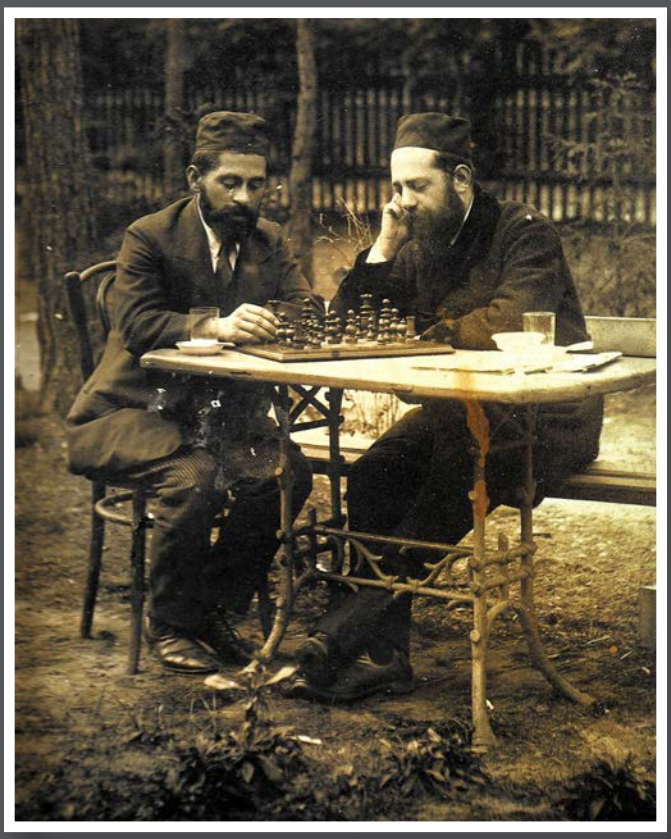
And I still see their faces

Images of Polish Jews



Museum of Jewish History

From 27 January to 22 May 2016

An exhibition based on an initiative from Gołda Tencer, president of the Shalom Foundation Warsaw, presented in Girona in collaboration with the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Barcelona and the Museum of Jewish History



The exhibition "And I still see their faces. Images of Polish Jews" ensued from an initiative of the Shalom Foundation, which, in 1994, had launched an international call for the donation of photographs of Polish Jews. At that moment –almost fifty years after the end of World War II–, there were many who had their doubts regarding the viability of this project. Nevertheless, photographs began to arrive from all over Poland, as well as from the remotest spots around the world. Many photographs were donated by Polish Jews established in different parts of the world –relations of Holocaust victims living in Israel, Venezuela, Brazil, the USA, Italy, Argentina, or Canada–, who had taken with them these cut-outs from the past. Some of these photographs had been guarded as precious mementoes, others had been stowed away and forgotten in attics and basements.

This exhibition can be read as a lament for a world that has disappeared, and to which we can only return by looking at old photographs. Many museums in different parts of the world are keeping photographs of famous Polish Jews: musicians, painters and writers. But the memory of ordinary people, generally ignored by history, has been missing. With this show, the Shalom Foundation has retrieved their memory. This way, the names of all these people have become known, and they are now a part of the collective memory of Europe.

"Not only those who have saved a life are righteous. Also those who have contributed to the preservation of memory deserve this epithet".

And these are precisely those who have made possible this exhibition.

For several centuries, Polish history has been intertwined with the vicissitudes of the Jewish people. It is quite probable that Jewish merchants had already been visiting the territories inhabited by Poles before the creation of a Polish state towards the end of the 10th century, while travelling on their commercial routes which took them from Western Europe through the current Ukraine to Byzantium and the Muslim countries. The first permanent settlements of Jewish communities were established in the 11th century in Krakow and other cities. Poland offered Jews a refuge from the prosecutions they were suffering in Western Europe between the 11th and 13th century during the medieval crusades, and also in the aftermath of the so-called Black Death plague in the second half of the 14th century. The Polish kings and princes protected the Jewish settlers, guaranteeing them religious liberty and the right to carry out economic activities, mainly in the field of commerce and credit, which the own national merchant class had only scarcely developed.



Due to the nature of their economic activities the Jewish people mainly established themselves in the cities. There they formed compact centres (streets or whole boroughs), with all the institutions and establishments necessary for their community life: synagogues, schools, ritual baths, kosher butchers, bakeries or cemeteries. Life in these centres was managed by the Jewish communities themselves, and they not only attended the religious needs of their members, but they also took responsibility of the issues of teaching, charity and arbitration in all kinds of internal disputes. Towards the end of the Medieval Age Poland was the European country which offered most security to the Jewish people, and after their expulsion from Spain in 1492 –with the ensuing decline of the nucleus of Hebrew culture in Andalusia–, it became one of the main destinations of the Diaspora.





From the 16th century on, the Jewish population of Poland was rapidly growing, and gave origin to the centre of religious and cultural life of the Ashkenazim –Jews of German origin–, which was highly regarded everywhere in Europe. The Ashkenazim, unlike the Sephardim originating from Spain, spoke a German dialect called Yiddish, and they had their own religious rules and rites.

Even though certain anti-Semitic attitudes started to emerge during this period, the Polish Jews managed to consolidate an ample framework of liberties and autonomy. Foundations for the development of Jewish science had been laid by the Talmud scholars of the 16th century, who had founded the Yeshiva (Talmudic schools) of Krakow and Lublin. The authority of these high-level academic institutions reached as far as Germany, Bohemia and Italy. On the other hand, an indication of the increasing importance of the "Polish Diaspora" can be found in the development of autonomous Jewish institutions, which began between the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century. Besides the local Jewish communities, which acted as local administration, a central institution emerged: the Jewish Assembly. It governed, on one hand, the internal running of the Jewish population in Poland, and, on the other hand, it represented this population before the Polish State authorities. The institution as such was unique in the whole of Europe.



From the second half of the 18th century on, the stable existence of the Polish Jews, faithful to their religion, was shaken by sudden changes. In the first place, a new religious movement based on mysticism emerged, the Hasidic Judaism, which over time contributed to the growing isolation of the Jewish people from the rest of the society. Secondly, the European Enlightenment brought up ideas of equality of rights, leading towards the elimination of socio-cultural barriers between Jews and Christians. These new religious and ideological tendencies were developed in the framework of completely changed political circumstances after the collapse of the Polish state in 1795 and the partition of its territories among the three neighbouring powers Russia, Prussia and Austria. Since policies regarding Jews were different in each of these countries, the result of these new tendencies –modernisation and assimilation on one side, and the wish to preserve the traditional religious model on the other–, also was different in each country. Throughout the 20th century, the Jewish population experienced an ever-increasing internal diversification: a religious shop-keeper from a small village under Russian rule, speaking Yiddish, had less and less in common with a Jewish businessman from the Prussian-dominated part, educated and secularized, speaking German and aspiring to become a part of the elite.





The rise of anti-Semitism from the end of the 19th century on –not only in Polish territories, but also in the rest of Europe–, led to the ideas of equality of rights and the tendencies of assimilation of the Jewish people being questioned, and investigation into socio-political measures to that end was given up. In those times, hundred thousands of Jews, fleeing anti-Semitism and overpopulation, abandoned Poland and emigrated to ever more prosperous America. A part of these Jewish people joined



different left-wing movements, which saw anti-Semitism as an expression of class conflict, and were convinced that anti-Semitic attitudes would disappear in a socially more just society. There was also a large group of Jewish people who responded to the appeal made by Theodor Herzl, who promoted the creation of an Israeli state as a necessary condition for the future of the Jewish people. The Zionist movement found many followers in the Polish territories, the most committed of whom emigrated to Palestine in order to work on the construction of the state of Israel, even though most of them only intended to preserve their way of life based on religious observation, such as they were used to up to then.

When Poland regained independence in 1918 after more than a hundred years of subjugation, there were some three million Jewish people within its borders. The majority of these Jews were backing the new state, since they believed the future Poland to be a democratic country, where they would be able to live free of prosecution. Their hopes were only partly fulfilled. During the time between the two wars, the Jewish people enjoyed considerable liberty to cultivate their own culture and conduct their political affairs.

However, the rise of nationalist and right-wing ideologies in many European countries, such as Germany, Spain and Poland, brought an escalation of anti-Semitic attitudes from the second half of the 1930's on.





The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany in September 1939 marked the beginning of the Holocaust. The first measure of the German occupation forces was to isolate the Jewish people from the rest of Polish society. They confined them to ghettoes and subjected them to the terror of forced labour, first, and then proceeded to their systematic annihilation in extermination camps such as Auschwitz, Treblinka, Bećřec, Sobibór and others. The response of the Poles to the Holocaust was varied: some of them were helping the Jewish people, risking their own lives; others, moved by greed for profit or anti-Semitic feelings, held with the Germans, whereas the majority of Poles, also prosecuted by the Nazis themselves, just remained indifferent in the face of the tragic deaths of the Jewish people. During the Second World War, approximately ninety percent of the Polish Jews died, and with them the culture they had created and represented.

The effects of the extermination of the Jewish people carried out by the Germans in Polish territory, as well as the institutional anti-Semitism of post-war Communist Poland, forced most surviving Jews to leave the country between 1946 and 1968 in successive waves of emigration. The few who chose to stay in Poland were not allowed to express or to develop their Jewish identity until the fall of Communism in 1989, when the dialogue between Poles and Jews was taken up again, just like the reconstruction of Jewish life in democratic Poland.

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