

1000 years of history

Welcome to the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. You are about to embark on a journey of a **thousand years** – from the Middle Ages until today – in **eight galleries**. To view the entire exhibition, allow two to three hours. Or, visit one or several galleries during your visit.

This guide provides a brief description of each gallery, selected highlights, and a floor plan. You can pick up an audio guide at the information desk.

Adults accompanying children under the age of 12 are advised to consider whether the children should visit the Holocaust gallery.

POLIN Museum's building, designed by the Finnish studio Lahdelma & Mahlamäki, is an architectural gem. Its minimalist exterior, clad in glass, encloses a dramatic interior of undulating walls.

About the exhibition

The Core Exhibition is a journey through the 1000-year history of Polish Jews. Discover how Jews first arrived in Polish lands, why they stayed, and how Poland became home to one of the largest Jewish communities in the world – there were 3.3 million Jews in Poland before the Holocaust. While the number of Jews in Poland today is small, there has been a renewal of Jewish life since the fall of communism.

The history of Polish Jews is an integral part of the history of Poland, and the history of Poland is not complete without the history of Polish Jews. This is a story of cooperation and competition, coexistence and conflict, separation and integration.

Enter this theater of history, where the story unfolds in acts and scenes as you walk. Immerse yourself in the story. Encounter those who lived in each period – their words are quoted throughout the exhibition. Enter the scene – a salon, tavern, home, church, synagogue, or schoolroom. There are surprises in drawers you can open, screens and objects you can touch, and much that you can see – artifacts, photographs, documents, and films.

FOREST



G1

Catch a glimpse of what awaits you as you walk along the bridge from the front entrance to the main hall – just look down. You will enter the exhibition from the main hall. As you descend a grand staircase, you will discover a poetic Forest, the setting for the legend of Polin. According to the legend, Jews fleeing persecution came east. When they arrived in a forest, they heard the word *Polin*, which sounded like “Rest here” in Hebrew. They knew then that this was the place to settle. Polin is the Hebrew word for Poland and the inspiration for the name of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS



You will cross the threshold between legend and history as you enter the medieval gallery. The first six hundred years of our story unfold here. As early as the 10th century, Jewish merchants were already traveling along trade routes that passed through Poland. By 1500 Jews were living in over 100 places with organized Jewish communities in about half of them. How did that happen? Explore the charter that gave Jews the right to settle, practice their religion, engage in certain occupations, and be protected from harm. Have a look at town maps and documents showing a place for a Jewish street, synagogue, and cemetery.



JEWISH TRAVELERS

The first Jews to arrive in the Polish lands were traveling merchants from western and southern Europe. Follow the journey of Ibrahim ibn Yakub, a Jew from Cordoba, who was sent

by the Caliph on a diplomatic mission across Europe around 960. One of the very first mentions of the “Land of Mieszko,” as Poland was known, is to be found in his travel account, which he wrote in Arabic. → 1



THE STATUTE OF KALISZ

Touch the screen to explore the Statute of Kalisz. This charter, which was proclaimed by Bolesław the Pious, Duke of Greater Poland, in 1264, gave Jews permission to settle, follow their religion, be protected from harm, engage in various occupations, and even play a role in the minting of coins. Just in front of the stronghold is an original coin, with Hebrew letters, which was minted in Poland during the early 1200s. It is the oldest object in the museum's collection. → 2



JEW IN TOWNS

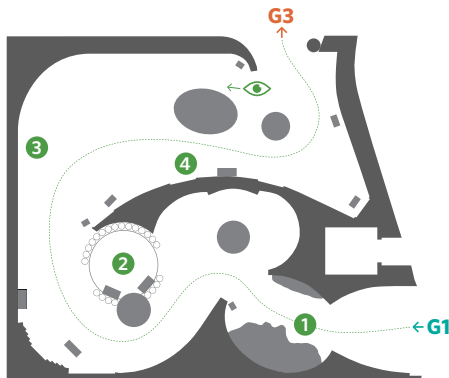
Follow the Town Wall to see how a Jewish neighborhood was included in the plans for some of Poland's

earliest towns and cities. Stories of Jews who lived in these towns are illustrated on this wall, which, like the entire gallery, is hand-painted. Touch the large interactive table to discover how the Jewish community organized itself. Or touch the screen to make a tombstone rubbing at the nearby cemetery display, which features the oldest Jewish tombstone in Poland, dated 1203. → 3



JEW AND RULERS

Follow the Royal Relations Wall to see how each ruler reconfirmed the statute for Jews living in his domain – legend has it that King Kazimierz the Great gave Jews such good conditions because of his love for the beautiful Esther. Meet the Fiszel family, bankers and doctors to the royal court. → 4



PARADISUS IUDAEORUM



What made this period a golden age for Jews in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? Discover the rich culture that Jews developed here. Rabbinical authority and scholarship reached new heights. Jewish communities were allowed to govern themselves locally, regionally, and nationally. Jews played an important role managing assets on noble estates. And, the Jewish population expanded rapidly. Why here? The Commonwealth, one of the largest, most diverse, and most tolerant countries in Europe at the time, never experienced the religious wars that were tearing apart Western Europe, although there were incidents of anti-Jewish violence. The outbreak of the Khmelnytsky uprising in 1648, however, devastated Jewish communities, and, together with the wars of the 17th century, left the Commonwealth in ruins.



REMU

Meet Rabbi Moses Isserles, known as the Remu, considered the greatest rabbi in the history of Polish Jews. Touch the interactive screen to read excerpts from his most famous work – the Code of Jewish Law, Shulḥan Arukh, with his glosses, which reflect the customs of Polish Jews and guide Jewish religious life to this day. Find out why there are real peppercorns next to the presentation of his yeshiva, a religious academy, in Kraków. → 1

PRINTING

Kraków and Lublin became major European centers of Jewish printing in the 16th century. Admire the fruit of their labor – an original Jewish book printed in Poland 400 years ago. You can even print a title page



or printer's mark by hand in a printing press! → 2

THE COUNCIL OF FOUR LANDS

The Council of Four Lands represents a degree of Jewish communal autonomy unique to the Commonwealth. Representatives from the Jewish communities of Lesser Poland, Greater Poland, Red Ruthenia, and Volhynia began to assemble on a regular basis in the 16th century. The Council soon became a body that addressed matters of importance to Jewish communities across the land, settling disputes, and passing laws. → 3



become home to the largest Jewish community in the world and a center of Jewish life. → 4



JAN ZAMOYSKI AND ZAMOŚĆ

Follow the nobility to the countryside and explore the role of Jews in the economy of the latifundia, which were vast landed estates. The starting place is Jan Zamoyski's private town, Zamość, the economic hub of his latifundium. Like other nobles, Zamoyski invited Jews to settle in his private town and contracted them to manage assets on his estate – mills, forests, fisheries, salt mines, taxes, and more. Read the contracts he signed with one of his Jewish managers. → 5



1765 MAP

This map shows the almost 1200 towns where Jews were living when the census of 1764 and 1765 was taken. There were about 750,000 Jews living in the Commonwealth at that time, compared with 30,000, at most, around 1500. The Commonwealth had



THE JEWISH TOWN



Explore daily life in the small towns where Jews made up a large proportion of the population and developed a distinctive way of life. Experience the everyday interactions of Jews and their neighbors in the marketplace and tavern. Visit a Jewish home and find Yiddish books for women – some of them written by women. Make your way to the synagogue and stand beneath a celestial canopy – the reconstructed painted ceiling of the synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec, today in Ukraine.



THE HOME

Enter a Jewish home, often just a single room where the family slept, ate, and worked. This is where parents instilled in their children the values of piety, modesty, and study. Watch an animated film about women's lives – their religious obligations, proper behavior, and role in raising children.

The earliest portraits of Polish Jews are on the table. Find the amulets to protect the mother and her newborn – they are near the bed. Why is there a citron next to the illustrated Yiddish book in the cabinet? Notice the mezuzah case attached to the doorframe. → 1

CHURCH

Consider the changing relations between the Catholic Church and the Jews, and the contradictions between Church policy and practice. Find the document that shows all the church institutions that loaned money to Jews, despite strong warnings not to do so. Or, the paintings that illustrate the story of a blood libel, despite papal declarations that such accusations were false. Rest on a pew and watch



an animated film about Jacob Frank, a false messiah, who converted to Catholicism along with 3,000 of his Jewish followers. → 2

SYNAGOGUE

Stand beneath this breathtaking painted synagogue ceiling and listen to the liturgical soundscape created specially for this space. Notice the *bimah* – the platform for the reader's desk. Almost 400 volunteers from Poland and abroad used traditional tools, materials, and techniques to reconstruct the ceiling and roof of the wooden synagogue that once stood in Gwoździec, today in Ukraine. The synagogue was built in the mid-17th century, and the renovation of the paintings was completed in 1729.

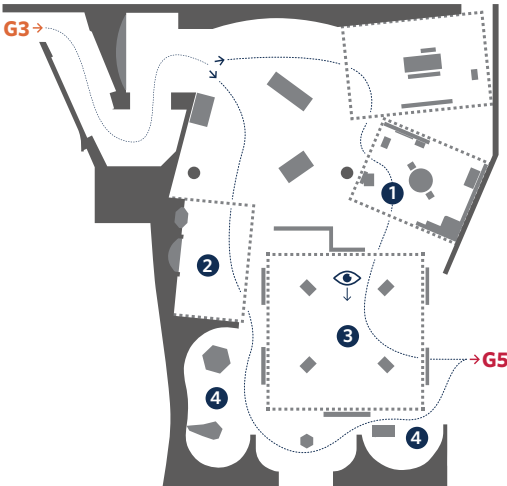
Notice the signs of the zodiac around the base of the cupola and the messianic animals along the middle band – the Leviathan, Behemoth (a red ox), and the unicorns. → 3

NEW SPIRITUAL LEADERS

The 18th century was a period of spiritual quest and messianic yearning. There was also a crisis of rabbinical authority and communal leadership. Meet the new spiritual leaders in a series of animated films. Yisrael ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, was later claimed as the founder of Hasidism. Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, known as the Gaon of Vilna, is considered the founder of the modern yeshiva. Mendel Lefin represents the Jewish Enlightenment. → 4



G4



ENCOUNTERS WITH MODERNITY



Between 1772 and 1795, Russia, Prussia, and Austria partitioned the Commonwealth and inherited the large Jewish populations living there. Jews were now individual subjects of the monarch, who regulated their everyday lives with law upon law. The coming of the railway and the development of industry in the mid-19th century led to mass migration to the city, the rise of wealthy entrepreneurs, and the birth of a poor proletariat. Waves of pogroms in the Russian Empire during the 1880s and harsh laws restricting Jewish settlement and work led to mass emigration. Some Jews continued to hope for social and cultural integration, while others defended tradition, albeit in new ways – Hasidism expanded rapidly, and the modern yeshiva (religious academy) took hold. New forms of national consciousness gave rise to modern Jewish social and political movements. Modern Hebrew and Yiddish culture found a mass audience.



THE PARTITIONS

The three monarchs in the portraits look down on the empty throne of the last Polish king. Would you like to live in one of the three empires? Touch the screen to find out if you qualify. Behind the thrones are maps and population figures – after Russia took part of the Commonwealth, her Jewish population rose from 50,000 to 610,000. The same thing happened on a smaller scale in Prussia and Austria. → **1**

HASKALAH, YESHIVA, HASIDISM

Meet Hayim Selig Slonimski, who promoted modern Hebrew and secular knowledge. Touch the screen to explore his popular science newspaper,

featuring the calculating machine he invented, and articles about dinosaurs, boas, and electricity. Spend 24 hours in the modern yeshiva in Volozhin in seven minutes, the length of a painted animation film. Listen to Hasidic melodies at the *shtibl* table. → **2**



THE RAILWAY STATION

Welcome to the railway station, a symbol of the industrial revolution.

Sit on the red velvet sofa and take in the 360-degree panorama showing the making of the railway, the rise of industry, and the growth of the metropolis. Meet the characters in the railway station, and read their impressions of train travel and arrival in the big city. Buy and sell tickets, with train stories on them, at the two ticket counters. → 3



4

INTEGRATIONISM

Some Jews identified with Polish language and culture and supported

Polish national struggle. They considered themselves Poles of the Mosaic Faith and built the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street. Listen to the cantor Gershon Sirota, who was the first to record cantorial music, while examining a finely crafted scale model of the Great Synagogue, where he served as cantor. → 4

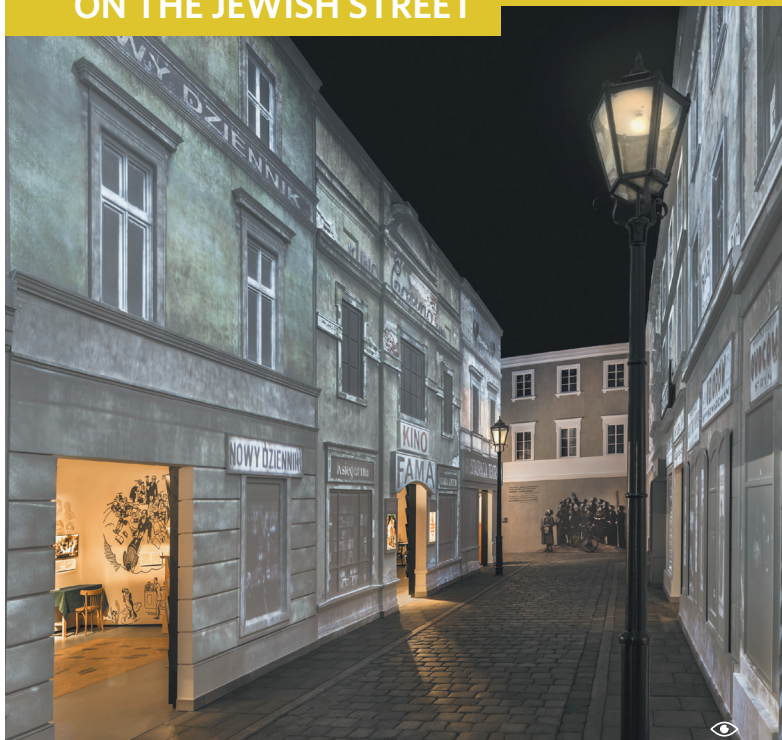
EMIGRATION

About a third of the Jewish population left between 1880 and 1914. A film about emigration is projected above a map showing the routes they took. More than 85% went to the United States. Others went to Palestine, Canada, Argentina, South Africa, Australia, and parts of Western Europe. Follow the emigration process through the stories of Mary Antin, Manya Shohat, and Alexander Harkavy. → 5

G5



ON THE JEWISH STREET



With the collapse of the three empires during the First World War and the creation of the Second Polish Republic in its aftermath, there began what some historians consider a second “golden age” for Polish Jews – despite economic hardship and rising antisemitism. What’s doing “on the Jewish Street” is a way of asking, in Yiddish, what’s doing in the Jewish world. That world is presented in the form of a multimedia street whose axis corresponds to the exact prewar location of Zamenhofa Street, the heart of the Jewish neighborhood of Muranów before the Second World War. Pass through doorways from the multimedia street to explore politics and culture. Walk up the stairs to a mezzanine to explore growing up as well as daily life in towns across the Second Polish Republic.



POLITICS

Jews enjoyed full electoral rights in interwar Poland, and some Jewish parties even had representatives in parliament. It is Election Day, and posters are everywhere. Which party should you vote for? Touch the screen and take the quiz to find out. Then, head over to presentations of the three main parties – Zionists, Agudas Yisroel, and the Bund – to make your final decision. → 1

TŁOMACKIE 13 AND CAFÉ ZIEMIAŃSKA

Join the Yiddish literary world at 13 Tłomackie Street in Warsaw, headquarters of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists. They danced to music from a gramophone – you too can have a go! Or, join the Polish literary world at the famous Mała Ziemiańska café, where writers, artists and actors, including many who had Jewish roots, such as Julian Tuwim and Antoni Słonimski, would gather – catch their witty repartee in a playful animation. → 2

VILNA

Enter through one of the archways so typical of Vilna, where Jews made up a third of the population. Discover why Vilna was considered the spiritual capital of the Yiddish world and why the language mattered. Join the *zamlers*, the collectors recruited by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research to document Jewish life – touch the screen and begin the adventure of collecting folklore. → 3

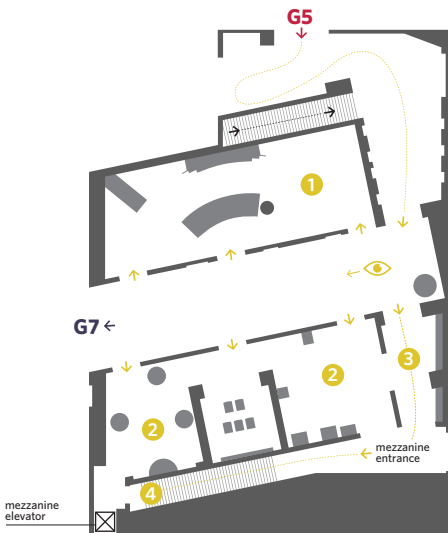


MEZZANINE: TRAVEL AND DAILY LIFE



Head up the stairs, passing through an “art salon” along the way, to a mezzanine. Tour thirteen towns across the length and breadth of the Second Polish Republic, from Gdynia to Drohobycz. Each town reveals a different aspect of daily life. Or, explore what it was like to grow up in the twenties and thirties and be part of a new generation unique to interwar Poland. Which school would you have attended? Open the desks in the classroom to find out. → 4

G6



HOLOCAUST



There is no sign at the end of the multimedia street that war is approaching. Turn the corner and the sound of airplanes and bombs fills the air. Germany, and then the Soviet Union, have invaded Poland. The story of the Holocaust is presented within the borders of occupied Poland and focuses on the experience of Jews. German repressions separate and isolate Jews and force them into ghettos. Diaries and documents preserved in the secret archive created by Emanuel Ringelblum and his team provide a unique perspective on the Warsaw ghetto and the Warsaw ghetto uprising. A bridge symbolic of the one across Chłodna Street offers a view from above of the so-called Aryan side. The view from below reveals the harsh reality of German terror against Poles, how the Polish underground state resisted the occupation, and how ordinary people responded to the Jewish fate on a spectrum from help to indifference and even betrayal. The German invasion of Soviet-occupied Poland marks the onset of mass murder by death squads and then in death camps.



GROWING REPRESSIONS

Repressive German orders depriving Jews of basic rights cover the wall on your left and are illustrated through photographs and personal stories on your right. Forced labor, beatings, lootings, and executions became the norm. The 600 ghettos created in occupied Poland are listed on the wall. → 1

DAILY LIFE IN THE GHETTO

At its peak, around 460,000 Jews were crowded into the Warsaw ghetto. Accompany Emanuel Ringelblum,



the historian who organized a clandestine archive documenting ghetto life, and Adam Czerniaków, the chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat (Jewish Council), through the Warsaw ghetto. Quotations from their diaries describe the overcrowding, hunger, disease, and helplessness in the face of German terror, but also the struggle to retain one's humanity under such inhumane conditions. → 2

MEZZANINE: THE GREAT DEPORTATION



Walk up the stairs to a mezzanine. Adam Czerniaków has committed suicide, having refused to sign the order to “resettle” Jews, which meant to deport them to their death. On 22 July 1942 the Germans began the deportation of Jews from the ghetto. Walk down the steps to a map of the Umschlagplatz, the place where Jews were assembled before being boarded onto trains. Within a matter of two months the Germans had transported over 300,000 Jews to their death in Treblinka. → **3**

IN HIDING

White and black symbolize the choice between hiding in the light on false papers or hiding in the dark. Explore the stories of parents who placed their children in the care of Christian convents, or others who hid in the woods, in bunkers, or in Polish homes – under the floor, in the attic, behind the wall. Some of these stories ended happily, most tragically. → **4**

EINSATZGRUPPEN AND POGROMS

The German army, which invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, was followed by death squads, the Einsatzgruppen, which carried out mass executions of Jews and other “undesirables,”

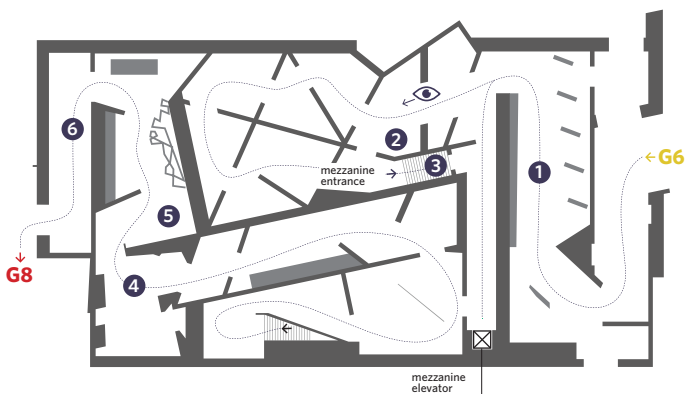


including communists. The tree trunks symbolize the Ponary forest near Vilna, where about 100,000 people were shot, most of them Jews. During the summer of 1941, in Lwów, Jedwabne, and other places, the local population, encouraged by the Germans, perpetrated pogroms against Jews. → **5**

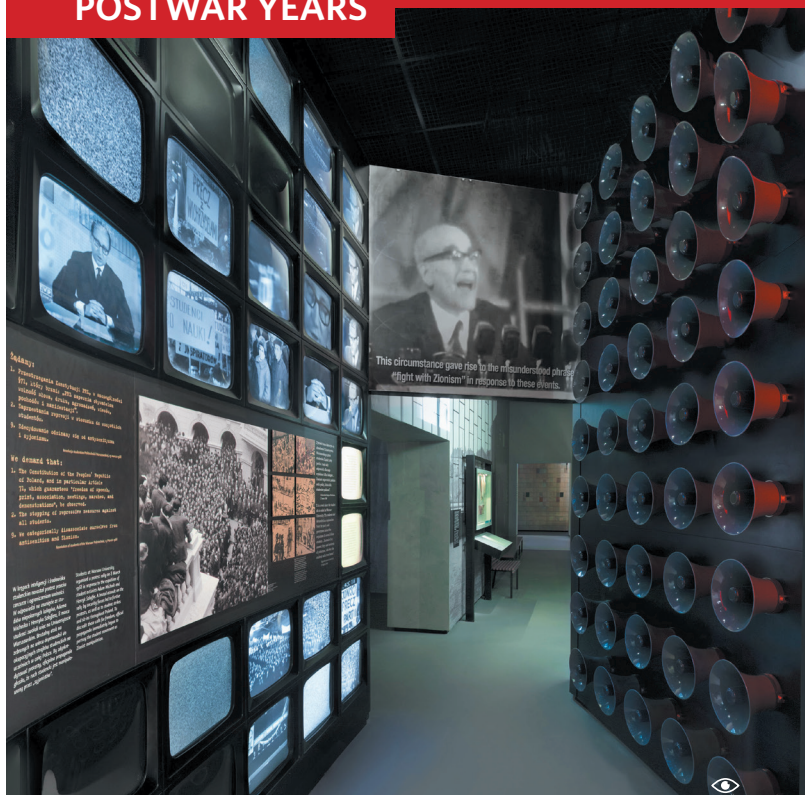
DEATH CAMPS

In January 1942, at a conference in Wannsee, German officials and army officers planned the annihilation of Europe's eleven million Jews. The Germans located all the death camps in occupied Poland, because this was where Europe's largest Jewish population lived. A multimedia Deportation Map chronicles the process of bringing Jews to the death camps in Kulmhof (Chełmno), Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Majdanek. Six million European Jews were killed in the Holocaust. Three million of them were Polish Jews. → **6**

G7



POSTWAR YEARS



Barely 300,000 Polish Jews survived the war, most of them in the Soviet Union. The most urgent question for them was whether to stay in Poland or to leave. Many left, most of them for British Mandate Palestine, where they played an important role in the creation of the State of Israel. Those who remained in Poland helped to rebuild the country and also Jewish communal life. Following the antisemitic campaign of 1968, only about 10,000 Jews remained in Poland. After 1989, with the fall of communism, there is a renewal of Jewish life on a small scale. The enormous Jewish presence in Polish consciousness is seen in festivals of Jewish culture, Christian–Jewish dialogue, films and books, courses in Jewish Studies and many artistic projects. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews is also part of this story.



COMMEMORATION

Follow the process of creating the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, which was unveiled on the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto in 1948. This monument became an icon of the fight for freedom and dignity in Poland and abroad. → 1