

Lublin, February 10, 2022

Ladies and Gentlemen / Dear Readers,

In 2022 the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre is planning a series of activities (artistic, educational and academic) designed to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the beginning of “Operation Reinhard”. Particular significance will be given to the Mystery of Memory: *Following the Traces of “Operation Reinhard”. Grieving*. The organization of the Mystery will be the most important event in the history of the Grodzka Gate Centre which is also celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. We have had to come a long way in order to arrive at this point...

At the beginning of the 1990s the Grodzka Gate – being the seat of the NN Theatre – has entered the path to becoming a symbolic “Ark of Memory”, salvaging the dying memory of the Jewish Town. By means of searching for and preserving everything that managed to survive – photographs, recollections, objects – we salvaged the memory of the Jewish people who had once lived here.

The creators of this “Ark” are the children of the generation born on the smouldering cinders left by the ravages of World War II. We grew up next to the people who came out of the flames of war scarred but alive. For a very long time we were unaware that the wartime wasteland was hiding the ashes of the murdered and the burnt, or that surviving witnesses to the Holocaust were still alive. Indeed, those were the last moments we had to record their stories on time. And that was exactly what we set out to do.

The generations that follow will come to know only us – the people who were given the chance to meet and talk to the Holocaust survivors. We have become the last link between them and the ones who will find out about what happened here only from books, films, or the Internet.

It is for this reason that we are particularly burdened with the responsibility for passing on the memory of the Holocaust victims to the future generation. We have concluded that our message will be encapsulated in the idea of creating the Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews here in Lublin, its symbolic foundation stone being the Mystery: *Following the Traces of “Operation Reinhard”. Grieving*.

Please find the following three texts attached to this letter:

1. “Operation Reinhard”
2. *Following the Traces of “Operation Reinhard”. Grieving*
3. Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews

Following the Traces of “Operation Reinhard”. Grieving.

On March 16, 2022, exactly 80 years after the first transport with Jews had left Lublin for the death camp in Bełżec as part of the so-called “Operation Reinhard”, we will set off on a virtual journey through time to the sites connected with this operation. Our journey will last for an uninterrupted 19 months (as long as the operation itself had lasted). We will finish on November 3–4, 2023 – 80 years after the perpetrators of the Holocaust shot 42,000 Jews in a mass execution referred to as “Operation Erntefest”. Our journey will also serve as a symbolic Mystery of Memory – grieving the Jews murdered during the Nazi operation. We will visit the places where soil – in the words of Czesław Miłosz – has been “sullied, blood-stained, desecrated”. It is in reference to this image that Jan Błoński insists that:

[...] memory, collective consciousness – cannot forget this bloody and hideous defilement. It cannot pretend that it never occurred. [...] The desecration of Polish soil occurred and we have not yet discharged our duty of seeking expiation. In this graveyard, the only way to achieve this is to face up to our duty of viewing our past truthfully.

The crucial and most evocative testimony of the Holocaust is derived from the accounts of its witnesses recorded while the Shoah was still taking place. The Word has become the Ark salvaging the memory of the murdered Jews.

Jacek Leociak:

The decision to put things down on paper, made by the authors writing in the times of the Holocaust, can be interpreted in the categories of the Biblical formula to bear witness. [...] Thus, a text created in the face of the Holocaust, testifying to it, inevitably adheres to the Biblical paradigm. [...] The act of writing, irrespective of the catastrophic awareness many of the authors had, would become a form of resistance to the Holocaust, an act of faith in a better future world, an act of hope in the next generations' finding out about it, understanding it, judging it and providing redress. Therefore, not only the content of their writing is significant, but also the very fact that they have decided to write in the first place.

This is precisely why – in a sense – we will take a journey through the depths of the witnesses' words. Using these words to recount the events which took place during the murderous “Operation Reinhard” – including remembering the names and lives of the victims – will give form to the Mystery of Memory – being the act of Grieving over their fate. One of the Holocaust survivors, Ida Glickstein, puts it in the following way:

I list names of the murdered, because maybe it is the only gravestone they will get, because there is no one left of their families who would mourn their premature deaths.

We will “weave” the story of “Operation Reinhard” with the symbolic “threads” of the fates of individual people – those who were murdered and those who survived. Every now and then each “thread” will appear on the surface of ongoing events. Most of the “threads” break off at a certain point (usually in a death camp); others lead us to the very end of the war when a particular Survivor shares their story.

Various archival sources and survivor accounts allow us to get to know many of the Holocaust victims' names. Still, most of them remain anonymous – we know nothing about their fate.

Martin Pollack:

A haunting question always lingers – who were the people buried here, on this meadow, in that forest and whose remains were only found so many years later. What was their story? Where did they come from? Were they alone in the moment of their cruel death or were they accompanied by their relatives, their loved ones, parents, siblings, friends, other inhabitants of their villages or shtetls. [...] Most often [...] we are only in possession of an inaccurate number of victims and in many cases even that remains a mystery. A hundred, two hundred, a

thousand, several thousand [...] 'And it will never change – when writing of the Holocaust we will be forever forced to repeat huge numbers, never able to lay each individual victim to their rest'¹.

This is why it is of such great importance to keep searching for the most minute traces of someone's existence. It sometimes happens that witness accounts (apart from every victim mentioned by name) contain fragments of particular significance – brief references to unnamed people (NN) and isolated events connected with their lives. They never form a complete story. They are a barely visible trace of someone's existence. Often the only remaining one.

Nameless stories bear a certain degree of vulnerability. They are most prone to being forgotten. Since they are barely visible – almost unnoticeable – they call on us for particular attention.

The *Mystery Following the Traces of "Operation Reinhard"* will also be designed as a symbolic continuation of the mission undertaken by the founders of the Ringelblum Archive, which was created during the war with a view to conveying to the world both the description of the Holocaust, as well as preserving the memory of the murdered people. In spite of the years dividing us from the Shoah, despite all the available information on what had taken place, there are still plenty of people who do not know much about the Holocaust.

Let us remember that the Ringelblum Archive survived because it was buried in the ground. One of the people hiding it also enclosed their last will, stating among other things:

We have buried in the ground the things we were not able to shout out to the world [...] May this treasure end up in the right hands, may it see better times, may it alert the world which got lost in the 20th century [...]

Our *Mystery* will thus be an attempt at reminding everyone of our duty to execute this will.

In the course of the *Mystery's* duration we will regularly update a particular kind of "Journey log". Every day a new entry will be published on our website, disclosing consecutive installments of the story recounted by witnesses. These will cover the events which took place on the exact day and in the exact location 80 years ago – while "Operation Reinhard" was still underway. In this manner, the "Journey log" will gradually compose a story of the Holocaust of Polish Jews. It will be accompanied by contemporary accounts referring to how – and even whether – the events are still remembered by the present-day inhabitants of the towns and villages affected by "Operation Reinhard" and what they mean to them today.

In the course of the *Mystery of Memory* the "Journey log" is to be created in the Grodzka Gate. After all, its location within the space of the city is of great symbolic importance to the *Mystery* itself. The Gate is situated between two significant sites – the first being the gathering point from which groups of Jews were escorted to the railway platform near the municipal slaughterhouse in order to be transported to the death camp. The second location is where the first testimonies of Holocaust survivors were recorded after the liberation of Lublin in July 1944.

The *Mystery Following the Traces of "Operation Reinhard"*. *Grieving* is to be a symbolic event leading to the creation of the Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews (located in Lublin).

¹ Martin Pollack, *Skazone krajobrazy*, Wołowiec 2014, pp. 63–64; internal quotation Jan Tomasz Gross, Irena Grudzińska Gross, *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o tym co się działo na obrzeżach Zagłady Żydów*, Kraków 2011, p. 109.

“Operation Reinhard”

“Operation Reinhard” commenced in Lublin on March 16, 1942. Its intention was the destruction of the entire Jewish population of the General Government. It was coordinated by the Lublin District SS and police chief, Odilo Globocnik, and its headquarters was situated in Lublin. Up until this point in history all of the mass executions ever carried out proceeded according to a similar pattern – the perpetrators came to seek out their victims. The situation was similar in the Soviet territories which were being occupied by the Nazis for several months – Jews were shot in mass executions (Holocaust by bullets).

However, a fundamental change to the proceedings was introduced during “Operation Reinhard”. It was the victims that were brought to specially appointed locations – death camps – to be murdered. Three such death camps – in Belżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka – were designed, constructed and hidden in remote areas entirely for the purposes of “Operation Reinhard”. For some time KL Majdanek also served the function of a death camp. All of the above required the perpetrators to operate on a much higher organizational and technical level. Among others things, it necessitated the relocation of hundreds of thousands of people from their home communities to towns and villages situated in the vicinity of railway stations from which they were transported to the various death camps.

This is why the visual characteristic of “Operation Reinhard” were the columns of Jews treading the roads of the General Government – amounting to hundreds or several thousand people at a time, often escorted by uniformed guards. Jews had to walk or were taken by carts to one destination – the nearest railway station (or platform) to be taken by train to the death camps.

The logistics of the operation were dictated by the accessibility of railway tracks and the whereabouts of railway stations. Trains, similar to conveyor belts, connected locations in which Jews were being concentrated with the very places where they would be murdered on an industrial level with the use of gas chambers. Taking advantage of the railway system as an efficient means of mass transportation in the territory of the General Government (which included five administrative zones: Warsaw, Lublin, Radom, Kraków, and Galicia Districts), the Nazis managed to organize an industrial-scale murder machine.

The first Jewish transport, with 1,600 people to be sent to the Belżec death camp as part of “Operation Reinhard”, departed from Lublin at night on March 16, 1942. It marked the beginning of an entirely new chapter in the history of mass murder.

The last part of the operation, referred to as “Operation Erntefest” (“Harvest Festival”), was carried out on November 3 and 4, 1943. It was during the “Erntefest” that more than 42,000 Jews were shot at the Majdanek concentration camp and the labour camps in Trawniki and Poniatowa. “Operation Erntefest” was the biggest single mass shooting carried out during World War II.

Thus, the wave of atrocity which started in Lublin on March 16, 1942, rolled across the entire GG to return to its origin – Lublin – after 19 months. It is here that, as part of “Operation Reinhard”, the ultimate act of the Holocaust had taken place. In the course of these 19 months large and small communities of Polish Jews were being liquidated daily. Jews who remained in hiding were regularly hunted down. During this period, the Nazis murdered approximately two million Jews – mainly Polish citizens, but also Jews from other European countries.

This is all very much reflected in the statistical data cited by the historian, David Silberklang:

In January 1942, according to the data prepared for the Wannsee Conference, the Nazis estimated that there were 2,284,000 Jews in the Generalgouvernement (GG) in Poland. One year later, according to SS statistician Dr. Richard Korherr, fewer than 298,000 were still alive. [...] These statistics take on even more astonishing proportions considering the fact that the murder began only in mid-March of that year. Thus, nearly two million Jews had been murdered in this part of Poland in nine and a half months within the framework of “Operation Reinhard.”

The culminating point of the murder of Jews, perpetrated as part of “Operation Reinhard”, took place between the end of July and the beginning of November 1942 when within only a hundred days Germans killed approximately 1,4 million Jews. Nearly 1,1 million people were murdered in the gas chambers at the Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka death camps, and almost 300,000 were shot. Thus, during “Operation Reinhard”, the Germans managed to murder close to ¼ of all Holocaust victims within three months (August–September–October).

The three-month culmination of the mass murder of Jews was connected mainly with the order given by Himmler on July 19, 1942, in Lublin. It was then that Himmler indicated the ultimate deadline – December 31, 1942 – by which all Jews inhabiting the General Government were to be killed. The order became a turning point as far as the total character of the Holocaust was concerned. From that moment on, only a small number of essential Jewish forced labourers were to be spared. It needs to be added that the plunder of Jewish property was an integral part of “Operation Reinhard” and the central warehouses containing the items stolen from the victims during the operation were situated in Lublin.

David Silberklang emphasizes that Lublin was central to organizing and carrying out the murder of Jews:

The murder of most of Polish Jewry was planned in Lublin, and much of it was coordinated there. [...] Globocnik’s influence was based to a great degree on his close personal relationship with Himmler, and perhaps this was one of the reasons that Himmler entrusted him with a mission as important as “Operation Reinhard.” The location of the headquarters of “Operation Reinhard” in Lublin is also testimony to its centrality. Two death camps, Bełżec and Sobibór, were constructed in this district, and a third, Treblinka, also under “Reinhard” command, was built in the northern part of the Warsaw District. In addition, over a long period of time, Globocnik partially controlled the Majdanek camp adjacent to Lublin, as well as dozens of forced-labor camps, and a rather significant economic empire.

“Operation Reinhard” was an element of the most extensive Nazi plan – implemented in the spring of 1942 – aimed at the complete murder of European Jewry. It was carried out in the name of racial ideology, in line with which all Jews were to be killed. To realize the plan, the state (German Reich) – supported by a large proportion of German citizens – employed all of the power it had at its disposal.

Soon, the murder of Jews was symbolized by the camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and for most people the very association evoked by its name became the embodiment of the entirety of the Holocaust experience. Naturally, such an image of the Shoah is by far incomplete.

Nikolaus Wachsmann:

The reason for it was partly the fact that Auschwitz operated considerably longer than other extermination centres. By late spring of 1944, when the three death camps in the General Government had been long closed, Auschwitz was only reaching the peak of its murderous capacity. And when the Red Army had finally liberated the camp in January 1945, a large part of the murder infrastructure was preserved intact, contrary to Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka where the traces of genocide have been meticulously erased. It is one of the reasons why we know much more about Auschwitz than the other death camps. Another reason is the abundance of testimonies. Tens of thousands of Auschwitz prisoners survived the war and many shared their stories.

Meanwhile, there were practically no survivors from the other camps since they functioned almost entirely as extermination centres: only three survivors provided testimony on the death camp in Bełżec².

² Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Historia nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych*, Warszawa 2020, pp. 326–327.

Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews

The history of the Holocaust of Polish Jews has still been insufficiently uncovered and recounted, even though it regards nearly a half of the total number of Holocaust victims. This history is connected with Lublin and the Lublin region in a most particular way. It was from Lublin that the first transport of Jews bound for Bełżec set off on the night of March 16, 1942, marking the beginning of an act of genocide carried out on an industrial scale – as part of “Operation Reinhard” – in the death camps of Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. When the operation was finally completed in November 1943 it cost the lives of more than two million Jews from the territories of the General Government and Bezirk Białystok. Their murder was organized by individuals from the Lublin headquarters of “Operation Reinhard” (“Einsatzstab Reinhard”) under the command of Odilo Globocnik. The perpetrators planned to obliterate the memory of their mass-murdered victims, rendering them anonymous and deprived of history in order to erase forever their every living trace.

David Silberklang:

The absolute finality of Bełżec and of the other “Operation Reinhard” death camps — Sobibór and Treblinka — is one of the major reasons that their awesome evil power did not assume the symbolic proportions of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Remote from the public eye and from eyewitness testimony, and remote in time and place from the liberation, none of the three death camps could be seen, photographed, or immediately investigated by the liberators. And even if these camps had been reached by liberators, there were few survivors to tell the story. As a result, these camps and the operation they served have until recently also remained far from the center of popular consciousness and scholarly interest. [...]

In fact, Bełżec was the only one of the death camps in which the assigned tasks were actually completed and therefore was shut down by the Nazis. This in itself symbolizes what the Nazis had intended for the “Final Solution.” However, relatively little is known about this camp, which ceased operations and was dismantled nearly two years prior to the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

This explains why among all the death centres it was Auschwitz-Birkenau to have become the embodiment of the Holocaust in the collective imagination. However, such a picture of the Shoah is definitely incomplete. Almost twice as many Jews lost their lives in the General Government than in Auschwitz-Birkenau alone. Unfortunately, the fate of these victims is still overshadowed. Obviously we must never forget about Auschwitz, but it is of great importance that the full view of the Holocaust includes other elements – such as “Operation Reinhard” – too. Hence the need to create the Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews in Lublin.

Lublin, as a location for the Museum, is also significant for one other reason. It was here that mere weeks after the city had been liberated – on August 29, 1944 – the Committee for the History of Jews was established, soon renamed as the Central Jewish Historical Commission. One of its main goals was to collect the testimonies of the Jewish Holocaust survivors. The Commission operated in Lublin until March 1945 when it was transferred to Łódź. Thanks to its work dozens of survivor accounts were recorded in this period.

Therefore, the city which had seen both the beginning and end of the murderous “Operation Reinhard”, commenced with the process of collecting testimonies from Holocaust survivors too. It was in Lublin that – for the first time in history – Holocaust survivor accounts were being officially recorded in accordance with the first guidelines.

Years later the “Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre” Centre, founded in Lublin in the 1990s, became one of the continuators of this endeavour, aimed at salvaging the memory of the murdered Jews. After many

years of active work, its creators decided that their message for the future generations should come in the form of an idea to establish the Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews here – in Lublin.

Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews

We live in the times of globalisation which forces every community, along with each individual person, to face weighty questions regarding the future – questions of a practical, as well as ethical and existential nature. One such question is of an absolutely fundamental and radical character: What do we exist for as a community? What do we want to give the World to make it a better place? Our intimate experience of discovering and salvaging the memory of the Jewish inhabitants of Lublin demonstrates how deeply the life of each community is connected with remembering the past.

The dramatic history of Lublin has bound us forever with the universal problem of memory which is still relevant today – not only in relation to our city but to the whole world. Lublin should show the world that it is possible to transform into a place of “good memory”, a place which is capable of facing its past in a wise, responsible and empathetic way. This is precisely why we are in such need of the Museum of the Holocaust of Polish Jews.

The work performed in Lublin in the autumn of 1944 by the Central Jewish Historical Commission can be regarded as the symbolic origin of the Museum. In a deeply significant sense it was the Commission that provided⁵ the groundwork for its creation.

The Museum will house the accounts of Holocaust survivors and its internal space will form a great and unique Storehouse of Memory.