



## Torahs, Tanks, and Tech: Moscow's Jewish Museum

Benjamin Nathans, Risa Levitt Kohn, Natan M. Meir, Oleg Budnitskii & Jonathan Dekel-Chen

To cite this article: Benjamin Nathans, Risa Levitt Kohn, Natan M. Meir, Oleg Budnitskii & Jonathan Dekel-Chen (2015): Torahs, Tanks, and Tech: Moscow's Jewish Museum, East European Jewish Affairs, DOI: [10.1080/13501674.2015.1033609](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2015.1033609)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2015.1033609>



Published online: 18 Jun 2015.



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



Article views: 16



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Torahs, Tanks, and Tech: Moscow's Jewish Museum

**Benjamin Nathans**

**Department of History  
University of Pennsylvania**

“A museum of Russian Jewry in Russia.” The idea was born on the eve of the First World War, in the form of an ethnographic exhibit, and became a reality nearly a century later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the initiative of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, an umbrella organization dominated by representatives of Chabad – and with major financial backing from a handful of Russian-Jewish oligarchs along with vital support from the Kremlin – a 92,000 square-foot Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center opened its doors on Novosushchevskii Street in Moscow in November 2012.

Work on the museum began in 2008, when the Federation hired the well-known museum design firm Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA) to fashion a state-of-the-art, interactive exhibition. RAA in turn hired an international group of scholars to form what it called its “content committee,” consisting of the authors of these short essays. Our job was to produce a coherent narrative of Jewish experience across imperial Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet history, identifying key stories, individuals, ideas, and images with which to animate the journey.

The initial challenge, to my mind, was to produce a museum whose content, notwithstanding its cutting-edge technology, would not feel like a foreign import product. While much of the outside world has traditionally regarded Russian Jewry as victims of their host society, many Russians have been accustomed to thinking of Jews as among Russia's most privileged beneficiaries. The committee decided to approach this issue honestly by showing graphic evidence of anti-Jewish discrimination and pogrom violence as well as the extraordinary rise of Jews into higher education, entrepreneurship, elite culture, and for a time, the halls of political and military power. We were also determined to illustrate the extraordinary flowering of Jewish collective movements and cultural idioms, developments nourished in part by the push and pull of the surrounding society.

Needless to say, the “lesson” of this dual-edged narrative did not lend itself in any straightforward way to a message of tolerance. While the museum's Tolerance Center broadcasts an important moral value, it remains distinct, conceptually and substantively, from the rest of the museum, mandated by the Russian government and designed by a different committee with whom we had no contact. Our goals for the museum's historical exhibits were different: we sought to impart compelling knowledge about the Russian-Jewish past, to stimulate curiosity about the Jewish experience, and to spark conversations about how that experience might matter in today's Russia.

The content committee consisted of scholars whose output, for the most part, takes the form of books and articles. For myself, it was my teaching experience that came closest to the kinds of challenges we faced in helping design a museum. Working with a group of scholars on issues of shared interest became a welcome respite from the usual solitary practice of the humanities. We were also fortunate to work with a dynamic team of designers at RAA, led by Evelyn Reilly, in a series of iterative workshops designed to move from basic narratives to fully fleshed-out audio, visual, and interactive exhibits. The workshops began as discussions of periodization: how to partition two and a half centuries of history into narrative units that would eventually become studios. Over time, they became increasingly text-based, as members of the committee produced outlines, story-paths, and scripts for each studio. For each unit, the content committee together with RAA staff members developed ideas for associated images, recordings, and interactive materials.

It was remarkable to see the variety of ways a given story could be represented or embodied for the senses. As with any narrative endeavor, we were constantly forced to select parts that could stand for a larger whole. In the context of a museum, those parts were necessarily less analytically nuanced and less argumentative than they would have been in a book. But the range of possible media through which to capture and display the parts, and to make them suggestive of a larger whole, was vastly greater. Thus for example in a section of the museum devoted to Jewish life in the late Soviet era, we recaptured the gatherings of refuseniks and Jewish activists in the Ovrazhki forest outside Moscow by building a small grove of (fake) birch trees, inside several of which were mounted video screens playing historical footage of those gatherings, with singing and dancing on Sukkot and other holidays. Visitors standing in the midst of this grove experience a powerful feeling of “you are there.” What they might not sense is that the overwhelming majority of Soviet Jews did not participate in such gatherings, or that the songs accompanied by guitar were closely related to the Russian “bard” music that was wildly popular in the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s.

Over the course of four years’ work, the center of gravity of the decision-making process gradually migrated from the content committee to RAA’s staff. All parties remained part of the discussion throughout the process, but as the agenda shifted from texts to exhibits, the design professionals increasingly bore the project’s momentum. Representatives of the Jewish Federation of Russia also took part in these discussions, but episodically, and in ways that were occasionally unpredictable.

I understood, going into this project, that our committee would not have the final word on the content of the various exhibition spaces. As a Russian saying puts it, ‘he who pays gets to choose the music.’ At the outset, my hunch was that we might face pressure from the clients in several areas: to downplay Russia’s history of violence and discrimination against Jews, or, conversely, the role of Jews in the early history of the Communist Party and the Soviet secret police; to glorify or at least magnify the history of Chabad; to deflect attention away from the massive emigration of Russian Jews at the beginning and end of the twentieth century; and possibly to pay explicit obeisance to the Putin government. Some of these issues did indeed surface in the course of our work. But they were either resolved according to the committee’s advice or took a back seat to other sources of contention which I had not anticipated. The Chabad leadership of the Jewish Federation of Russia, for example, initially wanted *less* attention to their own history than I proposed, out of concern that the museum not come across as a Chabad production, or perhaps to sidestep a critical assessment of that history.

Consensus was reached surprisingly easily on another potential bombshell: which Jewish communities to include under the rubric of “Russian-Jewish” history, given the dramatic expansions and contractions of state borders precisely in the areas of densest Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe over the past two and a half centuries. We decided on an inclusive approach, one that brought under the museum’s purview all the Jewish communities that had come under St. Petersburg’s and then Moscow’s rule, but only for the periods during which they were subject to that rule, a solution one might call imperial as well as empirical.

My colleagues’ essays enumerate areas of conflict between the committee and the clients that I had failed to anticipate, some of which were resolved to our satisfaction, others not. Stepping back from the particulars, and with the perspective of three years and several visits since the museum’s opening, I see two significant aspects of the museum’s content that, if given the chance, I would modify. More attention to Hebrew and Yiddish poetry and literature would help bring home the flowering of specifically Jewish culture in Russia and would resonate powerfully, I believe, with Russia’s abidingly literature-centric culture. Similarly, a more detailed treatment of the Jewish national movement in the late Soviet period could offer a more satisfying account of the massive emigration that began in the 1970s and that eventually produced today’s global Russian-Jewish diaspora.

### **Risa Levitt Kohn**

**Chair, Religious Studies Department  
Classics & Humanities Department  
Director, Jewish Studies Program  
San Diego State University**

As a scholar of Hebrew Bible and Judaism, I was the only non-specialist in Russian Jewish history among the team of academic consultants assisting in the development of the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center. I primarily worked on the conceptualization of three key areas of the Museum. The first is a 4D introductory theater experience intended to provide an overview of Judaism’s connection to biblical Israel. The second is a gallery that runs through the entire museum exploring Jewish ritual and practice. The third is a digital Torah Scroll where visitors are able to “scroll” through the text using a ritual pointer to pull up the weekly Torah reading along with a brief summary of its contents in Russian, Hebrew and English.

The work on the theater experience proved to be challenging and, ultimately, extremely frustrating. As a biblical scholar, my objective was to create an academically sound museum experience that, as a moving visual piece, would set the stage for visitors to appreciate the interconnectedness between the biblical text and the ever-evolving rituals and traditions of Diaspora Judaism during critical points of Jewish history. My hope was to explore key moments in Israelite history so that visitors would be able to better understand the evolution of Judaism in the Diaspora as an ongoing effort to re-define and resituate biblical laws and precepts in different lands and ever-changing circumstances. Over time, it became clear that those who had commissioned the Museum - the leaders of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia - were primarily concerned with creating a cutting-edge 4D theater experience that lent itself to impressive special effects and wished its focus to be on those biblical stories best suited

for such effects. Thus, the Museum theater now presents to visitors a range of biblical tales beginning with the creation of the universe and through the Flood, the near sacrifice of Isaac, the Plagues, and the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, with a nod to the Ten Commandments and a loosely scripted story that attempts to link these events to the larger sweep of Jewish history. There are some beautiful elements in the film, especially those depicting the words and text of Torah in different languages, but ultimately, what is lost is the opportunity to understand and appreciate the complex evolution of biblical Israel into early Judaism and the effect that Israel's literary heritage realized in the laws and stories of the Torah had in terms of serving as a portable manual for the survival and adaptability of Judaism outside of Israel. There is no question, in my mind, that the dramatic approach adopted here came at the expense of academic rigor and soundness.

The gallery we ultimately named "Living Judaism" is, in my view, far more successful. This introduction to Judaism runs through and links the historical arc of the Museum. Here we were concerned with presenting Jews and Judaism through a vibrant array of texts, traditions and rituals firmly grounded in the sacred past, but also vast and varied depending upon the specific Russian community or denomination of the group or practice in question. There were several challenges faced in the creation of this gallery. The first was that the Museum did not own any collections of Judaica. Next was the fact that for many years religious observance was restricted in the Soviet Union and as such Judaism was not openly practiced. How then would we visually document such activities? The academic team was also concerned that the Judaism we present reflect the eclectic nature of traditions evidenced throughout Russia, including the emerging Reform and Conservative movements, and accurately depict the role of women in all aspects of Jewish life. Our objective was to present the ritual lives of living communities rather than to portray a simplistic overview of the life of a traditional Jewish person.

The gallery explores Sacred Texts, Sacred Spaces and Sacred Time. Each piece contains one or more quotations from key Jewish texts such as the Hebrew Bible or the Talmud. These quotations firmly root Jewish tradition in the sacred past. A portion of the text in each of these sections appears in the form of an open book, which is an important nod to the richness of Jewish learning and the concept of the Jews as the "People of the Book." However, the majority of the displays in "Living Judaism" explore the living meanings of these Jewish concepts, highlighting the way in which modern forms of Jewish practice in communities throughout Russia bring to life their ancient origins. This allows visitors to experience the great importance placed within many Jewish communities of experiencing strands or elements of biblical tradition anew in the present.

Visual elements in this gallery include photographs, some archival and some very recent, of Jews, in action, engaged in prayer, study, becoming a bar mitzvah, celebrating weddings, participating in a Seder or in mourning. I believe that the overall experience succeeds in engaging visitors and imparting to them a sense of the multi-dimensional aspects of modern Jewish life in Russia.

The Digital Torah, the third area of the museum in which I participated, is a wonderful interactive tool. It allows visitors to move through an entire Torah scroll with the ability to stop at weekly portions and read a brief summary. The experience helps visitors appreciate the way in which Jewish populations across the world share in the ancient ritual of reading, recounting, and interpreting this sacred text by reading a small portion of the Torah each week.

It is this tool that I believe best illustrates the way in which the Jewish Museum successfully adopts an innovative approach to the museum-going experience by engaging visitors more intimately and actively in their own learning process. Much of the museum is designed to have visitors take an active role in determining and forming their own interaction with the varied forms of information they encounter along their journey. I see the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center as a symbol of cultural identification; a place where people can go to learn about their past, but also, and perhaps more importantly, can enter into a dialogue concerning their future.

**Natan M. Meir**

**Chair, Harold Schnitzer Family Program in Judaic Studies  
Portland State University**

From my first meeting with the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia in the London offices of museum design firm Ralph Appelbaum Associates, I was both excited and apprehensive at the prospect of helping to generate the content for the Federation's proposed Jewish Museum in Moscow as a consultant for RAA. Brainstorming for hours on end with RAA's design team on creative ways to present Russian-Jewish history in multimedia, interactive exhibits was incredibly stimulating; while I enjoy writing scholarly pieces and giving academic lectures, I also take great pleasure in communicating ideas of Jewish history to general audiences, and this was clearly a new and very exciting medium for that kind of historical interpretation. But I was also concerned: behind the Federation's somewhat generic name stands Chabad-Lubavitch, not known for a dispassionate or unbiased approach to Jewish history or anything Jewish, for that matter. RAA assured what came to be called the "Content Committee"—the museum's academic advisory group—that its client desired a museum that would not only be popular among visitors but also garner the respect of critics and scholars; an institution that would present a narrative of Jewish history resting on firm academic foundations. Obviously, the Federation had its own motives for wanting to create this kind of museum: giving Russian Jews a better understanding of their own history might stimulate a deeper interest in Judaism and Jewish practice; creating a pioneering, multimedia museum of the kind never before seen in Russia would raise the Federation's profile, and thereby that of Judaism as well. That the new museum was supported by Putin's government is probably evidence of the Kremlin's hopes that the institution would serve as a symbol of Russia as a successfully multicultural and tolerant society. Indeed, one of the few aspects of the museum on which there was no flexibility on the part of the client, despite the Content Committee's reservations, was that the museum would include a "tolerance center" bearing that precise name (*tsentr tolerantnosti*).

At every phase of the museum's development, from the overall concept and design to the content of each "studio," RAA's design team actively solicited input from the academic consultants; but I hasten to add that they were not the only ones being educated. We scholars were challenged to rethink our own assumptions about how history should be taught, especially as we tried to imagine the different audiences that would be visiting the museum: Russians, both Jewish and not; schoolchildren, families, and visitors to the capital; tourists of various stripes. While the Federation left almost all of the important decisions about content up to RAA and its consultants, there were some

debates—some of them encapsulated in a single meeting, others extending for months—about how a particular historical phenomenon or religious idea should be presented. One of these was the “Shtetl” interactive studio, for which I provided most of the academic content, along with the “Migrations” and “Cities and Beyond” studios. “Shtetl” is one of the physical and emotional fulcra of the museum. I remember well the term that the Federation’s representative used to describe his vision of this studio at our very first meeting: “the warmth of tradition.” I certainly did not want to provide a whitewashed version of Russian-Jewish history, and yet, as I learned, the form that the studio eventually took—with the aim of “recreating” certain aspects of shtetl life for the visitor through interactive media—lent itself, if one was not careful, to just such a nostalgic picture. While I was hopeful that this would not be the final product (and indeed, I do not think that it is), I attempted to provide RAA’s designers with as much historical information and detail as possible to enable them to create an accurate representation of significant aspects of shtetl society. They, in turn, commissioned extensive research on appropriate and accurate images, music, and other media. So, for example, the “heder” interactive station, while underlining the value of education in Jewish society and providing the visitor with an entertaining window into traditional education by having him or her become a pupil, as it were, was also designed to reflect some of the more negative aspects of the heder: the generally poor conditions of most hadarim, under-qualified teachers, the creation of a social hierarchy based on learning, and so on.

One of the hard lessons one learns in helping to create a museum is that one never has the final say on the finished product. As I look back over the original plans for the Shtetl studio, I am disappointed that some interactive stations, such as that dedicated to the theme of Jewish self-governance and social welfare, did not make it into the final version for lack of space, for fear that they lacked appeal to the average visitor, or perhaps for other reasons. Given the choice, I would probably have chosen to keep a station portraying the work of the *hevra kadisha* or the *kahal* over the station featuring a group of *klezmerim*, which from a multimedia perspective naturally makes for a more engaging interactive activity.

It is also important to emphasize that in the course of the design process, RAA and the Content Committee came to a decision that the interactive studios, in many ways the centerpiece of the museum, would be accompanied by a more traditional narrative of Russian-Jewish history that would enable the visitor to dive more deeply into specific aspects of the historical period covered by each studio. Thus, before immersing themselves in the “Cities and Beyond” studio, which features a “café” with interactive table-tops that challenge visitors to put themselves in the shoes of turn-of-the-century Russian Jews forced to make life-altering decisions in response to historical circumstances, visitors can choose to learn more about the specifics of those circumstances from a panel elaborating on eight historical themes from the late tsarist period.

While not free of flaws, it seems to me that the museum does, in the end, do what my colleagues and I had hoped; namely, providing visitors with an accessible entry into an academically-informed and intelligent discussion of Jewish history, Judaism, and the challenges faced by contemporary Jewish society in Russia. My own experience of the museum is that its multimedia character truly helps bring to life important aspects of the Russian-Jewish experience that most visitors would never learn about in any other way. That alone is a reason to be optimistic about the museum’s long-term impact.

**Oleg Budnitskii****Department of History****Director, International Center for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences****National Research University—Higher School of Economics, Moscow**

Why did I join the content committee for the Jewish Museum? As Ben put it at the beginning of our labors: think about how many people will read your books and how many will visit the museum. To us it seemed that the museum would make it possible to disseminate our ideas (or at least some of them) to a wide public. This was of course a bit (or more than a bit) naïve, but still ...

As we planned the scholarly foundation of the exhibits, we sought to retain chronological order while accenting certain key moments in the history of imperial Russian and Soviet Jewry. This gave birth to the idea of studios: “Migrations,” “Shtetl,” “Cities and Beyond,” “War and Revolution,” “Soviet Union,” “Holocaust and Great Patriotic War,” “Postwar,” “Perestroika to the Present.”

We sought to illustrate political history, patterns of everyday life, and religious practices, to convey the lives of diverse protagonists – from Hasidic rebbes to so-called “Red Commissars.” We attempted not only to illuminate the Jewish world, but to show Jews as part of Russian and Soviet society. After all, it is impossible to understand the history of Soviet society without taking into account the participation of Jews, even if those Jews were distant from Jewish life – a life moreover that barely glimmered during the Soviet period. The history of Soviet physics, for example, is unthinkable without its founding father, the academician Abram Ioffe. We sought to show the light as well as the dark sides, to showcase both Jewish scientists and Jewish executioners. Our mission was to create a history rather than an apologia for Russian Jewry, in whose ranks one finds both Lev Landau and Lev Trotsky.

I was responsible for two studios: “War and Revolution,” and “Holocaust and Great Patriotic War.” The thinking behind “War and Revolution” was grounded in the idea that the Russian revolution was a form of collateral damage from the world war. For Jews, collateral damage took the form of the destruction of their traditional way of life (a process already underway as a result of modernization) and the militarization of hundreds of thousands of Jews, drafted into the imperial Russian army. Another side-effect of the war was the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees and expellees (somewhere between 500,000 and one million, according to various estimates), many of whom found themselves outside the Pale, in Russia’s interior provinces. By August 1915 the Pale of Jewish Settlement had de facto been liquidated. As a result of these processes Jews became more deeply entwined in Russian life. The military authorities, thanks to their explicitly anti-semitic policies, were fashioning with their own hands a reserve battalion of future revolutionaries. No wonder, then, that a substantial number of Jews took part in the political upheavals of 1917. And no wonder that, when faced with the openly anti-semitic opponents of the Bolsheviks, most Jews regarded the choice between Reds and Whites as a choice between life and death.

The Jewish Museum was not conceived as a museum for Jews. We assumed that Russians – or rather, residents of the Russian Federation who were not of Jewish origin - would constitute the majority of visitors. Another target group was tourists from various countries. Bearing in mind the likely values and interests of potential visitors, I proposed to make the “Holocaust and Great Patriotic War” studio the exhibit’s

nodal point. In the Russian consciousness – among Jews and non-Jews alike – the Second World War (or Great Patriotic War, as the Soviet aspect of the war is known in Russia) constitutes the country’s most important event in the twentieth century. The significance of the Holocaust for the history of Soviet Jewry of course requires no explanation. I had no desire to engage in polemics with the various anti-semitic stereotypes that circulated during the Great Patriotic War and for many years thereafter, e.g., that “Jews didn’t fight,” or that they took part in “the fifth front, in Tashkent [i.e., were evacuated to Central Asia, far away from the real fighting],” that they had been “Tashkent partisans.” Such polemics would have been undignified. The story of Jewish participation in the war didn’t have to prove anything; it had simply to demonstrate the Jewish contribution to the general victory over Nazism, and to do so by means of statistics and individual examples.

While this is a multi-media museum, the clients nonetheless wanted it to feature at least a modest assortment of real artifacts. When they asked me what sort of display items I would like for the studio on the Great Patriotic War, I replied on the spur of the moment - “a tank and an airplane.” This none-too-serious phrase turned out to have long-term consequences: in the museum you will see an actual T-34 tank (known in the Soviet Union as the tank that defeated the Wehrmacht) and a life-size model Po-2 airplane. At first I had hoped for the massive fighter aircraft designed by Semyon Lavochnik (of Jewish origin). Alas, that proved impossible to obtain, and so we settled on the Po-2, flown by Polina Gelman, the only Jewish woman to be awarded the title Hero of the Soviet Union.

The staff members at Ralph Appelbaum Associates with whom we worked – Evelyn Reilly, Doug Balder, Ilona Parkansky, Maggie Jacobstein, and others – demonstrated a remarkable ability to absorb and apply new ideas. Nonetheless, the museum was the product of people from various cultural backgrounds, and here certain complications appeared. Let me offer an illustration of what one might call “the American view of the history of Soviet Jewry.” There is a space in the museum featuring a recreation of the apartment of an allegedly typical Soviet Jewish family in the 1960s and 1970s, with the obligatory six-volume collected works of Sholem Aleichem on the bookshelf. Among the other items on display is a letter of rejection from a university. RAA’s staff were unaware that in the USSR there were neither acceptance nor rejection letters: one had to go personally to the university and find the information on a posted list. This custom remains in the majority of Russian institutions of higher education to this day. When it was pointed out that no such letters existed or could have existed, there followed the uncomprehending question, “How could people find out?”

Disagreements are a normal part of creative work. In most respects our work proceeded in a friendly way, if sometimes rather intensely. I would regularly receive emails from Evelyn, Ilona, or Maggie, requesting that I compose a text by close of business that day or at the latest by the next morning, or immediately confirm a certain fact, or check a map, or positively identify someone in a photograph. Especially intensive were the two- or three-day workshops held on the 29<sup>th</sup> floor of RAA’s building in lower Manhattan, with its spectacular views. During these meetings we would discuss conceptual questions as well as minor details. Actually, in such an undertaking no details are minor. From our many debates emerged, if not truth, then mutual consensus. This is normal. It would have been much worse had we all immediately agreed with one another. Periods of storm and stress alternated with periods of calm; on the whole it was rather time-consuming work.

Members of the content committee checked the accuracy of individual drafts meant for this or that exhibit, but unfortunately there was no final verification process. None of the committee members was physically inside the museum before it opened so as to “proof” the content. Perhaps this is what made it possible for the museum to open on time. Our work had lasted several years, but by international standards everything was done quite quickly.

**Jonathan Dekel-Chen**

**Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry**

**Department of General History**

**Chair, Leonid Nevzlin Research Center for Russian & East European Jewry  
Hebrew University of Jerusalem**

When Ralph Appelbaum’s firm invited me to serve on the team of academic consultants for the museum, the main challenge I saw ahead of us was telling the story of Russia’s Jews with the awareness that “common knowledge” – and to a lesser extent, scholarly narrative – still perceives the Russian-Jewish experience as mostly negative. Therefore, from the start one of our foremost challenges would be going against the grain of a popular impulse toward what has been called the “Tevye-ization” of East European Jewish history, wherein artists, authors, laypeople and scholars embrace in varying degrees an imagined, quaint past overlaid with nearly constant victimization. Our goal would be to communicate the complexities of real life for most Jews in Russian-speaking space.

From my point of view, the academic committee’s purpose was to create an authoritative and interesting textual pathway to transmit Russian-Jewish history without pre-determining a visitor’s comprehension of that history. But how could we offer a balanced historical account without pandering to older interpretations of history that highlighted repeated bouts of anti-Jewish repression? When thinking about the museum’s content, one could not avoid a problematic fact: there are still a great deal of suspicions and haunted memories separating Jews and non-Jews in reference to Russian-speaking space. Complicating matters still further, just prior to and during our work, painful issues bubbled up between Jews and Ukrainian nationalists regarding the Soviet past. How could these be handled by the museum, if at all?

Added to these questions, it seemed difficult to imagine how we could retell the past of a living community when the majority of Jews living in this space had voluntarily left during the preceding four decades. The remaining Jewish communities in the FSU are a demographic shadow of their former selves. No less important, if contemporary conditions were to be addressed at all, we would have to take into account the vibrant Russian-speaking diaspora communities that have taken root in Europe, the Americas, Israel and elsewhere since the 1970s.

A few factors started to conflict as we began our work. One axis of friction centered on differing understandings of the Russian-Jewish past among the various parties involved in creating the museum’s content. Second, we had to agree upon what visitors to the museum should encounter by the time they depart. Third, we had to take into account the desires of the Chabad-led Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, which had commissioned the museum. In my capacity as consultant on the more contemporary sections of the museum (the interwar, postwar and contemporary studios) as

well as for the migrations thread, I encountered fewer points of friction with the clients than I had initially feared. Finally, the academic committee had to construct the content of the studios mostly without the aid of physical artifacts; rather, the museum's clients and designers preferred technology-based exhibits.

When imagining the museum's target audience, our working assumption was that non-Jewish, and many Jewish, visitors would have little or no familiarity with Jewish history and rituals. As a result, we decided to build a kind of "Judaism 101" component, which eventually evolved into the "Living Judaism" exhibit thread that runs through the museum. This decision, however, invited more questions: How detailed should this exhibit be? To what degree should the museum focus on Jews as opposed to Judaism?

Specific challenges surfaced in my work. Among these, I had to deal head-on with challenging parts of the Jewish past, including the disproportionate role many men and women of Jewish origin played in the first generation of Bolshevik leadership. Another challenge for all of us emerged around the balance between historical integrity and contemporary sensitivities. For example, when we planned the content of the Holocaust exhibit, debate arose with the clients on what kind of visual images could be displayed. As historians, we had few, if any, barriers whereas the clients expressed concern about partial nudity in some iconic Holocaust photographs. In the end, we reached what now seems a reasonable compromise: the horrors of those years are shown without using images of unclothed victims. Another pointed discussion with the owners focused on visual representations of Jewish life in the Russian Federation today. Here too, an early exchange of opinions eventually resulted in the presentation of images that reflect the diversity of Jews in today's Russian Federation. These include varieties of denominational and secular communities, cultural and educational institutional life, as well as female rabbis. This debate and its resolution did not address the Jewish past, but rather the present and future – something outside the normal purview of historians, where no one has expertise but only vision.

Work on the museum underlined for me some contemporary dilemmas in our field. First, significant differences still exist between western-trained scholars' perceptions of Russian-Jewish history and the visions of that past among many of our colleagues in Russia. Second, it is no easy task to create a museum that properly reflects the complex realities of anti-Jewish repression versus the knowledge that the large majority of Jews who exited Russian-speaking space during the last half century were, in fact, white-collar and successful by almost any *Soviet* standard. Third, in a project of this kind, academic consultants can accomplish much but in the end cannot dictate the contents of a museum. In our case, dealing with the term, concept and application of *tolerantnost'* in the museum probably ignited the most disagreement between the clients and the consultant team. And finally, this was my first experience writing historical texts over which I did not have full control; our final texts underwent multiple edits, at times by people appointed by the clients who were not experts on Russian-Jewish history. That being said, the final product retained its historical integrity. Looking into the future of the museum, however, brings more circumspection. Only time will tell how it will fare. One hopes that an empowered academic committee will ensure that the museum continues to reflect the best of international scholarship on Russian Jewry.