

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**Abstract:** There is no individual museum dedicated to the Łódź Ghetto in which 200,000 Jews were confined. However, there are institutions actively working to preserve the memory of the Jewish community in Łódź. This article focuses on two recently established museums in the city: the Radegast Station, founded in 2009, and the Museum of Polish Children, established in 2021. The aim is to analyze the mechanisms that led to the creation of these historical museums and explore their specific functions. I am interested not only in how these institutions shape and present the Jewish heritage, but also in the conceptualisation of the social role of these institutions and the analysis of their presence in the public space. To achieve this, I examine local micro-interactions within the current framework of Poland's politics of history. Given that nationalism is the predominant ideology of modernity, my text demonstrates how nationalist discourses impact the commemoration of the Łódź/Litzmannstadt Ghetto and influence the remembrance of Second World War.

**Keywords:** Łódź/ Litzmannstadt Ghetto; museums; the Radegast Station; the Museum of Polish Children; politics of history; Memory

## 1 Introduction

Is it possible to conduct historical research on the Holocaust in modern-day Poland? Since April 2023, this question has been a recurring theme in the media discussion concerning the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto

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Uprising. The debate was triggered by a statement of Barbara Engelking, director of the Polish Center of Holocaust Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, which she made explaining the concept of a new exhibition of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.<sup>1</sup> Engelking's words were heavily criticised by politicians who called them "a lie" and "hog-wash," and spoke of "anti-Polish statements" and "insulting Poles" (see e.g. *Telewizja Republika* 2023). The issue of Jewish-Polish relations, which Engelking has been researching for many years, provoked the most severe condemnations. The scale of these attacks, occurring at the instigation, and with the approval of the erstwhile Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, shows that, in contemporary Poland, researching and commemorating the past in a manner that does not fit the framework of the country's politics of history is extremely difficult.<sup>2</sup> The mechanisms of this policy, manifested through the imposition, appropriation and modelling of images of the past, are not a new phenomenon and they operate in many fields. The fact that a broad coalition won the October 2023 elections and removed the Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) from power does not necessarily herald a swift change in this respect. Museums, the main sites of politics of history, are longue-durée institutions, and the ethnocentric perspective, underpinning the message they have professed, seems to be shared much more broadly in Polish society than the division between the supporters and antagonists of PiS may suggest.

The events of the Second World War play an important role in the model of memory of the Polish state and the country's national community. The experiences of that period constitute a formative element of Polish collective memory, which is formulated at the state level and connected with various (integrating and/or antagonizing) memory practices (see Szacka and Castle 2006). After the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum in 2004, the development of new historical museums in Poland has been growing at a rapid pace (Kobielska 2016b, 360–361).<sup>3</sup> "[A]s the basic elements of the politics of history and public history, which have an exceptionally strong impact on the knowledge and historical awareness of the general public,"

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1 On April 19, 2023, on the TV programme *Kropka nad i* [Final Touch], Engelking discussed various aspects of Jewish fate, including the complexity of Jewish-Polish relations, as well as the lack of help and betrayal by the Poles (Engelking, 2023).

2 See more Taczyńska 2023.

3 All these new institutions try to go (or declare to) go beyond the static paradigm of the traditional museum. Maria Kobielska describes such newly-established institutions as "memory devices", drawing attention to their complicated operating apparatus: the way of arranging exhibitions, deployment of a lot of different (also polysensual) multimedia, and various complex activities conducted by these museums (see Kobielska 2017).

(Ziębińska-Witek 2021, 9)<sup>4</sup> museums are the space where clear, gradual and consistent actions aimed at building a specific identity policy are particularly noticeable. Thanks to the long history of museums' presence in the cultural space at the intersection of social, cultural, political and economic fields, and their educational mission, they tend to be perceived as centres of objective knowledge. It is fairly easy to get swept away by the narrative presented in a museum exhibition and forget that the story it presents is always a deliberately constructed vision of the past that implements the specific politics of history (see Posocco 2022).

In Poland, the term “politics of memory” versus “politics of history,”<sup>5</sup> began to be used on a larger scale in 2004, first, in the election programme, and from 2005 onwards, in the actions of the conservative PiS party. This does not mean, of course, that previous governments did not refer to this term or intervened in the shaping of the collective memory. The rise of PiS to power was, however, the moment when the politics of history became an area of direct interest for the state administration and one of its declared major concerns (cf. Ziębińska-Witek 2021, 79). Nearly 20 years of PiS influence has given rise to a number of memory practices performed in the social space whose effects have been analysed by researchers (see e.g. Wóycicka, Wawrzyniak, Saryusz-Wolska 2023). As cultural policy is one of the foundations upon which national memory is established, it invariably remains the field where memory of the past is negotiated and constructed (Ratajski 2013). The category of politics of memory (see Nijakowski 2008), i.e. the influence of state authorities on commemorative practices, may raise justified concerns as to freedom to speak about the past, the way in which the past is presented in the narratives of museums, and which topics are included and omitted in said narratives.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, I analyse the new historical museums in Łódź devoted to the Second World War and the Holocaust. I am particularly interested in the mechanisms that led to the creation of these historical museums, and so explore their specific functions. Historian Andrea Petó describes today's changes in the area of Holocaust commemoration as a paradigm shift occurring within “polypore illiberal states,” that is to say, states that establish institutions mirroring the functions of the state to illiberally assume full control over it (Petó 2019; 2021). The changes driven by the politics of history promoted by Poland's current government are also affecting museums in

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4 All the here-quoted passages – unless stated otherwise – were translated by the author of this text.

5 There is no single definition of “politics of memory” or “politics of history” that would be universally accepted by researchers of all scientific disciplines. To read more on the complexity of the term, see e.g. Traba 2009; Nijakowski 2008; Kobielska 2016a, Kačka 2015.

6 See e.g. the Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (2018), as well as the impact of the public debate about this amendment on the opinions of Poles regarding Polish-Jewish relations: Babińska, Bilewicz, Bulska, Haska, Winiewski 2018.

various Polish cities (not only in Warsaw). Taking over the space of memory, they render the memory of the “Other” invisible and/or marginal in the face of the nation’s suffering. Thus, I am interested not only in how Jewish heritage is shaped and presented in the analysed institutions, but also in the conceptualisation of the social role of these institutions and the analysis of their presence in the public space.

At the end of 1939, there were approximately 233,000 Jews in Łódź (a third of the city’s inhabitants) (Sitarek 2019, 7). Łódź had the second largest Jewish population (after Warsaw) among the cities of the Second Polish Republic. Considering the current framework of Poland’s politics of history, I study the trajectories of local micro-interactions occurring in a city where the Jewish community represented a large share of the population until the Second World War. I analyse Łódź, one of the largest cities in Poland, which remains outside the main focus of the public’s interest. Taking into account the fact that nationalism is the dominant operative ideology of modernity (Malešević 2019), I analyse how nationalist discourses encroach on the process of commemorating the Łódź/Litzmannstadt Ghetto<sup>7</sup> and affect the commemoration of the Second World War and the Holocaust in the analysed institutions.

This article focuses on two new museums in Łódź: the Radegast Station, established in 2009, and the Museum of Polish Children, established in 2021. The Radegast Station is a small institution and the only museum devoted to the Łódź Ghetto.<sup>8</sup> In order to provide the context necessary to understand the social position and activities of the Radegast Station, I also study the activities of the Museum of Polish Children, which commemorates Polish children held in the concentration camp for young people in 1942–1945. The proposed research falls within the scope of cultural and social research. This article presents an in-depth case study (case of Łódź) that makes use of qualitative methods involving direct observation, one-to-one in-depth interviews with museum personnel, analysis of transcripts, as well as other texts and various audio and visual elements.<sup>9</sup> This approach allows us to study contemporary phenomena through a detailed contextual analysis, a limited number of events and relations occurring in the studied environment (Simons 2009, 21).

## 2 The Commemoration History of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto

Before the Second World War, Łódź was a multi-ethnic city where the histories of several groups intertwined, and for this reason, the history of the city is built upon at

7 In April 1940, the name of the city was changed to Litzmannstadt.

8 However, there are other institutions in the city that work to preserve the memory of the Jews of Łódź (e.g. the Marek Edelman Dialogue Centre).

9 The research was conducted from October to December 2022.

least several orders of memory (Polish, Jewish, German, and Russian). The Łódź Ghetto was one of the largest ghettos in occupied Europe and the second largest place of concentration and forced labour of the Jewish population in Poland. In February 1940, the Jewish population was forced to relocate into the closed district. The ghetto was created in an area of the Old Town and, foremost, in the densely populated, poor district of Bałuty, previously inhabited mostly by Jews. At that time, Bałuty had no sewage system, so the inhabitants were deprived of running water. At the end of 1941, more than 5000 Roma and Sinti from eastern Austria were “resettled” into the ghetto. A special sub-camp was created for them, separate from the ghetto area. Researchers emphasise that the level of isolation in this closed quarter of Łódź was greater than in other ghettos, but small-scale contacts with the so-called Aryan side were maintained throughout the occupation (Trębacz 2020a, 416). In addition, the Łódź Ghetto was distinguished by its lack of an organised resistance movement and absence of weapon transfers (Kozieł 2011, 164).

Inside the Łódź Ghetto, there was a Jewish administration (headed by Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski<sup>10</sup>) that included schools, hospitals, police, courts and even a prison. At the end of 1943, there were 117 factories operating in the ghetto, employing almost 74,000 workers.<sup>11</sup> In total, over 43,500 people died in the ghetto of hunger, hard work and diseases, or were murdered by the occupiers (Sitarek 2019, 15). At the same time, January 1942 marked the beginning of “deportations” of people who were unfit to work in the ghetto. They were sent to the extermination camps, first to Kulmhof am Nehr, and later, in 1944 also to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The largest deportation action (German: *Allgemeine Gehsperrre*, literally “general lockdown”), took place in September 1942, and after that, the ghetto became a *de facto* labour camp (Sitarek 2019, 15) until its liquidation in August 1944. During its four years of operation, over 200,000 people passed through the ghetto, including Jews from Łódź, nearby towns, and other European cities (including Berlin, Prague, Hamburg). Only between 5000 and 7000 of them survived the war.

The memory of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto was very rarely included in the official commemorations of the Second World War in Poland throughout 1945–1989 (Czyżewski 2020, 118)<sup>12</sup> and even the modest monument built in 1956 did not change this state of affairs. Despite the fact that historians in Poland had access to extensive

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**10** Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski (1877–1944) was a manufacturer, a social and Zionist activist, and the chairman of the *Judenrat* responsible for creating a thriving administration in the ghetto. He collaborated with the Germans, believing that work was the only means of salvation for Jews. He died in KL Auschwitz. For more about Rumkowski, see Polit 2012.

**11** The Łódź Ghetto as a “realisation of an antisemitic phantasm” was depicted in the propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew). See: Majewski 2011, 127–128.

**12** Danuta Dąbrowska conducted the first research on, among others, the Jewish administration of the ghetto in the 1960s. More on Dąbrowska: Sitarek 2020, 315–323. For more on the politics of

documentation on the Łódź Ghetto,<sup>13</sup> its history with its extensive Jewish administration apparatus, which perceived working for the Third Reich as a chance for survival and effectively suppressed any manifestations of rebellion, did not meet the ideological demands of the authorities of the era, who were interested in highlighting Polish martyrdom and heroic memory (Czyżewski 2020, 129).<sup>14</sup> This silence about the fate of the Jewish community during the occupation was a manifestation of a broader phenomenon of suppression of Holocaust memory in the period of the People's Republic of Poland (see e.g. Forecki 2013; Wóycicka 2009).

The transformation that began in 1989, after the Cold War, brought a breakthrough in Poland in the political, socio-economic, cultural, and intellectual fields. The globalised Americanised Holocaust discourse, which operates as the basis for a common consensus on the issue in Western European countries, was also an important factor of change. It was then that Poland witnessed a “multidimensional revival of the memory of Jewish culture” (Ziębińska-Witek 2021: 78).<sup>15</sup> However, the 1990s did not bring any major changes to Łódź.<sup>16</sup> The real breakthrough in this city came with the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto, which was organised by the Łódź City Hall in August 2004, headed by then Mayor Jerzy Kropiwnicki. In 2002, Kropiwnicki, an economist, right-wing politician, and one of the founders of the Christian-National Union (active in 1989–2010), won the first direct mayoral elections in Łódź.<sup>17</sup> At the instigation of his good

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historical memory in the period of the People's Republic of Poland in Łódź, see Czyżewski 2021. A bibliography of publications devoted to the Łódź Ghetto was published in 2018 (Olejnik 2018).

**13** The collection of photographs from the Łódź Ghetto is the largest preserved collection of photographs of this type and contains some of the most frequently reproduced images of the Holocaust. See Trębacz 2020b.

**14** The Jewish Street in Łódź was renamed to Warsaw Ghetto Fighters Street right after the war. See Piluk 2003, 11.

**15** There has also been change in the political sphere. The Prime Minister of Poland, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, made efforts to resume official relations with Israel after 1989.

**16** When discussing the city, Tomasz Majewski talks about the discrepancy between the local and universal memory of the Holocaust, noting that, for example, in 1989, a group of representatives of the Holocaust Memorial Museum (at that time, still under construction in Washington, which opened in 1993), bought and transported across the ocean the gate of the hospital from the Łódź Ghetto. Thus, the hospital, which Łódź failed to commemorate, became part of the cosmopolitan memory (Majewski 2011, 129). Joanna Podolska recalls that the need to commemorate the Jewish community had been discussed for a long time, but concrete actions were still to come (Podolska 2011, 238). The erection of the Decalogue Monument (created by the sculptor Gustaw Zemła) near the no-longer existing Old Town synagogue in 1995 could be seen as the first sign of change. But this form of commemoration attracted a significant number of critical comments (Piluk 2003, 12–13).

**17** Before 2002, the mayor had been elected by the city council from among its members.

acquaintance, Władysław Bartoszewski,<sup>18</sup> he became interested in the Jewish past of the city. He did his best to ensure that the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the ghetto liquidation was a high-profile and impressive affair. It was important to him for both moral reasons and as part of the image-building activities he supported as the mayor of Łódź (Gronczewska 2009).<sup>19</sup>

In 2004, the first elements of a monument by the architect and Polish Jew (as he describes himself), Czesław Bielecki, commemorating the Łódź Ghetto were erected at the station. The Radegast Station is part of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument, which will be discussed later on in this article. Also in 2004, the Survivors' Park was established in Łódź. Halina Elczevska (née Goldblum, prisoner of the Łódź Ghetto, 1919–2003) was the originator of the idea of planting trees to commemorate all those who survived the Holocaust. On August 30, 2004, some 387 people planted the first Memorial Trees as part of the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto (see Podolska and Sitarek 2019). Later, in 2005, the Centre for Jewish Research was established at the University of Łódź as an institution focusing on multi-faceted research into the ghetto's history and editing of source materials related to the Jewish community of Łódź. The Centre's work made it possible to publish a complete, five-volume edition of *The Chronicle of the Łódź Ghetto* in 2009, on the 65th anniversary of the liquidation of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto. It is a monumental collection of documents created and stored during the war in the Archive Department of the Head of the Jewish Council of Elders in the ghetto.<sup>20</sup> Also in 2009, the Radegast Station was established as a branch of the Museum of Independence Traditions on the grounds of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument. And in 2010, the Marek Edelman Dialogue Centre was established,<sup>21</sup> a cultural institution that focuses on the multicultural heritage of Łódź, putting the greatest emphasis on its Jewish dimension, especially in the aspect of preserving the memory of the Łódź Ghetto.

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**18** Władysław Bartoszewski (1922–2015) was a participant in the Warsaw Uprising, member of the underground Council to Aid Jews “Żegota”, prisoner at KL Auschwitz, as well as a historian, social activist and politician involved in the Polish-Jewish dialogue.

**19** In 2010, Jerzy Kropiwnicki, was removed from the mayoral office on the basis of a referendum vote (an appeal for his removal was submitted by the Democratic Left Alliance). However, he did not leave politics, and still works in the structures of the government. In 2010–2016, he worked as an advisor to the President of the National Bank of Poland. From January 2016, the Senate of the Republic of Poland appointed him to the Monetary Policy Council. From January 2022, he returned to the post of advisor to the President of the National Bank of Poland.

**20** For more about the publications of the Centre, see: Centrum Badań Żydowskich (2023).

**21** The Łódź City Council made the decision to establish the Marek Edelman Dialogue Centre in 2010. The Centre has been active since 2011. In 2014, it moved to its current location – a modern building located in Survivors' Park. The Centre presents, among other things, an exhibition devoted to the history of the Łódź Ghetto.

The process of commemorating the Jewish community began to be influenced by the new Polish politics of history. This impact is noticeable in the further development of the Survivors' Park, which, as historian Michał Trębacz describes, "distorted its original intention" (Trębacz 2020a, 415). A bench dedicated to Jan Karski,<sup>22</sup> a plaque commemorating the Council to Aid Jews, "Żegota,"<sup>23</sup> and, in 2009, a monument to Poles Saving Jews (author: Czesław Bielecki) were all installed in the park. The monument consists of an eagle rising to flight, placed on a high plinth, surrounded by marble plaques arranged into the shape of the Star of David, with the names of Poles recognised as Righteous Among the Nations. As noted by Trębacz, these added elements create an impression that it was the efforts of Karski, "Żegota" and the Righteous that allowed the Jews who planted their trees in the park to survive. Only one person from Łódź, Ryszard Lerczyński, was awarded the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations. Yet, Lerczyński's name was not included on the monument in the Survivors' Park. Thus, the place originally dedicated to the Holocaust memory is now used to honour the Polish contribution to saving Jews (Trębacz 2020a, 415). Such activities can be interpreted as examples of de-Judaisation and nationalisation of memory, which Andrea Pető perceives as signs of the paradigm shift in the commemoration of the Holocaust (Pető 2019).

Undoubtedly, although many places associated with the extermination of Jews in Bałuty have changed completely or disappeared forever, in recent years, many sites have also been commemorated, and the Jewish community has become the subject of many studies and cultural initiatives (see e.g. Gubała-Czyżewska 2020; Podolska 2011, 2020). The situation has changed radically since the 1990s when neither the history of the ghetto nor that of the Jewish community of Łódź were widely known, and the subject remained mostly absent from the city authorities' initiatives and activities. Therefore, it is not surprising that Joanna Gubała-Czyżewska – a sociologist, and a researcher of the collective memory of the inhabitants of Łódź – stated in a 2020 article that: "Łódź is an example of a city that for almost three decades has been filling the 'blank spots' in its memory created after the Second World War related to both the multicultural past of Łódź and to the Holocaust (as a specific, martyrological domain of memory)" (Gubała-Czyżewska 2020, 740). Further on, she also expresses doubts that the intense period of seeking

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<sup>22</sup> Born in Łódź, Jan Karski (1914–2000) was a political emissary of the Polish Underground State and the Polish government-in-exile during the Second World War.

<sup>23</sup> The Council to Aid Jews "Żegota" was a Polish underground organisation operating in 1942–1945 as a body of the Polish government in exile. Its task was to organise help for Jews in and outside the ghettos.



the roots of Łódź's identity is already over and questions whether the commemoration practices related to the history of Jewish Łódź have been normalised and ritualised (Gubała-Czyżewska 2020, 741).<sup>24</sup>

### 3 The Radegast Station – A Symbolic Museum

The Radegast Station, the first museum I analyse here, is a relatively new branch (2009) of the Independence Traditions Museum in Łódź,<sup>25</sup> located outside the city centre, close to the border of the former ghetto. At the beginning of the Second World War, it functioned as a transshipment point, and was later turned into a railway station for the people resettled to the ghetto. In January 1942, the station became the dispatch point for transports to the extermination camp in Kulmhof am Nehr, labour camps, and, from the summer of 1944, also to Auschwitz-Birkenau. At the station, there were also warehouses and a plant for the production of wooden houses for the German victims of the Allied forces' bombing. After the war, the station building was used for various railway-related purposes, then was left unused for some time, only to become the site of a private carpentry shop in the late 1990s. In 2002, the Monumentum Iudaicum Lodzense Foundation<sup>26</sup> proposed that the station should be turned into an educational centre, and a meeting between President Jerzy Kropiwnicki and Władysław Bartoszewski provided crucial support. First, it was decided that the site should be marked and commemorated, which gave rise to the idea of erecting a monument. Its construction was financed by city authorities, as well as private companies and individuals (Terela 2019, 23). The official unveiling of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument took place on August 29, 2004,

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<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, important and complex artifacts, and even polychromes, are found in Łódź to this day as evidenced by the discovery made in the synagogue building at Zachodnia Street 78, in February 2023; see Witkowska 2023.

<sup>25</sup> The Independence Traditions Museum in Łódź (which has been operating under this name since 1990) is a historical museum established in 1959, originally as the Museum of the History of the Revolutionary Movement. Currently, it consists of the headquarters (Gdańska Street, no. 13), located in a prison building from the 19th century, which retained its original function even after the end of the Second World War, the Radogoszcz Martyrology Branch, located in a building which during the Second World War housed a prison for the Wartheland residents who violated German occupation law, the Radegast Station branch, and the Roma Forge branch located in one of the buildings of the former Second World War gypsy camp.

<sup>26</sup> The Monumentum Iudaicum Lodzense Foundation is an institution established in 1995 to save monuments, especially the Jewish cemetery in Bałuty. Its founders consist of the City of Łódź Office, the Organization of Former Residents of Łódź in Israel, and the World Jewish Restitution Organization. See more about the Foundation on its website: <http://www.lodzjews.org/root/form/pl/fundacja2/index.asp> Accessed 3 June 2023.

inaugurating the 60th anniversary of the liquidation of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto (Terela 2019, 21–23).<sup>27</sup>

The station's building was incorporated into the design of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument complex, created in 2003–2005 by Czesław Bielecki.<sup>28</sup> In its entirety, it consists of the station, locomotive and carriages, *matzevot*-shaped slabs with the names of the concentration and death camps, a symbolic wall, and a tunnel ending in a column (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). The biggest structure is the Tunnel of the Deported (140 m), which runs along the line of the ghetto railway track. Information on life in Łódź/Litzmannstadt and copies of transport lists are presented inside the tunnel, which ends at City Hall. This is the space where the names of all the cities from which Jews were brought to the ghetto are displayed, along with the 25-m-high Column of Memory. The entire construction is 200 m long.

The Museum of Independence Traditions has supervised the station facilities since 2005. The interest in this site proved unexpectedly high, which led to the establishment of a museum branch in 2009 with the aim of providing more historical content (aside from the monument itself). Financed by the city of Łódź, the Radegast station is a historical site that documents and symbolically represents the tragic



**Figure 1:** The Radegast Station (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).

<sup>27</sup> The Tunnel of the Deported was unveiled in 2005, on the 61st anniversary of the liquidation of the ghetto.

<sup>28</sup> The author himself described the memorial construction in: Bielecki 2006.



**Figure 2:** The Radeagast Station with the Tunnel of the Deported (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).



**Figure 3:** The Column of Memory (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).

events in the history of the Jewish population of Łódź. I would like to say here again that the Radegast Station, as a museum, constitutes: “an element of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument” (see Museum of Independence Traditions 2023a), and is merely a branch of another institution (the Museum of Independence Traditions). It is a small museum whose building houses foremost an accurate physical model of the ghetto (which is to be made interactive in the future<sup>29</sup>) – the main element of the permanent exhibition (see Figure 4).

Isabela Terela, the branch head and historian, emphasises the Radegast Station’s importance within the structure of the Museum of Independence Traditions and the fact that their activities (obtaining external funds for the ghetto model project) have become an inspiration for other departments. Terela said that since 2015, the whole Museum has been more active in its development, and that the



**Figure 4:** The physical model of the ghetto in the Radegast Station (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).

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<sup>29</sup> The model project has been in development since 2015. The plans to expand the model were put on hold due to the COVID pandemic, but there are plans to return to the implementation of the original idea. To read more about the project, see: Terela, Grzegorzyc 2019, 12–17.

Radegast Station “inspired the rest of the branches to do and implement some other projects” (Terela 2022). The ghetto model project also includes an educational website: [www.radegast.pl](http://www.radegast.pl), which offers, among other things, educational trails meant to impart historical knowledge in a popular form. In addition, the museum presents facsimiles of all the preserved transport lists of Holocaust victims and the original suitcase of the Schwarz family, whose members were resettled to the ghetto from Vienna in 1941, and died in the Kulmhof am Nehr extermination camp. Maps and materials with very basic information (boards with photos and descriptions) round off the exhibition. Some basic information on the ghetto is also presented in the Tunnel of the Deported, which can be treated as the second permanent exhibition. Since 2009, the permanent exhibition has been accompanied by temporary exhibitions related to the Shoah, created by the Museum of Independence Traditions or loaned from other institutions. The employees of the Radegast Station continue to develop its educational offer and, from time to time, the museum functions as a venue for lectures and workshops.

The Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument itself is also the site of various events commemorating the ghetto and its victims. The most important is the anniversary of the liquidation of the Litzmannstadt Ghetto, commemorated on August 29 every year since 2004. It has become a permanent fixture in the Łódź cultural landscape. On behalf of the City of Łódź, the commemorations are organised by the Marek Edelman Dialogue Centre (together with the Independence Traditions Museum), while the City of Łódź and the Jewish Community of Łódź host the events (Terela 2022).

When one visits the Radegast Station, it is simply impossible not to notice that, although the site is impressive thanks to the construction’s monumental size, the museum, as an institution, is very small. It is, undoubtedly, being gradually expanded and developed,<sup>30</sup> but it remains limited in terms of space and personnel. Izabela Terela confirmed this issue in the interview. There are five people working at the branch, all of whom are professional employees (specialists in their fields), meaning that every visitor to the museum can always receive additional information about the site from its staff. At the same time, however, employees are also obliged to perform non-substantive work, e.g., administrative tasks. Terela emphasised that, in her opinion, Łódź should have a museum dedicated to the Łódź Ghetto. Because of the space and personnel limitations, the Radegast Station is unable to fully utilise the potential of the site (Terela 2022). According to Terela, the city authorities do not take advantage of the tourist potential of the place. A relatively large number of 50,000 people from Poland and other countries visit the Litzmannstadt Ghetto

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**30** Izabela Terela writes about the stages of the building’s development and its adaptation to the diverse needs of visitors; see Terela 2019, 25–26.

Annihilation Monument and the museum every year (Terela 2019, 18).<sup>31</sup> Foreign tourists visit the Museum in greater numbers than Poles, and the Polish tourists that visit the Station come from outside Łódź. “When it comes to Łódź itself, visiting us is just not something that people are used to doing here,” said Terela, “[...] the schools from the former ghetto’s area do not visit us at all” (Terela 2022). She regrets that the Station’s current offer has not reached schools and notes that they, i.e., the museum’s team, are working on adapting it to the schools’ needs, trying to make it more attractive in order to encourage visitors from Polish educational institutions, including those from Łódź. Interestingly, and noteworthily, neither the Radegast Station nor the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument are found among the Łódź sites, which the Minister of Education and Science of Poland included in the ministerial educational programme “*Poznaj Polskę*” (“Get to know Poland”).<sup>32</sup> As stated in the announcement of August 27, 2021 on the establishment of the programme, the Minister is the one who indicates “priority educational areas for the project in each year of its implementation” (point 1/3). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why teachers from Łódź opt for an hours-long trip to the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, a site included on the ministerial list, instead of simply taking a walk to the Radegast Station.

The Radegast Station focuses its activities on incorporating a marginalised memory into the Polish national memory and preserving the cultural heritage<sup>33</sup> of one of the minorities of Łódź, a minority which practically disappeared from these areas in the second half of the 20th century. Today, the Jewish community of Łódź is very small.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the Radegast Station performs its work within the field of difficult and dissonant heritage, which can cause various types of conflicts; the heritage is dissonant at its core, has different meanings for different social groups, and can give rise to divisions in society (see e.g., MacDonald 2008; Sendyka 2013). One of the tasks of people working with difficult heritage is to get the public accustomed to its presence in the social conditions in which it is located.

As Joanna Gubała-Czyżewska wrote in 2020, perhaps “the intense period of seeking the roots of the Łódź identity has already passed” (Gubała-Czyżewska 2020, 741). A lack of engagement in any questioning work with collective memory and treating it as a closed case (which does not require any further discussion) are also

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31 Waldemar Cudny reports that, in 2008, the number of visitors was 36,000, showing a clearly growing interest.

32 Information on the “*Poznaj Polskę*” programme (2023 autumn edition) can be found here: <https://www.gov.pl/web/edukacja/poznaj-polske>.

33 Cultural (and natural) heritage is understood as defined in the UNESCO Convention adopted in Paris in 1972 (see The Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage 1972).

34 In 2021, the Jewish Religious Community in Łódź had 115 members; see Ciecieląg et al. 2022, 250.

symptoms of the contemporary paradigm shift in the commemoration of the Holocaust. The large monument seems to dominate the space, but for the inhabitants it has become an invisible, transparent structure. As noted by Gubała-Czyżewska, the current formula of “a certain normalisation and ritualisation” will not lead to “more in-depth debates on the still undiscovered threads from this domain of memory” (Gubała-Czyżewska 2020, 741). Given the most recent politics of history in Poland, and the former Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, publicly announcing in April 2023 his plans for a top-down verification of Holocaust research, there is no space at the state-level for any discussion on how to obtain support for work on the difficult heritage, especially in the case of state-funded institutions.<sup>35</sup> And while the current ruling coalition has been very critical about Czarnek’s policies, so far it has undertaken no significant steps to undo his interventions in the politics of memory.

Izabela Terela repeatedly emphasised that it seems hardly possible to offer more than basic information when talking about Łódź, as there is a common lack of knowledge in Poland about the Łódź Ghetto and its specificity. As she pointed out, the history of the Warsaw Ghetto is given much more attention in the national arena. Consequently, whenever they touch upon a new topic related to the Łódź Ghetto, they must first restate the basic background information, which is always time-consuming. According to Terela, as a too small museum branch, they are unable to carry out their educational mission to a full extent. Still, she emphasised that, despite the fact that the Independence Traditions Museum has different goals than the Radegast Station, as the “education is oriented towards patriotism, independence, and national symbols there”, the Station has freedom to operate as a branch of a larger museum and the director of the Independence Traditions Museum is receptive of their ideas. “We’re operating on an equal footing,” stated Terela, “and I don’t see any problems with the cooperation” (Terela 2022).

Terela’s statement sheds some light on how Polish patriotism is constructed in the Independence Traditions Museum (and, consequently, also in the Radegast Station) within the confines set by the limitations of the Polish national memory, as it had been defined by the former government’s politics of history. The Polish memory and the Jewish memory are clearly separated from one another. But why can’t the memory of the Holocaust be substantively integrated into the so-defined Polish patriotism? And where is the place of Jews in the Polish national memory? Whose heritage does the museum work with? If Polishness excludes the Jewish component and treats it as “other,” the inhabitants of Łódź may also be uninterested in a heritage that they see as foreign. According to Terela, even though the Radegast Station and the Litzmannstadt Ghetto Annihilation Monument have never been

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35 See more Taczyńska 2023.

targeted by antisemitic attacks, inscriptions with antisemitic content are common in Łódź, especially in the form of graffiti and slogans related to the two Łódź football clubs: Widzew and ŁKS (Siwiak 2011, 222–225).<sup>36</sup> The antisemitism present in the streets is a clear signal that commemorating heritage is not tantamount to remembering the past (Kapralski 2016, 354).

In the context of the above-discussed activities, it is worth taking a closer look at a temporary exhibition presented in autumn 2022, on the railway ramp of the Radegast Station. Prepared by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the exhibition *Some Were Neighbors: Choice, Human Behavior, and the Holocaust* was created in connection with the 20th anniversary of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum falling 2013. After the exhibition closed in Washington in 2017, a shortened, easy-to-display mobile version was created for international use. The mobile version of the exhibition has been translated into 10 languages and presented in 21 countries so far.<sup>37</sup> Izabela Terela had the following to say about it:

This exhibition is extremely important, incredibly difficult and, in fact, for us, for our museum and young people, this is the first time [when we have] such an exhibition that allows us to talk about these attitudes. I think this is a difficult topic, and we can see that there is a need to talk about it. I think that we would not have created such an exhibition ourselves, because we would have some concerns. In any case, we've had a lot of signals from people that they worry about the exhibition standing outside, that something might happen (Terela 2022).

This “extremely important, incredibly difficult” exhibition can be seen as part of the academic discussion in recent years in Poland about the concept of a “bystander.”<sup>38</sup>

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36 I will just add here that both of these clubs have Jewish roots.

37 In Poland, the exhibition was first presented in January 2022 at the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in the Second World War in Markowa. Apart from Łódź and Markowa, the exhibition has been shown in Poland in such cities as Wrocław, Warsaw, Kraków, Sosnowiec, and Gdynia.

38 Examples of publications about the concept of “bystander” published in recent years include e.g. Janicka 2015; Sendyka 2017; Żukowski 2018; Koprowska 2018; Dauksza, Koprowska 2019. This academic reflection is an attempt to negotiate and specify the meaning, theoretical framework, application and limitations of the term. It has become the basis of some of the most important reflections undertaken by Polish researchers of the Holocaust. It was noted that the categories used to describe the Holocaust, defined by Hilberg’s triad of “perpetrator – victim – bystander”, require some reconsideration. Especially the last link of this triad is in greatest need of redefinition, broadening and differentiation, because of its complexity and ambiguity. At the same time, the issue of the civilian population’s involvement in the Holocaust in Poland is still poorly covered in museum narratives and/or tends to become politicised (see Grabowski and Libionka 2016; Kobielska 2019). Research on Polish-Jewish relations that takes into account the pre-war period, the issue of longue-durée in culture, continuation of conscious and unconscious elements, as well as sources in different languages (Yiddish, German, Polish), has still not been adequately represented in public institutions in Poland (such as museums).



As far as Łódź is concerned, there are few studies that attempt (even in a selective and incomplete way) to discuss the subject (see Sitarek 2018). On the one hand, some researchers are convinced that there are no documents describing Polish-Jewish relations and that the ghetto was isolated (Trębacz 2020a, 416, footnote 8). On the other hand, other researchers emphasise that many sources exist that describe the attitude of the Aryan side to the Jewish population (Sitarek 2018, 200). The website of the Radegast Station, in the section presenting the educational trail *Tramwajem przez getto* (“By Tram, Through the Ghetto”), also states: “there are many accounts describing the ghetto through the eyes of people from the other side of the wire” (*T. przez getto* 2023). However, the trail presented on the website touches upon the subject of the coexistence of Poles and Jews in Łódź during the Holocaust only in general terms. It is worth bearing in mind that after the closure of the ghetto borders, aside from Jews and Germans, there was still a large group of Polish people living in Łódź, about 367,000 (Sitarek 2018, 181).

Another aspect of the contemporary description of the war events in these educational materials is the division of the inhabitants of Łódź into Jews and Poles, which clearly excludes Jews from the group of citizens of the Republic of Poland, reinforcing the division into “us *versus* them,” making it difficult to build bonds between today’s inhabitants of Łódź and the difficult heritage of the city. Izabela Terela assessed the presentation of the *Some Were Neighbors* exhibition positively, saying: “I think that this exhibition helps us a lot, because it introduces this issue, somewhat suddenly, because we really would not have come up with the idea to talk about bystanders ourselves, because in Łódź we don’t have any documents for talking about bystanders” (Terela 2022). However, she did not fully agree with the need for a deeper examination of this issue in relation to Łódź: “So talking about bystanders would mean raising topics that take us out of the territory of the Warta Country (Reichsgau Wartheland), and we would very much like to focus on Łódź, the ghetto and the Warta Country, because there are basically no museums devoted to the Warta Country in the Warta Country, so we are, sort of, sticking very firmly to this topic” (Terela 2022). The exhibition is therefore seen by Terela as important, but also as going beyond the main focus of the museum, i.e., the local history, which, as already mentioned, is not known well-enough.

## 4 The Museum of Polish Children in Łódź – an Exclusionary Institution?

According to Katarzyna Person (a Holocaust historian, until February 2024 the head of the Research Department of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw) and

Johannes-Dieter Steinert (a researcher of Modern European History and Migration Studies, and a professor at the University of Wolverhampton), *Polen-Jugendverwahrlager der Sicherheitspolizei in Litzmannstadt*, a camp located on Przemysłowa Street, in which Polish teenagers and children were held in 1942–1945, “was not just another camp. It was unique. The only purpose-built camp for children under the age of 16 years, it reflected the brutality of German occupation policy in Poland, its racist ideology, and the exploitation of all human resources for the war economy, including the labour of children” (Person and Steinert 2022, 225). In their opinion, the Przemysłowa camp was unparalleled in National Socialist Germany and German-occupied Europe and, consequently, must be considered central to the discussion of forced child labour in both Poland and Germany (Person and Steinert 2022, 13, 225). The English-language monograph *Przemysłowa Concentration Camp: The Camp, the Children, the Trials*, published in 2022 by the above-mentioned researchers, is not only an important contribution to organising and building knowledge about the camp, but also draws attention to its importance in the structures and agenda of German policy. The fact that this book was published as part of the series “The Holocaust and its Contexts,” situates the camp in an important interpretative context, as an experience that nuances and problematises the Holocaust.

The Przemysłowa camp was also the subject of a Polish-language monograph titled *‘Dzieci z zielonego autobusu’. Z zeznań o niemieckim obozie dla polskich dzieci przy ul. Przemysłowej w Łodzi (1942–1945)* (“Children from the Green Bus: From the Testimonies about the German Camp for Polish Children at ul. Przemysłowa in Łódź [1942–1945]”), written by Artur Ossowski and also published in 2022. Ossowski, a historian working for the Łódź branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, created an in-depth work on the history of the camp, in which he incorporated his own additional research (utilising previously unpublished source materials). As Ossowski points out: “the tragedy of Polish children in the camp at Przemysłowa in Łódź is not isolated, because during the Second World War, the Germans killed Jewish and Roma children on a massive scale.” At the same time, he emphasises that: “[...] the camp at Przemysłowa in Łódź was a unique place, it was created exclusively for underage prisoners and implemented the barbaric ideology of the Third Reich” (Ossowski 2022, 9).

Both of these new monographs focus on the history of the camp, which operated in Łódź on the outskirts of the Łódź Ghetto, on the edge of the Jewish cemetery, from December 1942 to mid-January 1945. The camp was formally located within the ghetto area, but it was not part of it, and the ghetto authorities had no say over its administration (Person and Steinert 2022, 31). The camp was established for the re-education of young people, in particular: “[...] common delinquents, orphans, neglected or homeless children, minors who refused to undertake forced labour or were suspected of political dissent, and those whose families were sent to

concentration and death camps” (Stańczyk 2014, 620). But – as the researchers emphasise – the official name of the place did not reflect its true nature. Not only teenagers (up to 16 years of age), but also very small children were incarcerated in the camp, experiencing harsh living conditions and brutal treatment by the staff (Czyżewski 2018, 379). Before the Germans retreated from Łódź, they destroyed much of the camp documentation, which is why it is impossible to determine the exact number of its prisoners (Person and Steinert 2022, 70). For many years, all estimates concerning the number of the camp’s prisoners were assumed to include a large margin of error.<sup>39</sup> Taking into account various factors, nowadays, researchers believe that the total number of prisoners was about 2,000, of whom about 100 died during their imprisonment (Person and Steinert 2022, 73).

For the first 20 post-war years, the camp was virtually forgotten, as children-victims did not fit the model of memory promoted by the politics of that time.<sup>40</sup> In 1947, the barracks and the fence were demolished, and tenants moved into the building which had served as the camp’s solitary cell. In the 1960s, blocks of flats were built in the area (Ossowski 2022, 121), but the decade also brought an important change in attitudes. The camp began to emerge in the public discourse with the first camp-related publications, foremost including a landmark historical and intervention publication by the journalist Wiesław Jażdżyński, *Reportaż z pustego pola* (“A Reportage from an Empty Field”, 1965) (Czyżewski 2018, 387–393). Other studies soon followed and, on June 1, 1966, one of the city’s schools was named after the young camp prisoners (Heroic Children Primary School No. 81 in Łódź). The social and political changes of that era meant that “the camp became an important part of communist Polish memory politics” (Person and Steinert 2022, 217).

A few practices which were important for the commemoration of the camp: in 1971, the Children’s Martyrdom Monument (unofficially referred to as the Broken Heart Monument) was unveiled in Łódź on the site of the former ghetto, i.e., not at the actual location of the camp at Przemysłowa;<sup>41</sup> a feature film about the camp, *Twarz Anioła* (“The Face of an Angel”), was released in the same year; in 1972–1976, Eugenia Pol (a former employee of the camp in Przemysłowa) was put on trial. It is also worth noting that a memorial exhibition room dedicated to the camp was established in the Heroic Children School in Łódź, which, in 1981, was transformed into a school museum. Every year, on June 1, the school celebrates a day of remembrance for the camp’s victims. Another person important for the commemoration of the camp is Urszula Sochacka, the initiator and author of many innovative educational and

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39 The first publications mentioned up to 12,000 prisoners. See Ossowski 2022, 122–123.

40 Andrzej Czyżewski discusses in detail individual activities undertaken during this period: Czyżewski 2018, 383–387.

41 For more about the monument, its name and location, see e.g. Person, Steinert 2022, 217–218.

artistic projects on the history of the camp, which have been implemented since 2009 in close cooperation with Primary School No. 81 and other entities from Łódź. In 2020, Sochacka also created the *Virtual Museum of the Przemysłowa Camp* <https://muzeumprzyprzemyslowej.pl/>.<sup>42</sup>

The above-described activities, along with publications about the camp, led Person and Steinert to the conclusion that: “[t]hrough their [Ossowski, Czyżewski, Stańczyk, and Sochacka] publications, combined with the popular commemoration, the camp at Przemysłowa is finally getting recognition as an important element of German policy in occupied Poland” (Person and Steinert 2022, 224). Person and Steinert consider the activities undertaken to research and commemorate the camp as valuable, and their publication, positioning the camp at Przemysłowa as important for the context of Holocaust studies, further validates this conclusion. In their book, the authors mention, but do not elaborate upon, the most recent activities related to the camp at Przemysłowa. They merely note that, since 2013,<sup>43</sup> i.e., when the initiative to erect a cross at the Children’s Martyrdom Monument emerged, there has been a tendency to emphasise the Catholic (i.e. non-Jewish) identity of the camp. They describe marches commemorating the victims of the camp that begin with a mass and take place in early November, after the Catholic holiday of All Souls’ Day, when many Poles gather at the graves of their loved ones. Person and Steinert emphasise the Catholic, right-wing character of the celebrations and note that there is no shortage of outraged voices opposing attributing a Jewish identity to the site, claiming that it is done at the expense of the Polish memory, which is left without commemoration, and driven by anti-Polish Jewish historians (Person and Steinert 2022, 223).<sup>44</sup>

In their book, the comment on the politics of memory in contemporary Poland is a side note to the main topic, i.e. the analysis of the camp’s creation, experiences of the imprisoned children, and the post-war investigations and trials. In 2014, Ewa Stańczyk (researcher of contemporary Polish history and culture) wrote that the memory of the camp at Przemysłowa – perhaps due to its intimate, local character – had not been politicised after 1989. At the same time, the author also wondered why common projects concerning young victims of war, including both children from the Przemysłowa camp and the Łódź Ghetto, are so uncommon, or even non-existent. Stańczyk expressed concerns about the memory of Łódź’s past, which included

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<sup>42</sup> The Virtual Museum is an original project of Urszula Sochacka, implemented with the help of funds from the scholarship of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. Its goal was to create a website presenting the history of the camp on Przemysłowa Street.

<sup>43</sup> Artur Ossowski notes that the first March of Remembrance was organised in 2012. He also states that the monument has been looked after for years by scouts from Łódź, see Ossowski 2022, 12–13.

<sup>44</sup> In 2021, the march took place on November 4, under the auspices of the Museum of Polish Children; see: Museum of Polish Children 2021a.

children's experiences. She emphasised that the projects will remain ineffective and futile as commemorative activities if they are not inclusive and do not dialogically integrate residents' awareness of the city's history (Stańczyk 2014, 634).<sup>45</sup> The most recent commemorative practices, which will be discussed later in the text, seem to confirm Stańczyk's doubts and worries.

In 2021, Łódź gained a new museum commemorating the camp at Przemysłowa – *the Museum of Polish Children – Victims of Totalitarianism. A German Nazi Camp for Polish Children in Łódź (1942–1945)* – which, symbolically, began its operations on June 1, i.e., on International Children's Day. The museum is financed fully by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The idea of establishing this museum was first mentioned during the meetings of the Programme Council for the Commemoration of Polish Children from the Camp in Łódź, which had been established on December 22, 2020 by the Ombudsman for Children, Mikołaj Pawlak. The Museum received the full support of the then Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński (later also Deputy Prime Minister), and the Institute of National Remembrance. A letter of intent supporting the initiative was also issued on March 24, 2021 by the President of the Republic of Poland, Andrzej Duda (Museum of Polish Children 2021b).<sup>46</sup> The museum is still in the organisational phase and has neither a permanent seat nor a permanent exhibition. Its offices and temporary seat are located in a historic, renovated tenement house at Piotrkowska Street, the main, representative street of Łódź (see Figure 5). In December 2022, the museum purchased property that is to become its official seat and house its permanent exhibition.

The process of establishing a permanent seat will take the next few years. In its current location, the museum occupies several floors of the tenement house. One floor is taken up by offices, another by a conference room, a screening room, and an exhibition room. The museum is also preparing a permanent exhibition on a separate floor.<sup>47</sup> The director of the museum, Ireneusz Maj<sup>48</sup> said that the museum is a dynamic and growing institution. It employs about 20 people, 15 of whom are full-time employees, but that number is increasing every year. He emphasised that

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45 Stańczyk describes the project *Dzieci Bałut – murale pamięci* ("The Children of Bałuty: Murals of Memory") as an example of inclusive activities; for more, see: Stańczyk 2014, 629–633.

46 In the letter, Andrzej Duda referred to the camp as "Little Auschwitz".

47 At the time of my visit to the museum, the exhibition was still under construction. It was opened to the public in December 2022. There is a multimedia exhibition: *Mamo, czemu nie przyjeżdżasz? Listy dzieci z obozu na Przemysłowej* ("Mom, why are you not coming? Letters of children from the camp at Przemysłowa").

48 Before becoming the director of the museum, Ireneusz Maj was the director of the Team for Education and Upbringing at the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Poland, an assistant professor at the Department of the History of Polish Political Thought at the Jagiellonian University, and the director of the Public Junior High School No. 19 in Łódź.



**Figure 5:** Temporary seat of Museum of Polish Children at Piotrowska Street (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).

he “also has the privilege of being able to create the team from scratch. It is not a museum that has been operating for many decades or even several years. It is a team of young employees, historians and enthusiasts. It is being created right in front of me” (Maj 2022). He compared the relations on the team to relations within a family.

The museum is a young institution, but it has already been active in many fields. It is (1) developing its temporary seat, (2) working on building a new one, (3) writing and releasing publications, conducting educational activities, creating temporary exhibitions, making films and regularly holding press conferences, and it has even organised a scientific conference.<sup>49</sup> The interior design of the museum’s temporary seat is very formal and official, and its national character is emphasised by prominently displayed state flags (Figure 6). No artefacts from the former camp have survived (apart from a few chairs), so now the employees are focusing on creating materials that can be displayed at the museum. According to the director, the new permanent exhibition is to implement the assumptions of the so-called new museums, i.e., it is to be focused on producing experiences, affecting the senses,

<sup>49</sup> The multitude of the museum’s various projects can be seen here: Museum of Polish Children 2023.



**Figure 6:** Conference room in the Museum of Polish Children (photo: Katarzyna Taczyńska).

encouraging interaction, using multimedia, closing the gap between the visitors (especially children) and the exhibition's narrative, and creating conditions for emotional identification with the people presented in the materials:

We have an excellent holographic technique at our disposal. We can recreate the conditions in the barracks, let children sit at the table, in the canteen, show them what the workshop looked like, for example, what those industrial needles were like. Because children hear that the prisoners were supposed to work in the camp, so let them see what it really looked like. They would stand at the workbench, try to do these activities themselves, so that they could also face them. They would also face other external stimuli – temperature, weather conditions, smells (Maj 2022).<sup>50</sup>

Undoubtedly, the museum's employees deeply believe that it has a mission to fulfil, and even – as the director emphasised – a debt that it owes to the prisoners of the camp at Przemysłowa, whose experiences had long been denied social recognition (e.g., social benefits for prisoners): “The museum is a very important institution for

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<sup>50</sup> Victoria Grace Walden writes about the challenges and threats facing memorial museums in the digital age, see e.g. Walden 2022.

these people. First and foremost, we exist for them. In a secondary manner, we also exist for the younger generations” (Maj 2022). The museum is therefore an institution whose aim is to recognise the suffering of the former prisoners at the state level and commemorate them properly: “We will also make sure that information about Przemysłowa is finally included in school textbooks” (Maj 2022). According to the director, the camp can be considered a “pioneering” subject “for historians”. Listening to the director’s words, one gets the impression that the history of the camp at Przemysłowa Street is a new subject, which is only now being discovered for the public.

Giving voice to marginalised entities is one of the most important tasks of contemporary commemorative activities. However, when the subject is a child, an “object that is extremely easy to manipulate”, an innocent and helpless victim, the question arises whether the practices focused on such a subject do not lead to the exploitation and instrumentalisation of suffering (Kowalska-Leder and Woźnicka 2017, 149). In the case of the Museum of Polish Children, which is still being organised, but has been very active since 2021, I believe that there are legitimate concerns about the manner and rhetoric of the practices conducted by this institution.<sup>51</sup> What I find particularly problematic and disturbing, is the exclusive nature of the museum’s activities, which, instead of leaning towards dialogue, gravitate towards the conflict of memories and evoking and amplifying suffering, as I will show in detail below.

Both of my interlocutors (Ireneusz Maj and Andrzej Janicki) from the museum stated that although the museum commemorates the camp at Przemysłowa, the narrative about the suffering of children, victims of the Second World War, is not limited to the national framework. In this interpretation, the children’s trauma is positioned in contrast to the common enemy – the German occupier. The director says that for him “there is no demarcation here. It’s the same perpetrator. These are schoolmates. Yes, fate had placed one child on this side and the other on the other. What we should be talking about here is a shared narrative of a hell-on-earth-type of a scary place” (Maj 2022). The way both men talked about the experiences of children and youth in this camp was notable: they presented Jewish and Polish populations as victims of the same kind; victims of the same regime. It is yet another institution in Poland that defines Polishness on the basis of suffering and being an innocent victim, reinforcing the old 19th-century paradigm that has shaped the Polish identity narrative (cf. Kobielska 2019, 121–122). The Museum of Polish Children

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51 Due to the limited scope of the text, I will not present here arguments against the current name of the institution, or even the very necessity of its establishment, even though such arguments have been presented. I refer here to the voices of criticism regarding the establishment of a museum at a time when e.g., psychological support for children in Poland is greatly underfunded: Arlak 2021.



becomes a new representative of the model of the politics of history which emerged in post-2005 Poland, heralding a renaissance of the conservative (heroic and romantic) imaginary (Ziębińska-Witek 2021, 85). Moreover, following Andrea Pető, it is an example of an “establishment and enforcement of the competing victimhood narrative” characterizing a shift in the paradigm of Holocaust memorialisation (Pető 2019). This approach, focused on creating a positive image of the Polish state – a state full of victims, leaves no space for discussing difficult heritage. Consequently, at the level of the narrative expressed by the museum’s staff, the war suffering is used to maintain the traditional auto-stereotype of Poles as war victims. This is one of the most important Polish historical discourses – the martyrological discourse – in which the Polish nation is presented as the greatest victim of historical trials and tribulations (Kaprański 2016, 350–351).

Andrzej Janicki (a historian and head of the Museum’s Collections Department) explains that the documentation concerning the camp at Przemysłowa contains “no record at all of the martyrdom of Jewish children, because [they] were kept separate in the ghetto, and during the construction of the camp, the youngest [Jewish children] had been already killed after the so-called *Allgemeine Gehsperr*. The history of the ghetto is a subject that requires deep specialist studies and, as I am not an expert in this specific field, I personally would not take it upon myself to say a lot about it” (Janicki 2022). The history of the Łódź Ghetto is therefore excluded from the narrative of Polish martyrdom, which, as Janicki explains, is still barely known to audiences in the West: “in the Western world, in my opinion, there is a widespread ignorance of the fact that there were also millions of civilian victims that represented other [non-Jewish] nationalities” (Janicki 2022). Once again, we are dealing here not only with the competitiveness, which is characteristic for the Polish experience of memory, but also with the exclusion of other voices. The experience of the Second World War, fundamental to Polish history and identity, is a phenomenon in which Jewish history is seen as different and separate, as something which is not part of the Polish narrative, the story of Poland. The Holocaust is not a story “about us”, but “about them”.

Michael Rothberg, researcher of literature and memory studies, sees memory as a multi-directional phenomenon that is constantly negotiated (no memory is given once and for all), referenced, borrowed, and differentiated from other memories (Rothberg 2015, 15). It is, therefore, legitimate and understandable that each museum builds a grid of meanings that defines its position in relation to other memories in its operations. However, is there a place for the coexistence of multidirectional memory in polypore states? The essentialist approach to memory means that the museum’s activities to date resemble cultural appropriation, as the experience of children from the camp at Przemysłowa is described using the language of the extermination of the Jewish population. The juxtaposition of Polish and Jewish

victims equates them on the level of suffering, but excludes the Jewish ones from a Polish state institution representing the inhabitants of Łódź. The Museum of Polish Children, dedicated to a profoundly significant subject – the child as a victim of war, but closed within the confines of ethno-nationalism, forecloses the opportunity to address the challenging heritage in Poland, transforming itself into an institution that illiberally appropriates memory. The situation can be seen as one more example of using the memory of the Holocaust for the purposes of “polypore illiberal states” (Petó 2021, 171). The Polish flags and the Polish children referenced in the name of the museum do not leave space for the presence of other children (not to mention other topics related to difficult heritage). Thus, it seems that the museum simply becomes an intervention institution that will legitimise Polish martyrdom. The museum’s packed program of activities makes one wonder whether the institution, declaring the need to commemorate the tragic fate of Polish children, does not use these experiences as an argument in favour of creating and legitimising the current ethno-national, or rather ethno-nationalist model of national identity. Andrzej Ossowski sees an important task for historians in the historical research on the camp at Przemysłowa: “[...] Poland is obliged to actively oppose the historical lie ‘about Polish concentration camps’ and ‘Polish extermination camps’, effectively developing methods and strategies of action” (Ossowski 2022, 163). The Museum of Polish Children fits well into the framework of the Polish politics of memory, as an institution that fights for Poland’s place in the pantheon of war victims. In its current form, the museum has little chance of fostering an intercultural dialogue, which is essential in the current global social reality.

## 5 Conclusions

Museums, as material and symbolic spaces with a long history and a significant role in shaping social awareness, constitute an important space for the politics of memory. In my article, I argue that museums are used as important tools shaping Poland’s collective memory of its recent history, also bringing a major paradigm shift in Holocaust commemoration in Poland. In these museums, the transnational Holocaust narrative becomes a marginalised object; the goal is to strengthen the national values. These changes are occurring simultaneously across various Polish cities (in this context Łódź is just an example), often outside the main focus of the public opinion, but with the full support of government organisations. The museums that reinforce the nation’s positive auto-stereotype (being an innocent victim) play a special role in this transformation.

The Radegast Station, a small museum branch, is the only museum-type institution that deals directly with the memory of the ghetto. Its establishment

should be associated with the need of the Łódź authorities to work on a difficult heritage. The Radegast Station is not the only entity working to preserve the memory of Jews in Łódź. However, this does not mean that the inhabitants of Łódź perceive Jewish heritage as an element of the national heritage with which they identify. The Radegast Station is a memorial site operating as a martyrdom museum fulfilling several functions: it documents tragic historical events, conducts educational activities, popularises knowledge about the past, and cultivates the memory of the victims (see e.g., Sodaro 2018). It is, therefore, an example of the institutionalisation of memory in the social life of the city. However, the creation of the memorial site and getting people accustomed to their heritage have, to some extent, neutralised this space for Łódź inhabitants who rarely visit the museum.

The Radegast Station is a small institution whose potential has not been fully developed, and will be difficult to reach in its current form (with limited space and staff). It is part of the Independence Traditions Museum in Łódź. One of this institution's objectives is "to explore diversity in the analysis of the nature of Polish identity" (see Museum of Independence Traditions 2023b), but so far, the activities of the Radegast Station are primarily informative, remaining rather circumspect and conventional in terms of the topics and issues they address. The cultural memory constructed in these activities does not violate the framework of Polish collective memory, it actualises it, but does not enter into a more in-depth dialogue with it. In this case, the memory serves primarily to legitimise and naturalise the past and, only to a degree, to foster social integration.

The second museum analysed in this text, i.e., the Museum of Polish Children, may be an additional obstacle to an in-depth discussion on the Jewish past of the city. The museum is still under construction, but its activities to date raise justified concerns about the shape of the memory it presents. The museum is devoted to the history of children imprisoned in the camp at Przemysłowa in Łódź, which existed during the Second World War in the ghetto area, but was excluded from its administration. As the researchers indicate, the specificity of this camp significantly contributes to the analysis of both the policies of the Third Reich and the issue of war victimisation, expanding the knowledge of this phenomenon in the territory of the Second Polish Republic. Research on the history of the camp undoubtedly requires clarification of "various understatements or imprecise statements" (Ossowski 2022, 16). It is important for it to be undertaken on the basis of archival materials, and that the victims of the camp receive adequate support from the state. However, the issue of the form in which the memory of the camp is presented in the museum is a different, separate challenge.

The museum, in its current shape, has little chance of creating an institution and permanent exhibition that will contribute to shaping Polish memory in an inclusive way that encourages discussion. The conducted research indicates that,

firstly, the institution does not see the pressing need to rebuild and redefine the broadly conceived heritage, which is called for by critical heritage studies (see e.g., Harrison 2013; Smith 2007). The Museum of Polish Children promotes one dominant narrative about the war – the narrative that focuses on Polish suffering. Secondly, the museum rejects the vision of multi-directional memory, as defined by Michael Rothberg (2015), in favour of a monological, aggressive, and competitive vision. The Museum of Polish Children can be defined as an exclusionary institution – one that excludes the component of Jewish memory from Polish national memory, treating it as foreign. Drawing on the mechanisms of actions impacting memory described by Aleida Assmann (2009), it should be said that the narrative of the museum is dominated by the strategy of compensation, in this case – consistent consolidation of the image of Poland as an innocent victim, without any attempts to problematise it. The perspective proposed by the Museum of Polish Children has no space for the problematic issues for Polish memory, especially the participation of civilians in the Holocaust. In its current form, the museum gives the impression of an institution that serves primarily the current political goals of the state, i.e., aims to reinforce a narrowly understood national identity defined on the basis of exclusion. In such a space, there is no room for questions or discussions.

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