



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rdap21>

Exhibiting the Holocaust at the Majdanek Concentration Camp and the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp

Agata Pietrasik

To cite this article: Agata Pietrasik (2023) Exhibiting the Holocaust at the Majdanek Concentration Camp and the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp, The Journal of Holocaust Research, 37:3, 271-296, DOI: [10.1080/25785648.2023.2210939](https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2023.2210939)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2023.2210939>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 29 Jun 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 242



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Exhibiting the Holocaust at the Majdanek Concentration Camp and the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp

Agata Pietrasik

Art History Department, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs and analyses the spaces and visual narratives of two particularly important early exhibitions organized by Holocaust survivors: the one at the Jewish Pavilion in the former Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin (September 1946), and ‘*Unzer Veg in der Frayheytt*’ (Our Path to Freedom) made in the displaced persons camp in Bergen-Belsen (July 1947). Located in one of the barracks of the former concentration camp, the Jewish Pavilion in Majdanek was one of the first public commemorative sites expressing Jewish memory of the war in Poland. While presenting a history of the Holocaust, the display also established a space for mourning. ‘Our Path to Freedom’ was created on the occasion of the Second Congress of Liberated Jews in the British Zone. It also presented the Holocaust, while at the same time imagining the future life of survivors in *Eretz Israel*. Together, these exhibitions demonstrate the heterogeneity of Holocaust memory of that time. They pose questions about different ways of narrating history, pointing to exhibitions as a significant medium, while allowing for a combination of visual and spatial means of representation in order to create a multifaceted narrative about the past.

KEYWORDS

Displaced persons camp
Germany; Majdanek;
Holocaust memory; art
history; visual culture;
exhibition studies

Exhibitions representing the Holocaust and World War II were a particular phenomenon in the immediate postwar period. Organized by various agents (state institutions, individuals, groups of survivors), they created a complex web of meanings that gave rise to different narratives regarding the war and the Holocaust, framing both their present moment and their possible futures. In this article, I reconstruct and analyze the spaces and narratives of two particularly important early exhibitions organized by Holocaust survivors: in the former Majdanek concentration camp in Lublin (September 1946) and in the Displaced Persons (DP) camp Bergen-Belsen (July 1947). I examine their specific ways of displaying the Holocaust, focusing on which material was presented and how was it displayed, as well as on specific entanglements in differing aesthetic and political contexts.

CONTACT Agata Pietrasik  a.pietrasik@fu-berlin.de  Art History Department, Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Both exhibitions were organized by Jewish survivors, and both sought to narrate and commemorate the tragic recent past of the Holocaust from the perspective of victims. However, in spite of this common ground, one must recognize a difference in the political contexts that framed both exhibitions. The exhibition in Majdanek, the concentration camp in Lublin liberated by Soviet troops in 1944, was organized by the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland and located in one of the barracks of the former camp, which in the aftermath of its liberation was transformed into a state museum. This exhibition was created and perceived in the context of an emerging public memory of the Holocaust and World War II in Poland, at the time a site of struggle between competing narratives, yet already strongly primed by nationalist tendencies focusing on Polish victimhood. The exhibition pavilion in Majdanek is among the earliest Jewish public commemorations dedicated to the Holocaust in Poland, preceding the Jewish exhibition in Auschwitz (1947) and the Warsaw Ghetto Monument (1948) in Warsaw. The exhibition organized in Majdanek told a complex story, reaching beyond the immediate context of its location to include the history of Jewish resistance in ghettos set up by Nazi Germany in Poland. It also established symbols and visual forms facilitating not only commemoration, but also mourning.

The exhibition in the Bergen-Belsen DP camp, located in proximity to the former concentration camp, was organized by the Historical Commission of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the British Zone and accompanied the Second Congress of Liberated Jews in the British Zone. The event was therefore directly connected to the political struggles of survivors fighting for the possibility to immigrate to Eretz Israel (British Mandatory Palestine). Moreover, it was also entangled in a difficult and tense relationship with British authorities, as well as an ongoing fight for recognition of Jewish organizations representing Jewish survivors in DP camps in the British occupation zone in Germany. The primary goal of the exhibition was to give visibility to the life of Jewish survivors then living in the DP camps, and to give shape to their aspirations for a future life in Eretz Israel, as the title of the exhibition '*Unzer Veg in der Frayheyf*' (Our Path to Freedom) declares. However, as demonstrated by the exhibition, these tasks were only seen as possible when the recent past of the Holocaust was narrated and accounted for, which is why large parts of the exhibition focused on historicizing the Holocaust through exhibiting material from local historical commissions, or displaying commemorations organized by survivors. The past permeated the present moment and was its constitutive part.

Both exhibitions, in Majdanek and in Bergen-Belsen, were primarily aimed at Jewish survivors, but in differing ways they also engaged or addressed other audiences. According to official records from shortly after its opening, the exhibition in Majdanek had been visited by over 6,000 visitors by the fall of 1946.¹ The exhibition itself can be seen as an intervention into a public memory focused on Polish martyrdom and explicitly addressing antisemitism. Although no records of visitors exist in the case of the Bergen-Belsen exhibition, the exhibition's texts were in Yiddish, English, and German in order to address a variety of audiences.

¹List of visitors to the Jewish Pavilion in Majdanek from September 15 to September 30, 1946, Centralny Komitet Żydów w Polsce, Wydział Kultury i Propagandy, Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (ŻIH), 303/XIII/237.

Although located in very different locations, the exhibitions are connected in a significant way through their archiving, as their documentation can be found in the Jewish Historical Institute (ŻIH) in Warsaw, forming the trace of an exchange and an indirect connection between the two events.² Studying the two displays together offers a glimpse into a still largely unexplored network of exhibitions organized throughout Europe in the immediate postwar period, some of which aimed at giving public visibility to the narratives of survivors. Documentation of the exhibitions in Majdanek and in Bergen-Belsen shows us that they were heterogenous and dynamic presentations that revitalized the connection between narrative and space, creating what Michel de Certeau terms ‘spacial stories.’³

‘This is Majdanek’: Exhibiting and mourning

The Jewish Pavilion in the former concentration camp in Majdanek represents one of the earliest attempts to exhibit and commemorate the history of the Holocaust undertaken by a Jewish organization. The pavilion was located in a former camp barrack, which was part of the state museum in Majdanek established as early as 1944, in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of the camp.⁴ In 1945, a decision was made to create an architectural proposal for the museum, establishing the borders of the future commemorative complex. This task was given to Warsaw-based architect Romuald Gutt.⁵ Gutt designed a project according to which nationalities persecuted in Majdanek were to receive a pavilion in a former barrack, a space that could be used to present an exhibition. Already at that time, the internationalism of the struggle against fascism, albeit with an emphasis on Polish suffering, was emerging as a main trope in the commemorative strategy of the communist authorities. Despite the fact that Gutt’s designs never fully materialized, the intention to have national pavilions was partially realized in 1946.

The pavilions, including the Jewish one, were publicly allocated to different nations during the so-called ‘Week of Majdanek’ (Tydzień Majdanka), an annual ceremony to commemorate the victims of the camp in Lublin and the event of its liberation by the Red Army, that took place between September 15 and 22, 1946. Barrack 43, marked by the blue and white flag, was intended to commemorate Jewish victims. The exhibition there was organized by the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, the main Jewish organization of postwar Poland, established in 1944 in Lublin after the liberation.⁶ The Committee brought together representatives of different political parties and oversaw the activities of the Jewish Historical Commission.⁷ Early documents sketching the

²Materials from the Jewish Historical Commission in Göttingen, Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna, ŻIH, 303/XX/266.

³Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011), pp. 115-118.

⁴Janina Kiełboń and Edward Balawejder, (eds.), *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944–1947* (Lublin: Majdanek State Museum, 2004), p. 9.

⁵Kiełboń and Balawejder, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*, pp. 150-151.

⁶Krzysztof Banach, ‘Pamięć o Zagładzie w narracji muzealnej Państwowego Muzeum na Majdanku w latach 1944-1969’, *Studia Judaica* 32 (2013): 115-144. On the Jewish exhibition in Majdanek in the context of early commemoration of the Holocaust see: Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i Zagłady 1944–1950* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo TRIO, 2009), 238-252, 307-313.

⁷On the establishment of the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland see: Natalia Aleksion, ‘Zionists and Anti-Zionists in the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland: Between Cooperation and Political Struggle, 1944–1950,’ *Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2, no. 33 (1997): pp. 32–50. Regarding the activities of the Jewish Historical Commission see: Agnieszka

activities of the commission set as one of its goals the creation of a museum of Polish Jews that would present the commission's collection of objects and tell the story of the Holocaust, thus the Majdanek exhibition can be seen in the light of these larger ambitions.⁸ The display in Majdanek was designed by architect Zofia Rozensztrauch (later Naomi Judkowski), together with visual artists Mojżesz Lubliński and Dawid Opoczyński.⁹ Based on the existing documents, we can infer that Rozensztrauch, who studied architecture at the Warsaw University of Technology before the war, played a crucial role in designing the space.¹⁰ Rozenstrauch's personal history was also deeply and tragically connected to the site of the exhibition. The artist was deported to Majdanek from the Warsaw ghetto during the 1943 uprising, and to Auschwitz; however, both of her parents and her sister were murdered in Majdanek.¹¹

The politics of memory

The Jewish exhibition in Majdanek needs to be seen against the backdrop of discussions on the commemoration of World War II taking place in Poland at the time. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the format of official commemorations was not yet set and the memory culture was characterized by a certain plurality.¹² There were also discussions in the press regarding different approaches to commemoration, including the commemoration of Majdanek. Significant in this context are press reviews of the 'The Week of Majdanek', especially the 1946 edition during which the Jewish Pavilion was opened. The journalist Jerzy Wyszomirski presented a harsh review of the 1946 ceremonies and of the first general exhibition organized by the Majdanek museum.¹³ His criticism emphasized the saturation of the public visual sphere of Lublin with gruesome images depicting wartime atrocities, among them posters showing the skulls and bones of victims found in the camp, booklets with texts and photographs of the camp, and artworks by Zinovii Tolkachev, a Jewish-Ukrainian Red Army soldier who was

Haska, "'Zbadać i wyświetlić'. Centralna Żydowska Komisja Historyczna (1944–1947)," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, no. 13 (2017): pp. 110-137; Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe!* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition, 2012), chap. 3; Natalia Aleksun, "The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland 1944–47," *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, no. 20 (2007): pp. 74-94.

⁸Plans for the establishment of the museum as well as the characteristics of the commission's rich collection of artifacts and artworks are described in reports from 1944-1947, see: Archives of the Central Jewish Historical Commission, 303/XX/26, ZIH.

⁹Rozensztrauch (sometimes spelled Rosenstrauch, or Rozenstrauch) was also working as a secretary of the Jewish Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts (Yidische gezelschaft tsu farshpreytn kunst). In 1947, she co-designed the Jewish exhibition in Auschwitz. Mojżesz Lubliński figures in the archives of the Jewish Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts as a painter based in Łódź. See *Żydowskie Towarzystwo Krzewienia Sztuk Pięknych*, 361/38, 361/2, ZIH. For an analysis of the Jewish artistic milieu in Warsaw in late 1940's see: Magdalena Tarnowska, "Żydowskie środowisko artystyczne w Warszawie w latach 1945–1949", *Pamiętnik Sztuk Pięknych*, no 9 (2015): pp. 33-59.

¹⁰In a letter to Leon Komar, Rozensztrauch recalled that she travelled to Lublin in September 1946 to "prepare mourning decorations and photomontages, as well as historical posters of the *gehenna* of Jews under Nazi occupation" for the "The Week of Majdanek." She also mentioned that she worked then on the Jewish pavilion, together with a team of painters. See Naomi Judkowski: her correspondence with Leon Komar, letter from 28.09.1946, catalogue no. 242, Ghetto Fighters House Archives.

¹¹For Zofia Rozensztrauch's account of her survival in the camps see: Noemi Judkowski, *A Requiem for Two Families*, (Van-couver: Leon Komar, 1990), pp. 71-92.

¹²See Marek Kucia, "The Meanings of Auschwitz in Poland: 1945 to the Present," *Holocaust Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2019): pp. 223-225, DOI: 10.1080/17504902.2019.1567658; Zofia Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba. Polskie spory wokół pamięci nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych i zagłady 1944–1950* (Warsaw: Trio, 2009), pp. 377-382.

¹³Jerzy Wyszomirski, "Majdanek przeobrażony," *Tydzień*, vol. 13 (6.X.1946): p. 7. For discussion of the article, see also Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba*, pp. 280-282.

commissioned to create drawings in the aftermath of the liberation of the camp.¹⁴ Wyszomirski viewed this as exploitative, and compared the main exhibition of the Majdanek State Museum, which displayed wax figures in prisoners' uniforms, to the Grévin Museum in Paris.¹⁵ However, the author failed to mention the presentation in the Jewish Pavilion – a likely sign he hadn't seen it, as its setting was very different from what was presented in the main display. Another account of the 'Week of Majdanek' was given by a journalist of Yiddish language newspaper *Dos Naye Lebn* (The New Life), published by the Central Committee of Jews in Poland.¹⁶ The author described the commemorative ceremonies in great detail, including a Catholic mass organized beside an altar with a wooden cross entwined with barbed wire and framed by flags resembling striped uniforms, and a recital of Chopin's *Funeral March*. The journalist highlighted aspects related to Jewish victims, such as a speech by Marek Bitter, representing the Central Committee of Jews in Poland and himself a former prisoner of Majdanek. The reporter further stated that although, following alphabetical order, the Jewish Pavilion was presented last, when the barrack was handed over to the Jewish delegation, the Minister of Justice Henryk Świątkowski explicitly stated that Jews had suffered the greatest 'sacrifice' at Majdanek.¹⁷ Describing the atmosphere of Lublin, in contrast to Wyszomirski, rather than reflecting on the widespread presence of different images of the camp, the journalist depicted Lublin as a desolate city, where the extermination of the Jewish community is visible and palpable in the deserted streets and barren places once filled with life and activity.

The issue of public expressions of mourning for the murdered Jews raises another topic important to the context of the exhibition in Majdanek, namely antisemitism, for the creation of the pavilion took place during a rise in anti-Jewish violence in Poland. The 'Week of Majdanek' was organized only a few months after the Kielce Pogrom, which took place on July 4, 1946, and during which at least 40 Holocaust survivors were murdered and many more injured.¹⁸ This was the deadliest, and eventually the most recognizable, incident of a wave of anti-Jewish violence that transpired in Poland after the war. In addition to physical attacks and murders, a general atmosphere of resentment towards survivors was palpable. Survivors returning to their homes recounted being met with hostility from their former neighbors.¹⁹ Antisemitism and enmity against Jewish survivors was reflected on in the Jewish Pavilion in its explicit equation of antisemitism and fascism.

Displaying historical objects

The interior of the Jewish Pavilion was carefully documented in a photographic album now deposited at the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.²⁰ The album

¹⁴Wyszomirski, "Majdanek przeobrażony," p. 7.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Yitshak Bornshteyn, "Denkmal di milyonen kidushim fun Maydanek," *Dos Naye Lebn*, vol. 33 (20.IX.1946): pp. 3, 9.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸On the Kielce Pogrom and anti-Jewish violence in Poland in the 1940s, see Jan Tomasz Gross, *Antisemitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2006), chaps. 3, 4, Kindle edition. See also Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba*, pp. 105-116; Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "Postwar Violence Against Jews in Central and Eastern Europe," in Kata Bohus et al., (eds.), *Our Courage. Jews in Europe 1945–1948* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg), pp. 64-81.

¹⁹Audrey Kichelewski, *Ocalali. Żydzi polscy po Zagładzie* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2021), pp. 25-69.

²⁰Album "Muzeum Żydowskie na Majdanku," 1946, ŻIH, ŻIH-ALBU-43

itself is an object deserving of separate study, as its value exceeds the documentary role of simply presenting the exhibition. On black pages, photographs, drawings, and texts in Polish and Yiddish are brought together in a way that creates a somber atmosphere of mourning and commemoration. The cover of the album captures an essential image of the camp, comprising all of its instantly recognizable features: barracks, a barbed-wire fence, a watch tower, and a crematorium chimney. These parts of the camp were already canonized in art and literature in the mid-1940s as symbolic denominators of Majdanek the ‘death factory,’ as Soviet journalist Konstantin Simonov called it in 1944.²¹ The drawing depicts a prisoner standing in the foreground, his back toward us, his shoulders rounded, and his head hanging low. On the back of his striped uniform we see a prominent yellow star that stands out from the black and brown colors dominating the picture. This image evokes another work that circulated in Lublin at the time: a print by Zinovii Tolkachev titled ‘*Napiętnowany*’ (Branded), depicting a concentration-camp inmate in a similar pose, the letters K. L. for *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp) on the back of his uniform.²² The cover of the album related directly to contemporaneous codes of depicting Majdanek at that time; however, it changed these by visibly emphasizing that the victims were Jewish, a message further strengthened by the title written on one side of the cover: ‘Jewish Museum in Majdanek.’

The album offers a guided tour through the museum, beginning with a depiction of the location of the exhibition: Barrack 43. Called the *Effektenkammer* in German, new prisoners arrived at this building to be stripped of their property, which was also partially stored there.²³ Turning this site of dispossession and deprivation into one containing and honoring the memory of its victims was a powerful symbol in itself. Similar to the main exhibition in Majdanek, the exhibition in the Jewish Pavilion attempted to present prisoners’ objects (such as clothes) found in the camp beyond a forensic framework that saw them only as evidence in ongoing court trials; they were also a way of allowing viewers to imagine the enormous number of victims (Figure 1).

Having established the location of the exhibition, the other page in the album illustrates the entrance of the museum-barrack. A single, relatively small and tightly cropped black and white photograph of the barrack sits alone on the page, accompanied by the laconic caption, ‘Entrance.’ On the wall of the barrack, we see a poster with a Star of David and a matter-of-fact description: ‘The State Museum at Majdanek. Documents of Jewish Martyrdom. Clothing. Zyklon.’ To the left of the poster, an original camp sign in German is still partly visible. The doors to the exposition are open, but beyond them is a wall of darkness. The photograph of the entrance is underlaid with a black cardboard rectangle of the same proportions, giving the page the illusion of three dimensions. The black cardboard framing the photograph corresponds visually with the black space behind the open doors of the museum, as if the somberness of the interior was literally casting a shadow over its representation. This page not only renders entrance to the Jewish Pavilion, but it also introduces the somber mood that was aesthetically palpable throughout the exhibition.

²¹Konstantin Simonov, *Obóz zagłady* (Moscow: Wydawnictwo Ludowego Komisarjatu Obrony, 1944), p. 17.

²²Zinovii Tolkachev, *Napiętnowany* from the series *Majdanek*, 1945, print on paper, 36×26 cm, JHI, MŽIH A-1217/II/4

²³On the state of the barrack after the liberation of the camp and the items found there, see Kiełboń and Balawejder, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*, p. 87.

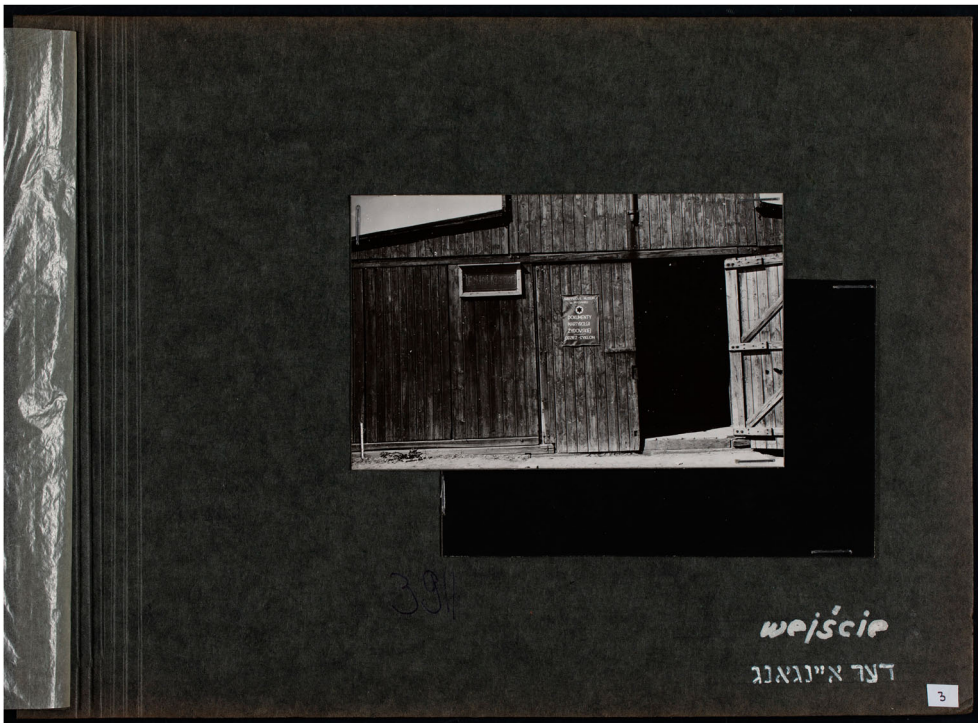


Figure 1. Jewish Museum in Majdanek, 1946, photographic album, Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, inventory number ŻIH-ALBU-43, p. 3. Caption reads: The Entrance.

The very first part of the exhibition, located right by the entrance, referred directly to the former use of the barrack as a storage facility. Visitors were presented with objects discovered in Majdanek, such as prisoners' clothes and striped uniforms, and cans that contained the Zyklon B lethal cyanide-based pesticide used in the gas chambers.²⁴ The clothes were presented in two ways: either hung on a coatrack on the wall, or forming a large pile on the floor. Displaying clothes from a concentration camp by stacking them into piles to render the unimaginable number of victims visible was already becoming a strategy. It was later employed in the first exhibition in Auschwitz in 1947, where masses of shoes, glasses, suitcases, and clothes were piled up and encircled by barbed wire.²⁵ In the Majdanek exhibition, however, there was no physical barrier between the objects and visitors; they appear accessible to viewers, especially the prisoners'

²⁴A Yitshak Bornshteyn press article also mentions other items, such as shoes of the victims and bars of soap (that at the time were presumed to have been made of human body fat), yet these are not visible in the available photographs. Additional items such as shoes, torture devices, and human remains (for example, hair) were presented only during the "Week of Majdanek." See Letters to the Propaganda Department, 1946, JHI, 303/XX/218. See also: Bornshteyn, *Denkmal di Milionen*, p. 10.

²⁵For comparison between the first exhibitions in Majdanek and Auschwitz, see Wóycicka, *Przerwana żałoba*, pp. 275-292. On the first exhibition in Auschwitz, see Johnathan Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration, 1945-1979* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), pp. 59-79; Imke Hansen, "Nie wieder Auschwitz!": die Entstehung eines Symbols und der Alltag einer Gedenkstätte 1945-1955 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), pp. 102-124.



Figure 2. Display of objects at the entrance to the Jewish Pavilion. Jewish Museum in Majdanek, 1946, photographic album, Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, inventory number ŻIH-ALBU-43, p. 4. Top caption reads: “Even today you can find here cans with the weathered “Zyklon” with which the Germans suffocated their victims.” Bottom caption reads: “as well as the clothes of the prisoners of all those nationalities who suffered and died at Majdanek.”

jackets, hanging on the wall almost asking to be touched or even worn. This direct presentation of objects gives the impression of an impromptu display, as if the objects had just been found, their physical immediacy locating the viewer in situ, making him or her aware of the proximity of history. This immediacy is confirmed and emphasized by text in the Majdanek album which reads: ‘Still today you can find here canisters containing the Zyklon used by the Germans to suffocate their victims as well as clothes of prisoners of all nationalities who suffered and died at Majdanek (Figure 2).’²⁶

Nevertheless, the immediacy of objects required a framework through which they could be seen, conceptualized, and understood. Already at that time in Majdanek, as well as in other memorial sites dedicated to World War II, frameworks of Polish martyrdom and the international struggle against fascism were emerging as dominant narratives about this recent past.²⁷ These perspectives, especially with time, led to the obfuscation or erasure of the Jewish experience from public discourse. For example, one of the main exhibits in the general display organized by the Majdanek State Museum in 1945 was a largescale map of Europe with borders outlined in barbed wire, marking the locations of concentration camps. At the location of Majdanek, flags of various nations were

²⁶Album “Muzeum Żydowskie na Majdanku,” p. 4.

²⁷Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the Politics of Commemoration*, pp. 79-108.

pinned with the Polish flag largest, thus establishing a national hierarchy of victims and effacing the Jewish element.²⁸

Forming space and meaning

The main part of the Majdanek exhibition began behind the piles of clothes and stacks of gas canisters. It was separated by a makeshift wall, constructed with wooden crates (probably also camp objects, but it is difficult to determine their origin based on the documentation), framed by thin, white columns whose classical form is at odds with the generic wooden architecture of the barrack (Figure 3). Above the columns hung a white banner inscribed in Polish: ‘The Extermination of Jews on Polish Soil.’²⁹ This slogan was repeated on separate banners in French, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Thus, a viewer entering the barrack would immediately see these banners towering over the interior space while being confronted with actual material remains of the Holocaust. The introduction of the columns provided a symbolic transition from the past, materialized in the camp objects, to the present of the exhibition in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The aesthetic contrast between the two parts is distinct. The space behind the



Figure 3. The sculpture inside the Jewish Pavilion. Jewish Museum in Majdanek, 1946, photographic album, Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, inventory number ŻIH-ALBU-43, p. 5. Interior of the Jewish Pavilion.

²⁸For discussion of this exhibition, see Agata Pietrasik, “Symbol, Testimony, Evidence: Representations of Majdanek in the 1944–45 Work of Zinovy Tolkachev,” *Miejsce*, vol. 6 (2020), <https://www.doi.org/10.48285/8kaewzho3p>

²⁹Album “Muzeum Żydowskie na Majdanku,” p. 5.

columns is rhythmically partitioned with banners that lead to a monument placed at the end of the barrack. The tall, white columns and pedestals placed around the monument, as well as the dark cloth backdrop draped behind it, evoked a sense of decorum. This aesthetic impression was achieved with significant creative effort. Noble materials such as marble or stone would have been unavailable at the time. The impression of such substance was instead suggested with poorer materials, and the attempt to overcome this scarcity demonstrates a determination to move beyond the confines of the camp architecture and to create a dignified space in which to enable mourning.

The monument itself consisted of two horizontal white stone-like slabs with the figure of a woman wearing a long robe. The statue seems to be fashioned from clay or plaster. Positioned with her face turned away from the viewer, she leans on the stone slabs, her entire body in a gesture of despair and mourning, burying her head in her hands. An inscription above reads in Hebrew: 'Rachel Weeping for Her Children,' a quote from the Book of Jeremiah regarding his vision of the mother of the tribes of Israel weeping for her own children and for the Jewish people exiled from their land. Next to the inscription, a Hanukkah menorah – a Jewish symbol of hope and light – was placed.³⁰ Black canvas was stretched behind the monument to cover the wooden architecture of the barrack. This served as a backdrop to a Star of David placed above the monument and a Polish text reading: 'To the memory of the hundreds of thousands of Jews murdered in Majdanek by Hitler's bandits.'

The choice of Rachel as the main symbol of the commemoration was unusual. The biblical matriarch personified a mother who refuses consolation ('She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone,' Jeremiah 31:15). Rachel is not facing the viewer, thus refusing to make her suffering a public spectacle, and perhaps also refusing their consolation. The movement of her body, collapsing onto the slab of the monument, which in this context can also signify a grave, establishes an autonomy for mourning and grief. Rachel as the 'Mother of Exiles' was oftentimes evoked in testimonies and texts of Jewish culture in the early postwar era.³¹ But as well as being rooted in the Jewish tradition, the monument evokes what was described by art historian Aby Warburg as a 'pathos formula,' a transhistorical and transcultural form of expressing suffering, rooted deep in the past.³² The gesture embodied in the sculpture can be found in images of mourning women present in centuries of iconography, from melancholic nymphs to the despairing women in Jacques-Louis David's *The Oath of Horatii*. Yet in the majority of these representations, female grief is presented as a backdrop to male heroism. This pattern of representation is even recognizable in Nathan Rapoport's 1948 Warsaw Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, whose frontal side depicts an armed struggle, albeit not reduced to only male fighters, while the back contains figures of crying and mourning people. The modest monument in Majdanek is a fascinating intervention into the field of commemorative practices, not only because of the centrality of a

³⁰Ibid, pp. 5-7.

³¹Susan Starr Sered, "Rachel's Tomb: The Development of a Cult," *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1995): pp. 125-130, 133; Simo Muir, "Mother Rachel and Her Children: Artistic Expressions in Yiddish and Early Commemoration of the Holocaust in Finland," *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2018): pp. 284-308, doi: [10.1080/13501674.2018.1568787](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2018.1568787)

³²For a discussion on Warburg's *Pathosformel* in relationship to affect, see Kerstin Schankweiler and Philipp Wüschner, "Pathosformel (pathos formula)," in Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve, (eds.), *Affective Societies* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 220-230.



Figure 4. Interior of the Jewish Pavilion (to the left section devoted to resistance in the ghettos, to the right drawings depicting female prisoners in Majdanek), 1946, black and white photograph, Ghetto Fighters House Archives, inventory number 38516.

female figure, but also because of how it reverses the visibility of the Holocaust in its relationship to what was understood as universal. As evidenced by many exhibitions and commemorations devoted to the World War II, Jewish suffering was oftentimes positioned under a universal, hegemonic symbol, and framed as a facet of this particular universalism. This monument reverses this dynamic, because it is this peculiarly Jewish symbol, the figure of weeping Rachel, that embodies the universality of the ‘pathos formula’ on its own terms (Figure 4).

Studying the fragmentary photographic documentation of the exhibition, it is hard to recreate the exact details of the artworks presented on the walls of the barrack. However, it is possible to sketch out the content of the display generally, and to distinguish two qualities that stand out as significant tactics. One of these is a focus on representing the persecution of Jewish women, and the second is an active engagement in contemporary visual culture. Regarding the first, the exhibition in Majdanek not only presented a female symbol of mourning, but also dedicated a significant amount of space to the depiction of Jewish women in Majdanek. Both sides of the barrack were framed by displays of medium-sized drawings depicting female prisoners. It is difficult to attribute the drawings to a concrete author, but they all depict violence against women, showing forced nudity and violent punishments, such as beatings with sticks and whipping. Above these drawings, a sign was placed stating ‘*To jest Majdanek*’ (This is Majdanek); underneath, an improvised barbed wire was stretched, extending outward and giving the impression of the drawings themselves being fenced off from viewers. The barbed wire acts here as a reenactment of the enclosed space of the camp, but also designates the position of the viewer by not allowing one to get close to the drawings,



Figure 5. Interior of the Jewish Pavilion (drawings depicting female prisoners of Majdanek), 1946, black and white photograph, Ghetto Fighters House Archives, inventory number 38514.

perhaps even preventing one from taking a voyeuristic position. The drawings are also placed at the end of the barrack, framing the monument from both sides and emphasizing the visibility given to the different forms of female experience.

The sign placed above the set of drawings is itself a good example of the second distinctive feature of the wall display: a striking engagement in contemporary language and visual codes of representing the Holocaust in the aftermath of the World War II. *To jest Majdanek* is only superficially self-explanatory. In fact, it is a quotation from the 1944 closing speech by Jerzy Sawicki, the prosecutor in the Majdanek war crimes trials. His emotional and accusatory speech was widely disseminated in numerous newspapers and recorded in the film *Swastyka i Szubienica* (*Swastika and Gallows*).³³ In it, Sawicki described the inhuman reality of the camp, and each description, at times almost literary, ended with the phrase ‘*To jest Majdanek*’ (Figure 5).³⁴

A further wall section was dedicated to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and displayed a portrait of the uprising’s Jewish resistance leader Mordechai Anielewicz next to a panel with the silhouette of a man throwing a grenade, and black cutouts forming ruins in combination with tangled barbed wire underneath (Figure 6). On the right of this panel is a

³³Jarosław Kuisz, *Propaganda bezprawia: o “popularyzowaniu prawa” w pierwszych latach Polski Ludowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Scholar 2020), pp. 302-303.

³⁴For example: “Uprzypomnijcie sobie na chwilę pustkę między dniem a nocą, a kiedy księżyc już zaszedł, a słońca jeszcze nie ma, kiedy jest rozlana po świecie szarość poranka. Zamarznięte ciała i dalej nic. Tylko siny dym z krematorium, kolczasty drut i jeki z komory gazowej. (...) *To jest Majdanek.*” (“Imagine, for a moment, the emptiness between day and night, when the moon has gone down and the sun is not yet there, when the grayness of morning is spread over the world. Frozen bodies and then nothing. Only the faint smoke from the crematorium, the barbed wire, and cries from the gas chamber. (...) This is Majdanek.”), “*To jest Majdanek. Przemówienie prokuratora Sawickiego,*” *Rzeczpospolita*, vol. 119 (December 2, 1944): p. 3.



Figure 6. Interior of the Jewish Pavilion, 1946, black and white photograph, Ghetto Fighters House Archives, inventory number 38517.

map marking uprisings and other acts of resistance in ghettos established on Polish soil, with an inscription above: '*Getta walczą*' (The Ghettos are Fighting). This once more constitutes a contemporary visual and a textual allusion, this time to a 1945 memoir published by one of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising's surviving leaders Marek Edelman titled *Ghetto walczy* (The Ghetto Fights), with a cover design employing a similarly flattened rendering of the ruined ghetto. This display also mobilized other images. It used the already described image of a Jewish camp inmate found on the cover of the documentation album, itself altering a work by Tolkachev. Another portion was directly based on a clandestine work made in the Lodz ghetto by Arie Princ (Ben Menachem), a montage of photographs taken by Mendel Grossman and captioned with the words '*Przybyli i odeszli ...*' (They Came and They Went ...). Princ's work had been included in the album *The Extermination of Polish Jews* published by the Central Jewish Historical Commission in December 1945,³⁵ and the work in the exhibition used his caption with different images that evoked the concentration camp.

The authors of the exhibition thus combined diverse visual and textual sources, largely created by survivors, that were circulating in the public sphere at that time. The exhibition was a kind of a collective work of reimagination and remembrance, in which the meanings and representations of history were negotiated, and the postwar atmosphere of the culture was reflected. This was a moment of language

³⁵Marek Edelman, *Getta walczą* (Warsaw: C. K. Bund, 1945); Collage created by Arie Princ (later Ben Menachem) using documents from the Lodz ghetto and photographs by Mendel Grossman, photograph, 1942-1943, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), photograph number 24577. The collage was reproduced in Gerszon Taffet, (ed.), *Zagłada żydostwa polskiego. Album zdjęć. Extermination of Polish Jews. Album of Pictures* (Łódź: Wydawnictwa Centralnej Żydowskiej Komisji Historycznej przy C. K. Żydów Polskich, 1945), p. 36.

formation and the emergence of symbols and iconography, that within a few decades would be unequivocally identified with the Holocaust. Giving visibility to Jewish suffering and mourning, however, was not only a matter of symbolic and visual depiction; it was also a deeply political act. One of the inscriptions placed in the exhibition stated: 'Antisemitism is a faithful ally of fascism.' Given the proximity and intensity of anti-Jewish violence at that time, it is clear that this text referred not only to the past, but also to the present.³⁶

Bergen-Belsen: the presence of the past

The concentration camp in Bergen-Belsen was liberated by British forces in April 1945. Soldiers encountered around 60,000 survivors, most of whom were in critical health, and over 10,000 dead bodies.³⁷ The horrors witnessed by the liberators was immediately mediated and widely shared with the public through film, photographs, and artworks. In the aftermath of the war, images depicting dead bodies, mass graves, and the exhausted survivors of the camp in Bergen-Belsen were broadly circulated in the press as evidence of Nazi crimes, and used in related exhibitions across Europe.³⁸ By May 1945, the concentration-camp barracks were destroyed, leaving only mass graves at the location, with a sign denouncing the horrific history of the site.³⁹ During this process, DP camps were created for Jewish and Polish former inmates nearby. Jewish survivors were the largest group, as many could not envisage returning to their home countries. Even though the British authorities were for a long time unwilling to recognize the Jewish DPs as a separate group, the Jewish DP camp in Bergen-Belsen became the biggest in Germany: Until 1950, up to 12,000 people lived there.⁴⁰ The camp became a vivid center of Jewish social life and cultural activity.⁴¹

Already within a couple of weeks of liberation, the survivors of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp established a committee that in 1945 transformed into the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews in the British Zone, headed by Josef Rosensaft.⁴² That same year, an archive was established that gathered documents, testimonies, and material culture related to the time of the Holocaust; two years later, in 1947, it was transformed into the Central Historical Commission of the Central Committee of the

³⁶Album "Muzeum Żydowskie na Majdanku," pp. 8-9.

³⁷Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen-Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), p. 42.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 41-42; Antoine Capet, "The Liberation of the Bergen-Belsen Camp as seen by Some British Official War Artists in 1945," *Holocaust Studies*, vol. 12, nos. 1–2 (2006): pp. 170-185, doi: 10.1080/17504902.2006.11087175; Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 66-85.

³⁹Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, p. 42; Monty Noam Penkower, *After the Holocaust* (New York: Touro University Press, 2021), pp. 32-79.

⁴⁰Silke Petry et al., *Bergen-Belsen Kriegsgefangenenlager 1940-1945, Konzentrationslager 1943-1945, Displaced Persons Camp 1945-1950; Katalog der Dauerausstellung* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2009), pp. 301-304.

⁴¹On the cultural activities in the DP camp in Bergen-Belsen in the context of the Holocaust remembrance, see Werner Hanak, "The Katset-Teater 'Concentration Camp Theatre' in the Bergen-Belsen DP Camp," in Bohus et al., *Our Courage*, pp. 214-219; Anne-Katrin Henkel, "'Ich will die Schwere abwaschen, die sich in mein Herz gefressen hat.' Zur Aufarbeitung der Shoa im Displaced-Persons-Camp Bergen-Belsen am Beispiel von Beständen der Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Bibliothek Hannover," in Anne-Katrin Henkel and Thomas Rahe, (eds.), *Publizistik in jüdischen Displaced-Persons-Camps: Charakteristika, Medien und bibliothekarische Überlieferung*, (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), pp. 97-117; Thomas Rahe, "Die jüdische DP-Zeitung Unzer Sztyme und die Shoa," in *Publizistik in jüdischen Displaced-Persons-Camps*, pp. 75-95.

⁴²Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, pp. 63-64.

Liberated Jews in the British Zone, with branches in other cities, such as Bremen and Göttingen.⁴³ Polish-born teacher and journalist Rafael Gershon Olewski was in charge of the Historical Commission, as well as chairing the Culture Department of the Central Committee.⁴⁴ Together with writer David Rosenthal and teacher Paul Pinkas Trepman, both originally from Warsaw, Olewski edited the newspaper *Unzer Sztyme*.⁴⁵ Unlike the historical commissions created in DP camps in the American occupation zone, the Bergen-Belsen Historical Commission encouraged gathering not only testimonies, but also objects of material culture relating to the Jewish past, reaching back even before World War II, some of which were presented in their exhibition in 1947.⁴⁶

The exhibition, organized by the Central Historical Commission, was titled ‘*Unzer Veg in der Frayhayt*’ (Our Path to Freedom). It ran from July 20–30, 1947 and accompanied the Second Congress of Liberated Jews in the British Zone, which took place in Bergen-Belsen and Bad Harzburg. The congress was an important international event that consolidated the political agenda of the *She'erith Hapleitah* and allowed them to express their opposition to the British policy regarding Palestine.⁴⁷ Consequently, the British administrative authorities refused to partake in arranging the congress, and the organizational effort fell solely on the Jewish organizations.⁴⁸ Thanks to the rich visual documentation made by the organizers recording the exhibition in both photography and film and preserved mainly in the archives of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, it is possible to reconstruct the space of the exhibition in quite a detailed manner.⁴⁹ The sheer existence of this documentation proves that this event was considered important enough to be preserved beyond its duration. However, the picture available to us today is incomplete. My interpretation of the exhibition is thus not an attempt to recreate the event in its totality; rather, it is an invitation to reimagine the space of the exhibition with consideration of gaps and inconsistencies. The exhibition wove an intricate web of meanings that can be untangled by following different threads, such as the rebirth of Jewish social and cultural life in DP camps, Zionism as a political framework of understanding the past, and, finally, representing the experience of the Holocaust from the perspective of survivors. While keeping other possibilities in mind, this interpretation follows closest to the last thread. The Holocaust was central to the message of the exhibition, and was represented directly and implicitly throughout the exhibition, weaving the past into the texture of the present.

The exhibition was an ambitious and unique undertaking. According to a press article published in *Unzer Sztyme*, it was divided into 22 sections, which displayed over 3,000 objects, the installation of which took a full month.⁵⁰ The exhibition was organized by

⁴³Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 4, Kindle.

⁴⁴See also Olewski, *Tor der Tränen. Jüdisches Leben im Shtetl Osieciny in Polen, Leiden unter NS-Terror und in Auschwitz, Überleben im KZ Bergen-Belsen, dort im DP-Camp und in Celle 1914–1948* (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2014).

⁴⁵See: Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*, Appendix, Kindle; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, pp. 67, 69, 70. On *Unzer Sztyme*, see also: Rahe, “Die jüdische DP-Zeitung *Unzer Sztyme* und die Shoa,” pp. 75–95.

⁴⁶“Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung,” *Unzer Sztyme*, vol. 22 (20.08. 1947): pp. 3–5.

⁴⁷The name *She'erith Hapleitah*, a Hebrew term meaning “Surviving Remnant,” refers to all Jews who survived the Holocaust. See also Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, p. 135.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁴⁹Exhibition “Unzer veg in der frayhayt” (Our Path to Freedom), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO), RG 294.5, Folder 46, 47, 48. *Bergen Belsen DP, 1946–1947*, film, Yad Vashem, Item ID 97823.

⁵⁰“Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung,” pp. 3–6.



Figure 7. Invitation to the exhibition 'Unzer veg in der frayhayt' (Our Path to Freedom), 1947, print on paper, YIVO Archives, inventory number RG 294.5, Folder 46.

Olewski, but the head of the historical commission in Göttingen, Zwi Horowitz (Horowitz), was instrumental in the curation of the historical sections (Figure 7).⁵¹

The invitation to the exhibition encapsulated the complexities of its narrative as well as its motives: representation of the tragic past, assessment of the current conditions of

⁵¹On Horowitz involvement, see Rainer Driever, "Zwi Horowitz – Ein jüdisches Leben für die Erinnerung," *Göttinger Jahrbuch*, vol. 60 (2012): pp. 211-237; Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*, chap. 4, Kindle.

Jews in DP camps, and a call to establish a Jewish state in Palestine.⁵² On the cover of the exhibition brochure was a vignette containing a symbolic image depicting a row of arms, dressed in prisoners' striped uniforms and shackled by already broken chains. The hands were stretched out, gesturing towards the horizon, above which one could see a stretch of land with 'eastern' architecture and the sun raising above it: an image of the Land of Israel. The exaggerated sunrays covering the sky visually echo the stripes on the uniforms, thus blending together symbols of suffering and of rebirth. The words imprinted on the image stated '2 Kongres. Kamf far rekht' (2nd Congress, Fighting for Rights), strongly conveying the political message. The text of the invitation to the exhibition was bilingual, written in German and Yiddish, an interesting fact given that the cultural events that took place within the DP camps were mostly addressed to the Jewish audience. Clearly the exhibition was at least partly conceptualized as reaching beyond the circle of the Jewish DPs. In fact, Horowitz, acting on behalf of the Göttingen Historical Commission, attempted to present parts of the exhibition at a local museum, a request that was strongly rejected by the institution's director.⁵³ Nevertheless, the willingness to also address a German audience remains visible in parts of the exhibition, even if no record of its reception by a such an audience exists.⁵⁴

The small image on the front of the invitation condenses the main motives of the exhibition, bringing together the past experience of the Holocaust and the political struggles of the Jews. Likewise, the *Rundhaus* building where the exhibition was held was marked by the wartime past. This palatial establishment with a horseshoe-shaped ground plan was constructed in the mid-1930s, and originally served as the Officers' Casino for a Wehrmacht military base. After the liberation of the concentration camp, the spacious interiors were used as an emergency hospital for gravely ill survivors to receive medical help, many dying within just a few weeks. After it ceased to be utilized as a hospital, the building was given to the Central Committee of the Liberated Jews.

Organizing the exhibition space

The ground floor of the building where the exhibition took place was not very functional for this purpose. It was one large, open space, filled with light coming in through sizeable windows. The wall of a former ballroom had no windows and was lined with wooden panels. These were used as a display surface; the walls with floor-to-ceiling windows were less suited for such a display. To increase the amount of display space, the organizers of the exhibition used movable panels that were placed throughout the center of the room, with potted trees spread between them (Figures 8 and 9).⁵⁵ The presence of the trees had an added symbolic meaning. The image of a broken tree with young shoots growing back belongs to an iconography used by the *She'erith Hapleitah* as a symbol of rebirth after the Holocaust, and was often employed as part of visual decoration during important ceremonies, in leaflets, posters, and even as a form of memorial to

⁵²Exhibition: "Unzer veg in der frayhayt" (Our Path to Freedom), YIVO, RG 294.5, Folder 46.

⁵³Driever, "Cwi Horowitz – Ein jüdisches Leben für die Erinnerung," p. 218; Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*, chap. 4, Kindle.

⁵⁴The congress was registered in the German press, see "Eine feige Konzession," *Der Spiegel*, vol. 30 (July 26, 1947): pp. 4-5.

⁵⁵Bergen Belsen, Germany, "An exhibit in the DP camp prepared for the Second Congress of Liberated Jews," photograph, 1947, Yad Vashem Photo Archive (YVA), item ID 20616.



Figure 8. General view of the exhibition 'Unzer veg in der frayhayt' (Our Path to Freedom), 1947, black and white photograph, Yad Vashem Photo Archive, item ID 19078.



Figure 9. General view of the exhibition 'Unzer veg in der frayhayt' (Our Path to Freedom), 1947, black and white photograph, JDC Archives, Item ID 1075358.

victims of the Holocaust.⁵⁶ The potted trees also resonated strongly with some content of the exhibition in which trees appeared in different contexts: broken trees symbolizing destruction of the European Jewish diaspora, palm trees symbolizing a new life in Israel. All these symbolic uses could be seen in numerous posters, drawings, and leaflets presented at the exhibition.

The division of space proposed by the commission was original, and not modeled to resemble that of a museum; nor did the display attempt to project the aura of authority and power that is often a part of museological aesthetics. The exhibition presented a great variety of material, which, according to the logic of modern archives and museums should be presented separately. Instead, the exhibition showcased documents and objects connected to Judaism, as well as artworks, posters, newspapers, and everyday objects created in the camp's schools – such as clothes, tools, and even objects manufactured in the dentistry school – as part of a one, porous narrative. Rather than displaying documents in glass cabinets or behind barriers, they were pinned to walls in different configurations, accompanied by other images, texts, and sometimes objects. Most of the documents were photographic reproductions, which oftentimes covered whole walls, forming rhythmic patterns. Such presentations played with notions of scale, shifting the mode of apprehending documents from an overall composition to a focus on the singularity and readability of a particular archival item, and highlighting the number of documents and the size of the archive. Items were assembled together, interwoven in a complex web of meanings and temporalities, and articulated simultaneously in different languages (Yiddish, Hebrew, German, English). This heterogenous and densely inhabited space can be thought of as mirroring the overpopulated space of the DP camps, where Jewish refugees from many different parts of Europe were forced to consider their pasts and futures all together.

Geographies of archives and commemorations

An attempt to establish a common expression for the Jewish wartime experience was already palpable at the entrance to the exhibition: a large-scale diorama depicting a concentration camp.⁵⁷ Rather than showing a particular location, this scene staged features of camp architecture familiar to all survivors, creating more an impression of space than of a reconstruction, by rendering two barracks and camp streets. In front of the architecture, large metal urns were placed, which, according to both a film recorded at the exhibition and a review published in *Unzer Sztyme*, contained the ashes of victims murdered in Bergen-Belsen.⁵⁸ The whole structure was encircled by barbed wire, turning it into panopticon-like space. Walls behind the model rendered a painted landscape whose color was described in the review as particularly effective, giving the rest of the space a 'K. Z. tone.'⁵⁹ A banner was placed above the model imploring that the deeds of Hitler, referred to as 'Amalek,' be remembered, and

⁵⁶See "Memorial to the victims of the Holocaust at the Ziegenhain DP camp," photograph, 1947, USHMM, Photograph Number 42542; "The Emblem of the Surviving Remnant Hangs Above the Dais at the Third Conference of Liberated Jews in the US Zone of Germany," photograph, 1948, USHMM, Photograph Number 42492.

⁵⁷For a description of the model, see "Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung," pp. 3-4; Rahe, *Die jüdische DP-Zeitung Unzer Sztyme und die Shoa*, p. 86. The model is also recorded in the film *Bergen Belsen DP*.

⁵⁸"Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung," pp. 3-4; *Bergen Belsen DP*, Yad Vashem.

⁵⁹"Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung," pp. 3-4.

placing the Holocaust in relation to earlier historical struggles of Jews.⁶⁰ By presenting a set of elements that by that time were unmistakably associated with the camps, the arrangement created a generalized form detached from site specificity, yet rooted in individual and specific memories, and thus able to be filled with the different recollections of survivors.⁶¹

The banner placed above the model was not the only element towering over the exhibition's space. A sign announcing the exhibition title was raised to the ceiling in the main space, supported by two wooden posts, Stars of David flanking its sides and crowning its top, with its center divided into three panels. On the left panel, there is a representation of a concentration camp with barbed wire, a guard tower, and barracks, behind which stretches an overcast sky; in the middle panel, there is a depiction of a man working in a field; and on the right panel, a vision of the of Israel with palm trees, luscious fields, and Orientalized architecture. Above these images the word *Oysshtelung* (Exhibition) is sign written in Yiddish; below it, *Unzer veg in der frayhayt* (Our Path to Freedom) hangs in cut-out letters. This object towers over the exhibition both physically and symbolically. The metaphors of the past and the present are located on the side panels of the composition; what connects them is an act of labor in the center, which can be understood on its literal level as the agricultural labor often depicted in Zionist literature, this image evokes and at the same time hints at the recent past of the labor camps depicted in the panel alongside. But the composition also carries the potentiality of another reading, a metaphorical one, that refers to the broader meaning of the word cultivation connected to culture, and thus allows the viewer to see the cultural labor of the exhibition itself as creating a bridge between past and present.

The central space on the wall below, located exactly on the axis of this sign, was devoted to the works of the Göttingen Historical Commission, headed by the aforementioned Cwi Horowic.⁶² This part of the exhibition presented the several-hundred-year history of the Jewish community in Göttingen, visualized with a variety of documents, such as copies of legal acts dating from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries, portraits, and a list of Jewish professors from the University of Göttingen, as well as photographs of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.⁶³

Meaning was condensed into a small amount of space. A vitrine, for example, presented materials printed by the historical commission, including a poster advertising an unrealized exhibition in Göttingen's municipal museum, underneath which were notices announcing 'our martyrology' and 'our blood time,' alongside a poster illustrating the commission's collection of different objects of Jewish heritage by Solomon Kronheim⁶⁴ and a notice calling for the gathering of testimonies (Figure 10). This assemblage related directly to the commission's task to 'collect and record,'⁶⁵ but immediately underneath it, another narrative was also given shape. A drawing presents stylized covers

⁶⁰Amalek is a tribe described in the Hebrew Bible as the persistent enemy of Israel.

⁶¹A photograph of a diorama matching the description from *Unzer Sztyme* was published in *Belzen* (Tel Aviv: Irgun Sheerit ha-peletah meha-ezor ha-Briti, 1957), p. 26.

⁶²On Horowic's role in the Historical Commission, see Henkel, "Ich will die Schwere abwaschen ...," pp. 103-106.

⁶³"*Unzer veg in der frayhayt. Barikht fun der oysshtelung*," pp. 3-4; Driever, "Zwi Horowitz – Ein jüdisches Leben für die Erinnerung," pp. 218-220.

⁶⁴Driever, "Zwi Horowitz," p. 214.

⁶⁵Jockusch, "Collect and Record!," Introduction, Kindle.

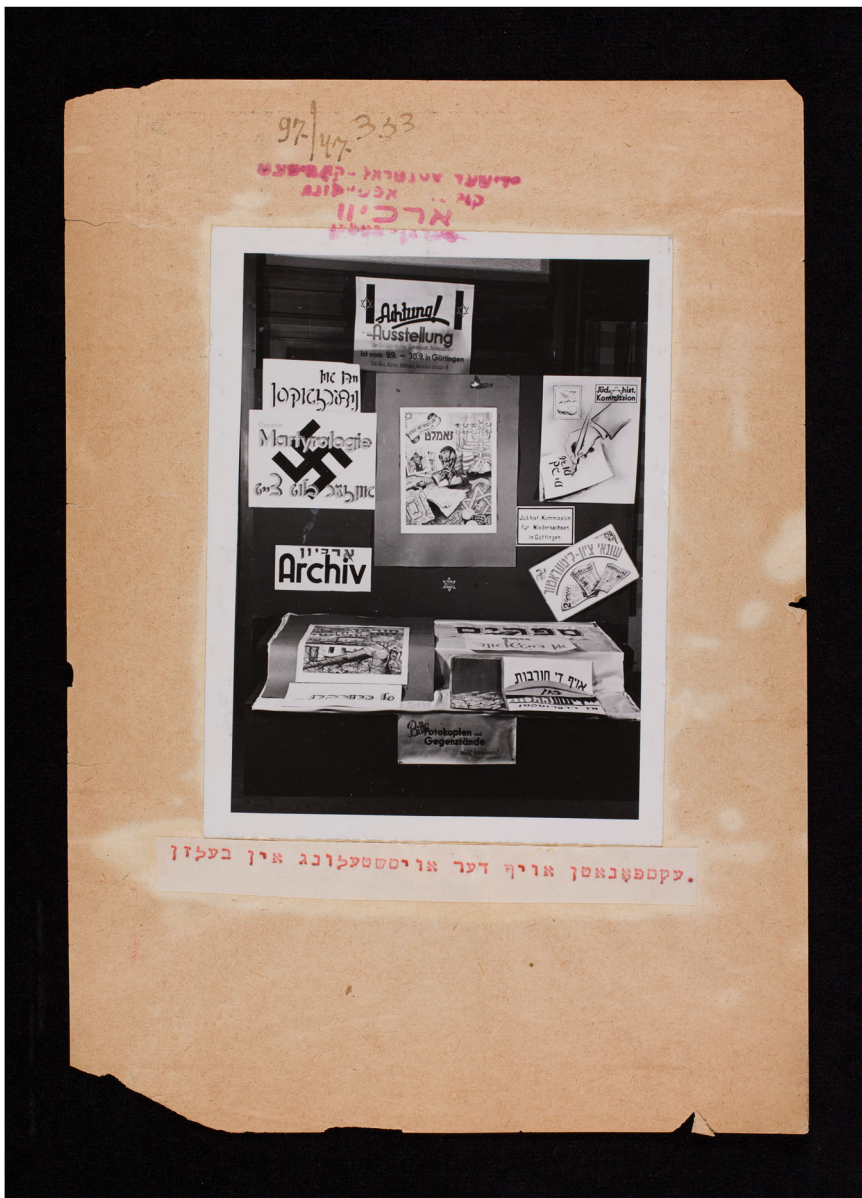


Figure 10. A part of the display of the Historical Commission in Göttingen in the exhibition 'Unzer veg in der frayhayt' (Our Path to Freedom), 1947, black and white photograph, YIVO Archives, inventory number RG 294.5, Folder 47.

of prewar antisemitic publications. Significantly, only one of these, *Der Strummer*, was a German magazine; the other two, *Pod Pręgież* and *2 Grosze*, were nationalist and vehemently antisemitic newspapers published in Poland prior to the Nazi occupation, in the late 1920s and 1930s. To the left of the drawing, in the center of the panel, a singular yellow star has been placed, and to its left a sign saying *Archiv* (Archive). If we read these three objects from right to left, following the Yiddish script, they form a kind of timeline

leading from prewar antisemitism to the persecution of Jews in the Holocaust, documented in the archive made present here. These three elements function as metonymy, exemplifying the highly productive economy of representation at work in the exhibition. On the bottom of the vitrine we find images from the aftermath of the war. A cover of the magazine *Hurban Beit Shlishi* (Destruction of the Third Temple) employs the familiar symbol of a broken tree with a new shoot emerging behind torn barbed wire, its young leaves shaped like a Star of David; to its right an image of destroyed Jewish graves is captioned: ‘*Oyf di hurves fun yidishe kehiles in Niderzaksen*’ (On the Ruins of the Jewish Community in Lower Saxony). All the images shown in this small part of the exhibition reflect the referential character of the general mode of display. However, the central element here, the yellow star, a material artifact of the Holocaust, is what organizes the dynamic of this particular symbolic field, setting the surrounding narratives in motion.

The exhibition space was structured according to the geographic locations of the DP camps and historical commissions of the British Zone, creating a spatial map of Jewish activities. Displays emphasized the commemorative work undertaken by survivors in specific areas, as in the case of the section devoted to the DP Camp in Neustadt Holstein. During the war, one of the sub-camps of Neuengamme concentration camp was located there, and in May 1945, the nearby bay of Lübeck was the site of the tragic sinking of the ocean liner *Cap Arcona* and the cargo ship *Thielbeck* where thousands of concentration camp prisoners were imprisoned by the Nazis. The ships were mistakenly bombed by the Royal Air Force, causing the death of over 7,000 prisoners from Neuengamme and other concentration camps. The exhibit presented photographs documenting the setting up of a monument to the victims of the sinking, emphasizing the efforts of the Jewish DPs. We see a monument with flowers arranged in the shape of the Star of David, and further tableaux showing photographs of the historical Jewish cemetery that served as the burial site for Jewish victims of the sinking.⁶⁶

Another facet of activities in the Neustadt DP camp represented in the exhibition is the vocational classes organized by the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT) schools. Photographs are presented of different workshops and classrooms in which young people could acquire necessary practical skills. Special focus was given to the work of graphic artist Walter Preisser, a teacher of ‘Commercial Art, Drawing, and Lettering.’⁶⁷ Preisser was an acknowledged artist and illustrator who was imprisoned in multiple concentration camps, among them Auschwitz, Gross Rosen, and Neuengamme. In the Neustadt DP camp, he created a series of woodcuts, 12 of which were exhibited in Bergen-Belsen,⁶⁸ that tell the story of his survival in the various concentration camps. The scenes Preisser depicted show the brutality he was subjected to and witnessed, corporeal punishments, and death. They also contain metaphorical representations focused on rendering emotional states. For example, one woodcut depicts a portrait of an inmate with face and torso emerging strikingly

⁶⁶Unzer *Sztyme* described the details of the ceremony at the Jewish cemetery. Hildegard Harck, (ed.), *Unzer Sztyme: jiddische Quellen zur Geschichte der jüdischen Gemeinden in der Britischen Zone 1945–1947* (Kiel: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung Schleswig-Holstein, 2004), p. 68.

⁶⁷ORT Zonal Vocational School, Neustadt Holstein, c. 1948, World ORT Archive.

⁶⁸Some of these prints are currently in the collection of Melbourne Holocaust Museum and the USHMM in Washington. For biographical information, see Jayne Josem, Melbourne Holocaust Museum, “Walter Preisser: The Art of Survival,” YouTube Video, 10:01, May 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9mFG5KwgVg>

from a black background; in the distance, below the figure, is a guard tower and the barbed-wire fence of the concentration camp with a skull and crossbones sign.⁶⁹ The prisoner's eyes are closed and his mouth open in an expression of pain and exhaustion. The image of his body floats towards the barbed wire as if it is about to fly above it, but has stopped just before. The border of the fence remains impenetrable even for this ghostly image of a body struggling to escape its suffering. The style of rendering is evocative of Preisser's earlier graphic work, with bold, decisive lines giving shape to poignant forms reminiscent of the aesthetics of expressionism. In this same cycle, the artist depicted the sinking of *Cap Arcona*, the event clearly recognizable as the date is inscribed in the top part of the image. In this way, Preisser's cycle stands in direct relation to the images displaying the commemorations of the sinking. The presence and framing of these woodcuts were multifaceted, grasping many aspects of the experience of the DPs at once, including their complex relationship to the past, which, rather than being a closed chapter, was constantly reworked, evoked, or simply present. Preisser's artworks narrate a personal story of survival in the concentration camps; they are the account of an eyewitness, both document and artwork. Simultaneously, the exhibition also frames them as an outcome of the ORT schools' activities, as we can assume they were made in one of the ORT workshops he led. In this way, they remain tied to that present moment.

A distinctive feature of this part of the exhibition dedicated to the DP camp in Neustadt and the sinking of *Cap Arcona* is that it exclusively used English, presumably aiming to address British authorities. The exhibition as a whole sometimes employed multiple languages, but certain sections of it, like this one, seem to have been specifically crafted to a particular audience. For example, a part of the exhibition dedicated specifically to German responsibility for the Holocaust only utilized German. This included an area devoted to Bremen, focusing on the events of the 1938 November Pogrom (*Kirstallnacht*), made of different boards testifying to the scale of the anti-Jewish violence and confronting Germans with their culpability. Images of the city on fire represented the events of 1938, and were further contextualized with statistics relating to the Holocaust. One plate stated that in January 1933, the local Jewish community counted 2,000 people, and that in 1947 only about 100 survivors were left. Subsequent panels were styled as graffiti and contained antisemitic slogans, such as '*Juda Verrecke*,' (Perish Judah), part of antisemitic hate speech that appeared in the public space of many cities during the pogrom.⁷⁰ A written commentary further specified how ubiquitous such statements were, clarifying: "This could be read on banners above every entrance to the village. Tombstones, as well as the street pavements ..."⁷¹ (Figure 11)

Further on, the exhibition addressed questions of knowledge and responsibility. A large painting depicts three distressed men hiding their faces behind their hats and the

⁶⁹Walter Preisser, Woodcut print, 1946, 31.75×24.46 cm, paper, ink, USHMM, Accession Number: 2019.523.1, and under reg no 1870–2 in the collection of the Melbourne Holocaust Museum.

⁷⁰The full slogan was "*Deutschland, erwache! Juda, verrecke*," which Fred Bridgman and Edward Timms propose to translate as "Germany, awaken! Jews, Exterminate 'em!" to render visible the genocidal tone of the language. See: Karl Kraus, *The Third Walpurgis Night*, translated by Fred Bridgman and Edward Timms (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2020), p. 259.

⁷¹"So war es in Spruchbänder über jedem Ortseingang zu lesen. Friedhofsteine als Straßenpflaster ...," see figure XX. On the antisemitic slogans, see Victor Klemperer, *The Language of the Third Reich* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 255.



Figure 11. A section of the exhibition ‘Unzer veg in der frayhayt’ (Our Path to Freedom) devoted to Bremen, 1947, black and white photograph, Yad Vashem Photo Archive, Item ID 19683.

broad lapels of their coats, the yellow star sewn on them, their faces buried in shadow, embodying the deprivation of their identities. Above them a large slogan written in German states: ‘The world suspected! And what did the Germans know?’⁷² Listed below were antisemitic regulations, starting with the Nuremberg Laws, enumerating how the persecution of German Jews was legalized and how this fact, as well as widespread anti-Jewish violence, were visible and known to non-Jewish Germans. It was a shared conviction among *She’erith Hapleithah* that Germans were collectively guilty because they knew the consequences of the Third Reich’s antisemitic policy. As observed by Zeev W. Mankowitz, such collective attribution of guilt and emphasis on the responsibility of ordinary Germans was a unique perspective at that time, one that amplified survivors’ concrete political demands for retribution and compensation.⁷³ In many contemporaneous exhibitions dedicated to Nazi crimes, the perpetrators were described in rather unrealistic categories such as ‘barbarians’ or ‘sadistic’ embodiments of evil. The approach of the Bergen-Belsen exhibition challenged the positions of ordinary people, posing questions about individual and collective responsibility.

The descriptions here hardly exhaust the entirety of what was shown at Bergen-Belsen, but even this necessarily fragmentary and belated visit to the exhibition shows how

⁷²“Die Welt ahnte es! Was wüßten die Deutschen?” See Bergen Belsen, Germany, “An exhibit in the DP camp prepared for the Second Congress of Liberated Jews,” 1947, photograph, 1947, YVA, Item ID 20671.

⁷³Zeev W. Mankowitz, *Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 226-235.

complex an undertaking it was. Although the exhibition was not specifically dedicated to the memory and the history of the Holocaust – on the contrary, its main intention was to illustrate the rebirth of life after the war – the past was an ever-present point of reference, and remained operative in framing the current activities. Thus, creating a narrative about the past was a question not only of history, but also of identity. The exhibition was a dynamic medium that allowed for multiple manifestations of the traumatic past, simultaneously presented as testimony, as objects of mourning and commemoration, and finally as accusations. In his *Unzer Sztyme* article, the reviewer of the exhibition strongly emphasized how impressive the visual richness of the display was, as well as the aesthetic arrangement of so many documents, artworks, posters, and diagrams.⁷⁴ It is hard to imagine, from our contemporary perspective, that documents relating to the Holocaust could share the same exhibition space as clothes created in the tailoring workshops of a DP camp. However, the uniqueness of this exhibition was that it created a space in which these two fields of activity both belonged and placed them in a mutual relationship.

Conclusions

Both exhibitions, in the former camp Majdanek and in the DP camp in Bergen-Belsen, displayed the heterogeneity of Holocaust memory immediately after the war and exposed a great need to narrativize the tragic past. The exhibitions operated in different contexts; while the pavilion in Majdanek created a space for mourning remembrance of the Jewish victims on the site of the Holocaust, the exhibition in Bergen-Belsen envisaged a future for Jewish people in its aftermath. The medium of an exhibition was particularly suited to creating a multifaceted expression of memory, allowing elements of art, documentation, and the daily lives of survivors to be combined into a narrative that opened up to the past as well as the present and the future.

After the war in Europe, governments in most countries organized exhibitions dedicated to Nazi war crimes, the most famous example being the 1945 French exhibition ‘Crimes Hitlériens.’ These exhibitions presented the public with documents of war crimes, as well as images of the liberation of concentration camps and Nazi trials, and delineated the past of the war and occupation from the present of a supposedly postwar Europe, demarcating a symbolic line between ‘then’ and ‘now.’⁷⁵ Holocaust exhibitions organized by Jewish survivors postulated different chrono-politics, one in which the past remained open, antisemitism continued to affect and threaten the life of Jewish people, and the pain of the past permeated the present.⁷⁶

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

⁷⁴Kielboń and Balawejder, *Państwowe Muzeum na Majdanku*, pp. 5, 6.

⁷⁵On the critical discussion around the notion of “postwar Europe,” see Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, (eds.) *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (Munich: Haus der Kunst, 2016). See also Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 1–16.

⁷⁶I would like to thank Alfred Landecker Foundation for supporting my research as well as Rachel Perry and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable input.

Notes on contributor

Dr. Agata Pietrasik is an art historian, currently the Alfred Landecker Lecturer at Freie Universität, Berlin. In her research, she focuses on the representations and memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War in the visual arts and culture of mid-twentieth century Europe. She graduated from the Institute of Art History at the University of Warsaw and Freie Universität in Berlin. Her book, *Art in a Disruptive World. Poland, 1939-1949*, was published by the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw and the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 2021, with her research supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). She was a postdoctoral researcher at the German Center for Art History in Paris, a visiting scholar at Institut national d'histoire de l'art in Paris, and a Getty/ACLS postdoctoral Fellow in Art History.