

December 8, 2014



## New Polish museum of Jewish life called 'stunning'

By Ron Csillag

*POLIN: The museum of the History of Polish Jews is being praised by many.*

**TORONTO — Add to your bucket list a trip to Warsaw to see POLIN: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which is already being hailed as a world-class facility just weeks after it opened.**

"I think it is a stunning museum. It has a fair chance of being one of the great museums of the world," enthused University of Toronto historian Michael Marrus at a panel last week at U of T's Wolfond Centre, presented by the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada.

What makes the museum so compelling is that "it is built on scholarship," Marrus added.

After eight years of construction, the completed museum has become a striking addition to the Polish capital's cityscape, said Peter Jassem, head of the Polish-Jewish Heritage Foundation of Canada's Toronto chapter and chair of the museum's Canadian committee.

On Oct. 28, the museum's core exhibit was opened by the presidents of Poland and Israel. Comprised of eight galleries set on 47,000 square feet, the exhibits "put you in the moment of time," said Jassem, who presented a slide show of the museum's interior and exterior.

The centrepiece of the museum, Jassem pointed out, is a meticulously reconstructed ceiling of a destroyed 17th-century wooden synagogue that once stood in the town of Gwozdziec.

Jews have lived in Poland for 1,000 years, and by the eve of World War II, they made up over a third of the population of many urban centres in the country, including the capital, he noted. Half of all Jews who perished in the Holocaust were from Poland, and 90 per cent of Polish Jewry was wiped out.

What makes the exhibits unique, Jassem explained, is that they present Polish history as a continuous, thousand-year story. Unlike other countries, Poland never banned or expelled Jews.

The Polish government invested \$80 million in the museum, and an additional \$50 million came from private funds, including from many Canadians.

Among the dignitaries who attended the opening was Canadian Sen. Linda Frum. "This new museum is not a museum to commemorate how Jews died in Poland. It is a museum to celebrate how they lived and, indeed, how they often thrived," Frum told the Senate on Nov. 4.

"For my part, as a Jew of Polish heritage, married to the son of Holocaust survivors, participating in the opening of this museum was a truly emotional experience."

Another Canadian connection came in 2006, when Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a Toronto-born museum scholar, was appointed as head curator.

The museum, which has won global acclaim for its design and architecture, stands in the heart of the former Warsaw Ghetto.

"With its tent flap-like entry and façade of copper, glass and sand-coloured concrete, the building, glimmering like a mirage against its drab Warsaw backdrop, appears to look both back and forward in time," noted the New York Review of Books this month.

Toronto historian Frank Bialystok, who was born in Poland in 1946, agreed the museum "has been done with class and nuance" and provides "a profound sense of the integration of Poles and Jews throughout history."

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