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us, so we took a number of steps to assure the integrity of the review process. The guest editor's critical article on JMTC went through two rounds of peer review, while the article on POLIN was clearly labeled as a voice from within the museum.

We also realized that, although the special edition included five first-hand scholarly voices representing the JMTC, none of them was truly working from the inside. Therefore, in addition to the letters to the Editors, we are excited to publish an essay by Borukh Gorin, the Chair of the executive committee that oversees the JMTC's operations. With his voice from inside the museum, along with two scholarly essays and five voices from the academic advisory committee already published, readers of *East European Jewish Affairs* will have a comprehensive view of one of the most important Jewish institutions in post-Communist Europe. Meanwhile, we look forward to having the special edition spark a conversation that will lead to broader scholarship about POLIN and all of the museums in post-Communist Europe.

The Editors of *East European Jewish Affairs*

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Oleg Budnitskii responds to Olga Gershenson's "The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the masses"

Dear Editors,

Olga Gershenson's article¹ characterizes the idea of creating the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center and in particular the section devoted to the Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust as a Kremlin project. Vladimir Putin is referenced in her essay more frequently than any other person. The words "Putin" and "Putin's" appear twelve times! According to Gershenson, the goal of the Kremlin-Chabad conspiracy is to represent the Jews, via the Jewish Museum of Moscow, as Russia's "model minority." "The final exhibits," she claims, "tell a story that is consistent with the regime's customary positive portrayal of Russia to the West" (160).

Gershenson is apparently unperturbed by the fact that the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia placed the realization of these ideas in the hands of the American Firm Ralph Appelbaum Associates. RAA representatives, lacking expertise in the history of Russian Jewry, asked Prof. Benjamin Nathans to convene a Content Committee, whose members included experts from the United States (3), Israel (1), and Russia (1). A rather exotic method for the realization of the Kremlin's nefarious plans, wouldn't you say?

According to Gershenson, "The Federation made clear to the designers that the three most important parts of the museum were the Beginnings Theater, the gallery 'Great Patriotic War and the Holocaust,' and the Tolerance Center" (160). Just to set the record straight, the idea to make the "Great Patriotic War and Holocaust" gallery (to which Gershenson's article devotes most of its attention) central to the museum as a whole, was

mine. I don't see anything especially meritworthy in this; it's an obvious idea that was unanimously supported by the members of the Content Committee.

On terminology: without going into details, in Russia the war with Nazi Germany is called the Great Patriotic War.² As for the connection between the Holocaust and the Second World War/Great Patriotic War, I think this does not require elaborate deliberations: the Holocaust became possible only in the context of that war.³ Gershenson apparently disagrees and writes: "Given the dearth of the commemoration of the Jewish victims of the war in Russia, the Jewish museum could have taken an additional step in bringing the specificity of the Holocaust forward" (169). She interprets references in the museum to non-Jewish victims of the Nazi occupation as "contin[ing] the Soviet legacy of universalizing Jewish victims" (169). This contradicts her consequent observation that "Jewish victimhood comes through most clearly in the main feature of the gallery: a panoramic film projected on a massive curved screen" (168). I should note that the film is accompanied by a text that unambiguously lays out the difference between the fate meted out by the Nazis to Jews and that meted out to Slavs: "Of course, the Nazis wanted to enslave the Slavic population and destroy a large part of it, but full extermination was their specific plan only for the Jews."

It's worth remembering what was distinctive about the Nazi occupation regime in the context of the Holocaust on Soviet territory. The USSR was one of just a few European countries, if not the only such country, in which the number of non-Jewish victims among the civilian population was greater than the number of Jewish victims. In my view, it would be unacceptable from an ethical as well as historical standpoint not to mention all the civilian victims of the Nazi occupiers. They totaled 7.4 million human beings, among them 2.5 million Jews. For the Jewish Museum to have remained silent about the mass Nazi killings of individuals of other nationalities would have been no better than the infamous Soviet tradition of silence regarding the Holocaust. Nonetheless, I want to underline again: the specificity of the Jewish fate is articulated in the museum without any ambiguity.

On the same topic, Gershenson writes: "The introductory text of the display reads, 'like the entirety of the Soviet people, Jews participated in the defense of their motherland.' Here, Jews are simply added to the heroic Soviet story" (167). An unsuspecting reader might be led to think that in the Soviet Union there were two separate histories – one Soviet, the other Jewish. Soviet Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s were not the "Jews of silence." They constituted the most successful Soviet nation; Jews were on the whole the most Soviet of all Soviet people. They were the most educated and most overrepresented among the highest-prestige professions, in the Soviet and Party apparatus. During the war years, for example, four Jews were employed in the highest level of government. They included Stalin's closest advisor, Lazar Kaganovich, as well as key figures in the military-industrial complex – Boris Vannikov (People's Commissar of Ammunition) and Moisei Zal'tsman (People's Commissar of the Tank Industry). Jews weren't "added" to Soviet history, they were part and parcel of it. They considered themselves above all as Soviet people, and only after that, as Jews. One may like or dislike this, but such is the history of Soviet Jewry.

Gershenson speculates that in the context of the Museum, the message is that Jewish heroism "can only exist in the context of the universalized story of the war, common to Jews and non-Jews alike." She believes that "this is why the artifacts chosen for this gallery are such universal Soviet military symbols – the tank and the airplane" (167). One can only speculate as to how Gershenson imagines "Jewish heroism" outside the

context of the war, a context shared by Jews and non-Jews. Everyone, after all – Jews and non-Jews – served in the same Red Army. Indeed, I myself selected the “universal Soviet symbols” – the tank and the airplane – for the permanent display. My selection was inspired, among other things, by the fact that the most prominent Jewish war heroes of the Second World War were the navigator Polina Gel’man (the only Jewish woman to be named Hero of the Soviet Union) and the tankist David Dragunskii (twice named Hero of the Soviet Union). The museum features a model of precisely the kind of aircraft that Gel’man flew. In this low-speed airplane there were two cockpits, one for the pilot and the other for the navigator. Polina Gel’man’s pilots were Russian. In this case, to separate “Jewish heroism” from “Russian heroism” would have required sawing the plane in half. I fear this might have compromised its ability to fly.

A museum, like most things in this world, is not perfect. It should be subject to critical analysis, which can only help its development. The Jewish Museum in Moscow is a kind of living organism, its exhibitions are subject to change and improvement. One wishes, however, that the author of a critical review would be grounded in the real history of Soviet Jewry and not simply be looking for conspiracy theories.

Notes

1. Olga Gershenson, “The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the Masses,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, nos 2–3 (2015): 158–73.
2. On the origins of the term “Great Patriotic War” see Oleg Budnitskii, “Изобретая Отечество: история войны с Наполеоном в советской пропаганде 1941–1945 гг.” *Российская история* [“Inventing a Fatherland: The History of the Napoleonic War in Soviet Propaganda, 1941–45,”] *Rossiiskaia istoriia* 6 (2012): 157–169.
3. See for example Doris Bergen, *War & Genocide* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

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Benjamin Nathans responds to Olga Gershenson’s “The Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow: Judaism for the masses”

Dear Editors,

Professor Olga Gershenson’s essay about the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center (JMTC)¹ suggests that historical museums are “institutions that both reflect and reproduce their societies’ ideologies. The elements of a museum – architecture, curatorial choices, and exhibit design – all convey the institution’s political narrative” (158). The politics of