;Living History – Between Threat and Challenge

The collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s had the side effect of reconnecting the Western Jewish world and the cities and towns of Eastern Europe. Nearly overnight, the obscure ideas of Krakow, Vilna, Kuraniec, Volozhin and Odessa had become an attainable reality. For the first time in fifty years one could stroll down the alleys of the town, visit the old synagogue, frequent the ancient cemetery, roam the local market and be united with the memory of holocaust victims in different locations, from Babi Yar in Kiev to the Ninth Fort in Kaunas. This renewed acquaintence had awakened dormant longing and ignited the imagination of tens of thousands of Jews worldwide, whose heritage was rooted in these regions. In just one decade, the slow trickle of visitors that began in the early 1990s had become a steady stream numbering tens of thousands of visitors.

Many of these visitors traverse Eastern Europe in search of their second, other homeland which in many cases is perceived as the authentic one, bringing into completion the “two-homeland experience”, in the words of Kaunas-born poetess Leah Goldberg. Yet oftentimes this search results in frustration and disappointment born of the gap between the historic reality – true or imagined – that had formed in their collective mind, based on the narrative they had been exposed to in the past, and the current historic reality that in many cases ends up being miles away from their expectations. The lack of historic elements so deeply implemented in their consciousness, such as the derelict buildings that had been replaced by post-WWII apartment blocks, or the pastoral town atmosphere replaced by modern hustle and bustle, only increase the sense of frustration and missed opportunity. The realization that “historic life” and the opportunity to relive the past are no longer possible is irrationally pushed away by the desire to feel, taste, smell and sense the world that was and no longer is. Undoubtedly, the tragic and sudden end of this historic existence bears considerable influence on this irrational process.

Such a reality poses quite a challenge to contemporary Jewish communities in Eastern Europe and local and central government. The Jewish communities exist in a ceaseless tension between past and present, and the steady stream of visitors forms a virtual bridge between them and the contemporary Jewish world while contributing to their establishment as torchbearers of the one that was destroyed. A response to such longing is, in fact, an existential need. As for governmental bodies, they recognize the immense touristic potential hidden in this phenomenon, as well as the associated economic opportunities. At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the problematic tension of trying to maintain or reproduce historic elements (synagogues, schools, etc.) while still responding to the modern needs for urban and public development, not to mention that oftentimes the prevailing narrative of the Jewish preservation initiative contradicts local historic narrative, whether national or religious, or both.

Nevertheless, even when both the Jewish community and the government are willing to create areas of “living history”, there still remains the question of how these elements are to be preserved or presented. In other words – just how much can the past be “resuscitated” by creating defined areas that respond to this need for “living history”. Those who travel to Eastern Europe in hopes of experiencing this remembered reality are not content with a museum-like exhibit, certainly not when modern museums throughout South America, Europe, South Africa, Australia and Israel offer vast collections in accessible museums. Moreover, the internet provides numerous opportunities to virtually visit the Jewish neighborhoods of days past. Thus it is clear that an actual visit to the realm of real memory must provide a “living history” experience that is as true to reality as possible, and in the case of memorial sites – an experience of utter destruction, finality, imagined though it may be. One expects to experience these emotions so strongly that many visitors are not content with commemorative models such as the German (and lately, cross-European) Stolpertein project, or commemorative plaques stationed at intersections or affixed to homes built on the ruins of the old Jewish quarter.

One proposed, and generally accepted, solution for the aforementioned dilemmas takes the focus away from the greater public sphere and toward specific elements, typically a synagogue or cemetery, but also other public buildings such as Yeshivas. Both cases involve spaces that are “Jewish” by definition, the design of which as “living history” (a problematic term as far as cemeteries go…) is relatively simple. For one, the fact that these areas are perceived as essentially “Jewish” by the majority of society helps preserve them as such, and at the same time decreases the potential tension buried in the aforementioned narratives. Second, given that these are defined compounds decreases chances of a “Jewification”, virtual though it may be, of the urban space, perceived as a possible result of attempted formation of “living history” in the public sphere. Third, in both instances – synagogue and cemetery – the visitor crosses a virtual border between the public space and the “Jewish” one, embracing a sense of time-travel from present to past. Fourth, in both of these locations the visitor is fully immersed in what he perceives as a “Jewish sphere” which evokes a sense of home, and all that it entails. Given these reasons, the interaction between time and space – imagined dimensions though they may be – provides an opportunity to create a sense of “living history” in predefined spaces.

Nevertheless, as time passes it appears that even this solution is insufficient in addressing the expectations of many “remembrance travelers”. Due to the variety of visual, literary, and documentary aids available to the potential visitor, namely via the internet, a visitor can recreate (to a considerable degree of authenticity) the urban-social reality of Jewish society in the cities and towns of Eastern Europe; in other words, to “live in history”. There are two fundamental ramifications to this process. One, that within the reconstruction of space, the visitor soon discovers that the synagogue is but one component in the aforementioned reality, and – from a personal perspective – at times even a negligible one. Two, he often pays little attention to the synagogue, the second component which acts as a tangible manifestation of the world that once was. This could be attributed to the decrepit state of most cemeteries, as well as to the fact that many places have repurposed Jewish tombstones, decreases the chances of a visitor finding the desired burial place of a relative.

As a result, we see the rise of several new trends intended to propose alternative models of “life in history” in cities and towns across Eastern Europe. This lecture will explore the reasoning behind such possible models, how they respond to the array of the aforementioned issues and the probability of their implementation.