CASE STUDY FIVE:
Souvenir, Talisman, Toy: An exhibition & intercultural dialogue project

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Project background

The project grew out of my ethnographic research on Jewish heritage tourism in Poland. Since my first visit to Poland in 1990 I have been interested in Polish-made figurines representing Jews sold in market stalls, folk craft shops, and increasingly in tourist souvenir shops, and which are displayed – often as good luck charms -- in Polish homes and businesses. I did research among makers, sellers, and buyers during my doctoral fieldwork in 1998-2000. In the course of this research in my fieldsite in Krakow, I discovered in the Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum had an historical collection, and a small exhibition, of such figurines (along with other non-Jewish Polish representations of Jews).
The figurines were exhibited with extremely minimal interpretive materials, no historical context, and no suggestion of the range of questions and meanings the figurines might provoke among viewers (particularly viewers belonging to the ethnic group depicted by the figurines). Nor was it acknowledged in the exhibit that the figurines exist within a broader a tradition of making figurines of Jews, which continues into the present day, and that some of these are sold in shops just outside the museum. In 2003 I published an article about the figurines in the context both of the museum’s display and their broader social life in (and beyond) the Jewish heritage district of Kazimierz that surrounds the museum. I remained interested in the figurines as they created constant consternation among the Jewish tourists to Poland who were my research subjects, while local non-Jewish Poles I spoke to generally viewed them with indifference or warmth, if they noticed them at all. As my interest in curating as a form of experimental ethnography grew, the figurines suggested themselves as an excellent tool for building awareness and discussion around a wide range of issues including Polish-Jewish relations and memory, divergent perspectives on the cultural past and present, and museum practice in pluralizing and increasingly globally interconnected societies. I was entering a teaching sabbatical, the museum agreed to host an exhibition, and Krakow’s annual Jewish Culture Festival (run by non-Jews, like most Jewish heritage initiatives in Poland) signed on as co-organizer.

Aims and outcomes

“Souvenir, Talisman, Toy” had two simultaneous aims. First, it sought to engage two conflicted publics – local non-Jewish Poles, and Jews, both local Polish Jews and foreign visitors – in a project of documentation and dialogue regarding the tradition of making and using for various purposes figurines depicting Jews. Second, it attempted to curate these objects in a way that breaks from (and thus also highlights) the narrative of cultural essentialism and ethno-nationhood to which the exhibit’s host institution still largely cleaves. Here Jews – who formed a major minority community in Poland from the middle ages until World War II – are presented almost exclusively in their guise as objectified, exotic others that function as characters in ethnic Polish Christian peasant rituals – seen only through non-Jewish eyes. The project touches on deep, ongoing, and traumatic discourses and silences that embroil both Polish and Jewish collectivities in the post-Holocaust, post-Communist era. The physical exhibition showcased a long history and variety of cultural, religious, economic, and political influences on the figurines, collected visitor knowledge about and reactions to them (using comment books and boards that posed specific research questions), and fostered dialogue among individuals who held different perspectives on the figurines’ meaning. The exhibit was preceded, accompanied, and is outlived by an interactive, trilingual (Polish, English, Hebrew) crowd-sourcing website that further extends the research capacity of the project, encouraging Poles, Jews, and anyone else who owns, has seen, or has knowledge or opinions about the figurines to contribute (via self-service, moderated uploading) images of the figurines in their “natural habitats” (in shops, homes, restaurants, etc.) and share their thoughts on their own or others’ images. The goal is to assemble an archive of this popular yet diffuse phenomenon, and present it for public scrutiny and
discussion. A book based on the exhibit, and a website that reproduces it in virtual form, are currently in production.

“Souvenir, Talisman, Toy” treated conflicted subject matter and took place within a complex, transnational social field. Thus it fits imperfectly in relation to the Museum Ethnographers Group’s proposed framework of “innovative, ethical, participatory use of ethnographic collections in community projects in museums.” My project’s approach to the terms “ethics,” “participation,” “ethnographic collection,” and “community” are necessarily fraught. The “constituent communities” who feel they have a stake in or are implicated by the figurines are both painfully divided by historical grievances and are internally diverse (they include non-Jewish Poles and Jews, but also Germans and other tourists, figurine carvers, collectors, vendors, ethnographers, and curators). I was not working “on behalf of” or in preferential collaboration with any one of these groups. Rather, I tried to make a space where all of them could acknowledge and reckon with each others’ claims. Participation occurred in different ways at different stages of the project’s development. My ethnographic research interlocutors shaped my understanding of the phenomenon in question, and an group of international students helped me think through figurine meanings and display problematics (in part via a transatlantic Facebook group). The trilingual (English, Polish, Hebrew) website offers a way for the public to document and upload their own figurines and share in the dialogue. A Facebook “event” page offers an evolving array of news, images, and press articles about the exhibit, with space for the public to respond and ask questions. A YouTube channel broadcasts the exhibit’s video interviews and other materials (with space for comments), and a Twitter feed allows interested commentators to further disseminate and discuss the project among their followers. They could also sit and talk with our bilingual student volunteers, or with the woodcarver Józef Regula, who sat in the museum’s courtyard and demonstrated his craft.

Are/were you merely providing access/information, or is this a project with mutual aims and outcomes?

The goal in the physical exhibition was to create access to objects and information about them, and using the website to create an archive and public gallery of a public-user-generated collection, and to frame both of these displays in such a way as to make multiple perspectives on them visible. As curator of both “platforms,” the overarching idea was mine alone. But the goal was to encourage any member of the public to use the platforms to make their own ideas about the figurines and their display visible to the public as well, to contribute to knowledge production about them.
How were the aims/outcomes agreed?

I determined the aims with constitutive input from colleagues, students, professional collaborators, and informal contacts in my field site. I workshoped the project at Concordia University with my colleagues during 2011-12 and 2012-13 in our Curatorial Theory & Practice working group, and with my Fall 2012 undergraduate students in a course called “Museums & Heritage in a Globalized World,” where they designed their own visions for the project in small groups, based on a digital archive of exhibit materials. Canadian and Polish students contributed to the project via Facebook; the Polish students trolled city streets documenting figurines and uploading photographs of them, and we all debated them online. A short discussion of the approach to and rationale for the crowd-sourced collecting website related to the project appears in Lehrer & Ramsey (2013). I also tried to involve a wide range of differently positioned participants during the tenure of the physical exhibit itself. I timed the exhibit to coincide with an annual Jewish culture festival to tap into a rare density of Jewish presence in Krakow, as well as integrating Polish and North American students as dialogue facilitators, a Polish woodcarver doing demonstrations, a shop that sells his figurines, the local Jewish community centre, and panel discussions with Polish and North American scholars and intellectuals on Jewish and comparative minority stereotyping. Originally I had hoped the dialogue would begin within the museum itself, but they rejected my interpretive framework, and held the project at arm’s length, offering only the gallery space and their collection.

Who are/were the lead personnel on the project?

I designed the project based on my field research and reading, assembled the exhibition team, oversaw the students’ curricula, and curated the exhibit.

Exhibition postcard. Design by Sabina Antoiniszczak.
Who are/were you working with?

This project is, in a sense, an extension of my long-term fieldwork in Krakow, Poland over the last 15 years. I built relationships with and interviewed people (figurine carvers, sellers, buyers, observers) whose opinions were either directly present in, or informed the project and final exhibit. During the 2012-13 academic year I worked with students both at my home university in Montreal and in Krakow, Poland, and trained some of them to be dialogue facilitators for the actual exhibit via a sustained, research-based, transatlantic discussion. I considered all members of the exhibition project team – including my project coordinator, the exhibit designers, the student volunteers, and some local institutions, who functioned as de facto consultants – to be collaborators on the project. I took responsibility for final decisions, but the input of all of these individuals vastly enriched the project, and made it possible to realize.

Are you clear about why you are working with this selected group and with their role as representative of others? Please comment:

I built outwards from my network of trusted individuals to engage people with a variety of different standpoints and viewpoints that I became aware of through my research. The project is intended to embrace a growing web of voices through its lifetime.

Assessment of authority: why are/were you dealing with this individual or group; how are/were they empowered to speak on behalf of a community? Are/were you satisfied with their ‘credentials’?

I selected individuals I met from the various “constituent communities” surrounding the figurines, seeking voices I thought were important to include in the overall landscape of conversation I was trying to curate. These individuals do not represent particular “communities” in a traditional sense; rather, they illustrate paradigmatic or productively challenging viewpoints that expand a developing understanding of the figurines’ meanings and the lives they touch.
Who were the main partners?

My main logistical partner was Krakow’s Jewish Culture Festival ([www.jewishfestival.pl/index.en.html](http://www.jewishfestival.pl/index.en.html)).

Warsaw’s Museum of the History of Polish Jews (www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en) and Krakow’s Jewish Community Center (www.jcckrakow.org/) consulted and helped with PR.

The Jarden Jewish Bookshop (www.jarden.pl/) was an essential logistical consultant for navigating a host of institutional conflicts and challenges.

Krakow’s Galicia Jewish Museum (www.en.galiciajewishmuseum.org/) partnered with the project to host a small extension of the main exhibition, along with some organized dialogue activities, in August 2013.

Is/was it a museum-to-museum/cultural centre project?

Krakow’s Festival of Jewish Culture agreed to be my key institutional partner, and helped negotiate the terms of engagement with Krakow’s Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum, as well as other bureaucratic and logistical hurdles.
What were the budgets and other resources? (e.g. grant awards, dedicated staff, sponsorship):

Most of the funds for the project came from academic research and research dissemination grants from the Canadian government (via SSHRC and Canada Research Chairs) and my home institution, Concordia University in Montreal. Krakow’s Festival of Jewish Culture also helped defray some costs, and a couple of local Krakow businesses (Hotel Columbus, Hamsa Israeli Restobar) also made in-kind contributions. A significant portion of my own personal social network in Poland was drawn into supporting the project in some capacity. It really “took a village” to make this happen.

What are/were the timescales?

Building on my research and archive of video materials from a decade ago, the exhibition itself took about 9 months to negotiate and assemble.

Ethical considerations – describe what these involved in relation to the project and how they were agreed/adhered to?

My biggest concern was putting a carver of Jewish figurines in a public setting where he might be confronted by people deeply critical of his craft, who could release accumulated pain and anger on him. I explained to him my concerns, and tried to make sure he understood how strongly some Jews reacted to seeing these figurines in Poland. He assured me he looked forward to the opportunity for dialogue. In the end, I think he had good experiences with visitors and felt personally honored by the exhibit, but I also sense he was unsettled when he grasped the overall interpretive framing of the exhibit, in which his work was juxtaposed with a long, very ambivalent history of depictions of Jews in figurines, and some disquieting video interviews.

Please also describe any compromises, surprises and how the project may have been transformed through the engagement:

This was the first large exhibit I have curated. I likely would not have done it if I had known the challenges it would entail, particularly in working without the support of the host institution. That said, I’m glad I didn’t know! As an anthropologist, all of the “failures” over the course of preparing the exhibit were fascinating and illuminating, and form a rich archive for analysis and publication. Most compromises I had to make turned out to be either for the best, or irrelevant. The biggest surprise was the number of visitors (1500 in the 20-day run) and the press attention we got (see above). The exhibit was immeasurably enriched by the input of the Polish designers.

What things would you consider if embarking on a similar project again?

A larger, more exclusively dedicated team, more lead time, a dedicated PR/public engagement person, a more rigorous educational program for the Polish student volunteers. A significantly longer exhibition run.
What things would you avoid?

Hard to say, as it all turned out so well. But the process was one big improvisation.

References to publications relating to project (online/in print):

*English*

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*Polish*

Bilewicz, Michał, 2013. ‘Powrót wypartego Chałacjara’, *Krytyka Polityczna*, July 4,
http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/sztuki-wizualne/20130704/bilewicz-powrot-wypartego-chalacierza

Cagiel, Gabriela, 2013. ‘Figurka Żyda z pieniązkiem na szczęście’, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 6,

Kawęcka, Dorota, 2013, ‘Zależy mi na budowaniu dialogu’, *Inne Muzeum*, July 1,
http://innemuzeum.pl/2013/07/zalezy-mi-na-budowaniu-dialogu/


Radzik, Zuzanna. 2013, ‘Żydek z monetą’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, July 9,
http://tygodnik.onet.pl/33,0,80861,zydek_z_moneta,artykul.html

*Hebrew*

Hagay Hacohen, 2013. ‘מהговорות הפנים של פ Nurs אומודה?’ *Kol Polin: Polskie Radio dla Zagranicy*, July 3,
http://www.kolpolin.pl/7/182/Artykul/140239.
Works Cited:


Links:

Project website: http://www.jewishfigs.org
Exhibit Facebook page: http://www.facebook.com/SouvenirTalismanToy
Exhibit YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/user/SouvenirTalismanToy
Exhibit Twitter feed: http://twitter.com/JewishFigs