Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

A trip to the POLIN Museum in Warsaw: a thousand years of memory and the deafening echo of silence.

Viaje al museo POLIN de Varsovia: mil años de memoria y el eco ensordecedor del silencio.

DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31.e0120

Yuleisy Cruz Lezcano
Azienda USL di Bologna
(ITALY)
CE: yulicruzlezcano2@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3721-2124

Abstract
This work examines the history of the Holocaust, focusing on Jewish life in Poland, the ghettos, the resistance, and the preservation of historical memory through archives, literature, and museums. It analyses the legal construction of anti-Semitism, collaboration in different European countries, and the organisation of the extermination camps. It highlights the POLIN Museum in Warsaw as a space for education and ethical reflection, as well as clandestine documentation initiatives such as the Oyneg Shabes archive and the literature of survivors such as Primo Levi. The methodology combines participant observation in the museum with bibliographic and documentary research, integrating direct experiences with academic analysis to understand historical events and their relevance.

Keywords: POLIN Museum; Jewish history in Poland; Warsaw Ghetto; Warsaw Ghetto.

Resumen
Este trabajo examina la historia del Holocausto, enfocándose en la vida judía en Polonia, los guetos, la resistencia y la preservación de la memoria histórica a través de archivos, literatura y museos. Analiza la construcción legal del antisemitismo, la colaboración en distintos países europeos y la organización de los campos de exterminio. Se destaca el Museo POLIN de Varsovia como espacio de educación y reflexión ética, así como iniciativas de documentación clandestina como el archivo Oyneg Shabes y la literatura de sobrevivientes como Primo Levi. La metodología combina la observación participante en el museo con investigación bibliográfica y documental, integrando experiencias directas con análisis académico para comprender los hechos históricos y su relevancia.

Palabras clave: Museo POLIN; Historia judía en Polonia; Gueto de Varsovia; Gueto de Varsovia.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

Introduction

To speak of the Holocaust is to confront one of the darkest abysses of human history, understanding not only dates and figures, but also the genealogy of hatred, ideological radicalisation and ethical renunciation that made the Shoah possible. This genocide did not arise out of nowhere, but was the culmination of historical processes of anti-Semitism, racial nationalism and the bureaucratisation of violence. Studying it is a moral act: it reveals how human dignity can be ignored, turning the other into an object or a problem.

Despite the extensive literature, gaps remain regarding Jewish life prior to the genocide, the cultural wealth that was destroyed, the various forms of resistance, and the role of indifference and collaboration. Accounts such as the one that follows have profound cultural value: they allow us to understand what happened, how and why, and its current significance. Visiting places of remembrance such as the POLIN Museum reactivates the responsibility of each generation and the need to recognise each victim as a specific human being, as emphasised by Primo Levi in his work and his fundamental ethical question: "Consider this a man".

Beginning of the journey

I began my visit to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews with the impression that, before its display cases told me stories, its own building did so: its walls, its empty space, its architecture. But this museum was not created immediately after the war, nor in the early post-war years: its construction was part of a collective, cultural and political process, long, slow, full of symbolic gaps, until a society decided to come to terms with its past. Its history, as the panels explained to me, began to take shape in 1995, when the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland proposed institutionalising a place of its own to tell the story of Polish Jews. The land, in Muranów, on the site of the former Jewish quarter and the ruins of the ghetto, was donated by the city of Warsaw. In 2005, the project was formalised through a public-private partnership between the Association, the State and the city, and that same year an international competition chose the design by the Finnish studio Lahdelma & Mahlamäki. The project was not immediate: the final documents were consolidated in 2008. It was not until 30 June 2009 that the first stone was laid, the moment when the old idea began to transform into real foundations. Construction continued until 2012 and the building was officially inaugurated on 19 April 2013; this date was not chosen at random: it coincided with the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

Ghetto Uprising. The central exhibition—the "Core Exhibition," which traces a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland—finally opened to the public on 28 October 2014.

Walking through the museum made me understand that this chronology—1995, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014—is not an administrative detail: it is the manifestation of a country that took decades to muster the social and political courage to look at its past. The building, with its glass and copper façade, its large reception hall whose walls undulate as if to recall an open wound, its symbolic connection to the Ghetto Uprising monument, everything is designed to give voice not only to what life was like, but also to the silence, the emptiness, what was torn away.

Leaving the lobby behind and entering the rooms, history ceased to be dry facts. I discovered that, before the horror, Poland was home to one of the densest and most vibrant Jewish communities in Europe. In 1939, it is estimated that there were around 3.5 million Jews in Poland. Some 350,000–380,000 Jews lived in Warsaw, representing nearly 30% of the city's population: it was the second largest urban Jewish concentration in the world, behind only New York.

The display cases, photographs, everyday objects, documents, testimonies, reconstructions of synagogues and scenes of urban life portrayed a prosperous community. Jews were merchants, artisans, doctors, intellectuals; they founded newspapers and theatres, schools, and participated actively in social life. Much of that cultural, spiritual and economic wealth came alive before my eyes, not as a distant memory, but as a presence that had really existed. But that vitality was brutally interrupted. After the German invasion on 1 September 1939, the first measures of exclusion quickly followed: closures of Jewish institutions, confiscation of property, compulsory identification, forced labour. In Warsaw, a Jewish council, the Warsaw Judenrat, chaired by Adam Czerniaków, was soon imposed with the mandate to implement Nazi orders. In October-November 1940, the creation of the Warsaw Ghetto was decreed: the Jews of Warsaw—and later Jews from other regions—were forced to move there, and within a few months the ghetto was sealed off. At its peak, around 1941, between 400,000 and 460,000 people lived there in a space that represented only a tiny fraction of the city, subjected to overcrowding, hunger, disease and systematic degradation.

As I walked through the room dedicated to the Holocaust, I realised that this was not an isolated event: it was not 'accidental'. It was the extreme, monstrous outcome of centuries of prejudice, legal restrictions, social stigmatisation and progressive exclusion. It did not begin with the war; Nazi violence was the end point of a path of hatred. Community life, diversity, culture—everything that had flourished for centuries—was wiped out.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

And yet, not everything was destruction without memory. The POLIN preserves documents, letters, objects, testimonies, and memories, although much of that legacy survived through clandestine mechanisms—hidden, buried, concealed by people who risked their lives to preserve something that the horror wanted to erase. That silent work, that intimate resistance, often individual, sometimes collective, made me realise that the survivor's testimony is not only historical evidence: it is an act of dignity. As I left the museum, with natural light streaming in through the large windows, I remembered that the name "Polin" alludes to the inspiring legend that Poland was a land of refuge for Jews, "Polin," "rest here." That name, that building, that exhibition are not just a memory: they are an act of symbolic reparation, a bridge between past and present.

Visiting POLIN meant for me to look squarely at a complex history: of life, destruction, memory, loss, resistance. It showed me that Jewish history in Poland is not a forgotten chapter, but an essential part of the country's history; that to hide, forget or deny it would be to prolong the violence; and that memory, actively preserved, transmitted and shared, is a moral duty to the victims, their descendants and all of humanity. And as I walked through its halls, seeing each object, each testimony, hearing the echo of lives that are no longer there, I understood: remembering is not a passive act, but a form of resistance; it is rebuilding stolen dignity, it is affirming that we can never accept that an entire people be condemned to oblivion.

I soon discovered that POLIN was not just a museum about the Holocaust. It was, above all, a museum about **a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland**, supported by documents, archives, objects and testimonies preserved with almost moving rigour. The institution claims to hold **more than 6,000 material objects**, **6,500 archival items**, **tens of thousands of photographs** and **hundreds of oral history testimonies** (POLIN Museum, *Collections and Archives Overview*, 2022). I suddenly understood that I was not looking at a poetic evocation of a vanished past, but at a living archive, an ongoing investigation into life and destruction. I stopped in front of display cases containing **birth certificates, marriage certificates, and citizenship records** issued by Polish municipalities between the 18th and 20th centuries. These were ordinary documents that spoke of an extraordinary reality: the Jews of Poland had not been "tolerated foreigners," but **citizens recognised by the state**, with a precise legal status. Historiography refers to this early period as **the "Polish Pax Judaica"** (Hundert, *Jews in Poland-Lithuania in the Eighteenth Century*, 2004), a time when the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth became the largest centre of Jewish life in the world.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

As I walked through the medieval gallery, a digital reconstruction showed the **settlement privileges granted by Casimir the Great in 1334**, followed by municipal documents from Krakow, Lublin and Vilnius confirming the economic role of Jewish merchants and craftsmen (Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry*, 1988). I understood then that those thousand years were not simply cultural continuity: they were a political framework, a legally recognised coexistence, a shared citizenship which, when destroyed by occupations, collaborations and racialised legislation, became the decisive factor that allowed genocide to take place.

That idea—that the Shoah began with the **loss of citizenship**, not with the trains—became clearer as I read the panels dedicated to the rise of Nazism. The dates I had studied so many times in books appeared here in an inexorable narrative sequence: **30 January 1933**, Hitler appointed chancellor; **April 1933**, first professional exclusion laws; **15 September 1935**, Nuremberg Laws; **9-10 November 1938**, Kristallnacht. Each date, the curatorial text pointed out, marked a new step in the legal emptying that would turn European Jews into expellable subjects (Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, 1997-2007). When the date **1 September 1939** appeared, the day of the German invasion of Poland, I felt a blow to my chest. I had read hundreds of times that more than **three million Jews** lived in Polish territory at the time (Snyder, *Black Earth*, 2015), but seeing their demographic weight represented, with Warsaw reaching **30% Jewish population** before the war, gave the figure an overwhelming human presence. In the small **shtetls**, where Yiddish was the everyday language, the Jewish community was not a minority: it was the central structure of social life. The exhibition showed how, just weeks after the occupation, the first ghettos emerged. The Warsaw ghetto, closed in **November 1940**, is narrated through the diary of **Adam Czerniaków**, now preserved at the Jewish Historical Institute. I read his almost broken notes, in which he described the impossibility of managing a space condemned to suffocation.

Further on, in the section dedicated to **Operation Barbarossa** on **22 June 1941**, a screen projected a map of the massacres committed by the **Einsatzgruppen**. There, the cold data from studies such as Raul Hilberg's (*The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1961) took on a brutal dimension: in **Babi Yar**, on **29 and 30 September 1941** alone, more than **33,000 people** were murdered.

Silent doors led me to a reconstruction of the villa where the **Wannsee Conference** was held on **20 January 1942**. On a table were reproductions of the original documents, written in blood-curdling administrative language. I inevitably recalled Hannah Arendt's reflections (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963) on the banality of evil, and I understood that what was most shocking was not the explicit hatred, but

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

the bureaucratic coldness of those who organised the logistics of extermination. From there, the narrative moved on to **Operation Reinhard** (1942-1943) and the camps at Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. I paused at the section dedicated to the latter: between **July and September 1942**, more than **250,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto** were deported to Treblinka (Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka*, 1987). Next to me, a panel recounted the **uprising of 19 April 1943**, led by Mordechai Anielewicz and the ŻOB, one of the most significant urban resistance movements in occupied Europe.

Then came Auschwitz. I knew the figures by heart: more than **1.1 million victims**, **900,000** of whom **were Jewish**, but the display case containing **suitcases, shoes and transport documents** made me feel something that the figures do not convey: the closeness between a life cut short and the moment before extermination. In a side room, I discovered fragments of **the Oyneg Shabes archive**, directed by Emanuel Ringelblum in the Warsaw ghetto. Seeing the manuscripts, written between 1940 and 1943 and buried in milk cans to be found after the war, made me realise that writing had not only been testimony: it had been resistance.

The museum did not shy away from the most difficult areas. Through studies such as those by **Jan Grabowski** (*Hunt for the Jews*, 2013) and **Timothy Snyder**, it presented the phenomena of collaboration, denunciation and local participation in the persecution. Far from assigning collective blame, this section sought to show the moral and social complexity of the period: anti-Semitism, fear, opportunism, but also rescues and civil resistance.

Further on, a quote from Zygmunt Bauman was projected onto a curved wall: modernity, he said, was not only the context of the Holocaust, but its structural condition of possibility. I was reminded of **Theodor W. Adorno**, who wrote that "after Auschwitz, writing poetry is barbaric" (*Prismen*, 1955), and of **Emmanuel Levinas**, for whom ethics is born in the face of the other. The exhibition articulated these philosophical voices with historical facts, as if measuring the moral temperature of an entire continent.

The historical journey culminated in the post-war period. Records of displaced persons, visa applications, and emigration documents to the United States or Israel narrated life after the catastrophe. I looked at the names of those who had managed to survive, many trying to rebuild their lost citizenship, others leaving forever the country where their ancestors had lived for centuries. Finally, I crossed the gallery that reconstructs the synagogue of Gwoździec, a work created by contemporary craftsmen based on photographs and drawings taken before its destruction. It was an act of restoration

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

and, at the same time, a reminder that not everything can be recovered: only what memory decides to retell.

When the outside light began to filter in from the exit, I understood that the hyphen between "Polish Jews" is not a simple linguistic sign, but a political category that sustains centuries of coexistence. Its rupture, first symbolic, then legal and finally physical, was the beginning of the disaster. And as I crossed the final hall, I felt that protecting that hyphen today, in any country, under any conflict, is to protect the political dignity that prevents humanity from falling back into dispossession and extermination. The automatic doors opened, but I remained motionless for a few seconds. Outside, Warsaw continued with its daily rhythm; inside me, something had changed forever. POLIN had transformed my way of looking at history, and also my way of looking at the present. I felt that my visit was not yet over; rather, that I had entered a dimension that did not close when I left the museum. I stood on the threshold, took a deep breath, and knew that this story, mine and POLIN's, had not yet had its final say.

As I made my way through the final rooms of the museum, I felt something change in the air. It was not only the density of history, but the way each object seemed to emit a faint pulse, like the weak beat of a heart that refuses to stop. I had spent hours among buried documents, secretly written words, and the remains of lives suspended in display cases. But then something unexpected happened: in an almost silent corner, far from the grand narratives, I found a small note written in shaky handwriting. A barely legible sentence: *"Let someone read this, even if I am not here*." It said no more and did not indicate who had written it, or on what date, or whether it belonged to a child, a mother, a teacher or a combatant. It was just a plea suspended in time. But that sentence encapsulated everything I had seen up to that point: hunger, confinement, resistance, clandestine writing, anger, fear, hope. I understood that memory was not a set of data but that minimal gesture: offering a sentence to the future, without knowing if any future would exist.

Everything I had seen at POLIN—the ghettos, the uprisings, the buried objects, the voices of Ringelblum, Levi, and so many others—took on a new dimension from that note. Because, deep down, that was exactly what they had all done: leave messages for those who would come after them. Documenting life and death not only as a record, but as a call, a warning, a moral legacy. What they were asking for was not compassion, but responsibility. I stood there, in front of that note, for a long time, unable to move. And as I looked at it, an uncomfortable idea began to take shape: the evil that historians spoke of, that 'rational coldness' that allowed entire peoples to organise the extermination of

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

others, was not a distant phenomenon confined to the past. It had happened in Poland, Germany, Lithuania, Hungary, France, Greece, Italy... and always with the participation of neighbours, acquaintances, ordinary citizens. It was not just a German machine: it was a European moral decay, a human fracture that crossed borders and languages. And as I thought about it, I remembered Browning's words about those ordinary men turned executioners, Jan Gross's observations about Jedwabne, Bartov and Korb's reconstructions of local violence. I understood, with unbearable weight, that horror is not born solely of a totalitarian state, but of the sum of small individual decisions: to remain silent, to look the other way, to take advantage of a neighbour's dispossession, to normalise humiliation, to accept that someone is less than oneself. I then felt a strange, cold, intimate fear: the recognition that no society is immune to such a fall.

I left the museum as it was getting dark. Muranów was quiet, as if the streets, despite the traffic and trams, retained an ancient breath. I walked aimlessly, imagining how that same ground sounded under the footsteps of those who are no longer here. And then I realised that something from POLIN remained with me, something deeper than sadness or indignation: a question I did not want to answer, but which lingered persistently in my mind, because if they wrote for us to read, what is it for us to write? If they resisted so that there would be no forgetting, what does it mean to resist today? If they left boxes buried for a possible future, what are we leaving behind?

I walked a few more metres and stopped in front of a modern, rebuilt, clean façade where nothing suggested the past. But beneath that surface, I knew, were still the ruins of the ghetto, the basement vaults where the boxes were hidden, the holes where entire families starved to death. The city was like a palimpsest: a new life had been written over the horror, but the old lines could still be read, if one knew where to look. I took a deep breath and felt the cold. And something inside me understood that this story, even though it was being addressed by the museum, through documents and recovered names, was not yet over. Not for me, not for Europe, not for the world. Because memory alone is not enough; it is only the first step. The rest, everything else, depends on us.

I walked to the tram station and, while waiting, watched people pass by: young people with backpacks, an elderly man wearing a cap, a woman pushing a pram. Everyday life, simple, peaceful. And yet, the shadow of the past stretched out silently, not to crush the present, but to remind us: **every human gesture can be the beginning of light or darkness**. The tram arrived. I got on. I sat by the window. The lights of Warsaw began to glide like reflections on the glass. And at that moment, **I felt that the real journey was just beginning**. I had left the museum... but I had not left history. And as the tram

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

moved into the night, I understood that there was still something more to discover, something I had not seen inside the display cases, something that awaited me outside the museum, perhaps in another archive, in another city, in another voice I had not yet heard. A missing piece, a bridge to what would come next.

As I reflected further after leaving POLIN, I realised that what I had witnessed could not be exhausted in a sensory or emotional experience. It demanded a deeper intellectual elaboration, a reading that would allow me to inscribe what I had seen into a philosophical and sociological framework that would account for the magnitude of the crime and, above all, its possibility. Because the Shoah, beyond the concrete horror, constitutes a radical challenge to the human condition and the structures that shape it.

In this sense, **Hannah Arendt**'s thesis on the *banality of evil*, formulated on the basis of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and published in 1963, immediately resonated with me. Arendt insisted that the perpetrators were not necessarily exceptional monsters, but ordinary individuals, embedded in bureaucratic machinery and collective logic that turned extermination into a 'normalised' task (Arendt 1963). **The danger**, according to her, did not lie in explicit cruelty, but in the absence of critical thinking and automatic obedience to totalising structures. This disturbing interpretation explained why so many European men and women participated, collaborated or remained silent. But understanding this process could not be limited to the figure of the diligent bureaucrat. In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), sociologist **Zygmunt Bauman** demonstrated that the instrumental rationality of modernity, technical efficiency, the segmentation of labour and the primacy of administrative logic were necessary conditions for the genocidal machinery to function. Bauman emphasised that the Holocaust was not a regression to pre-modern barbarism, but an extreme product of modernity itself, capable of turning the destruction of millions into an optimised technical operation (Bauman 1989). That 'efficiency' was embodied in every structure I had observed in the museum: forms, lists, wagons, classifications, stamps, administrative euphemisms.

After the war, many societies attempted to rewrite their participation. The idea spread that they acted exclusively under coercion, thus avoiding confronting the local dimension of complicity. However, research conducted since the 1990s has dismantled this self-image. **Jan T. Gross**, in *Neighbours* (2001), documented the direct participation of Jedwabne residents in the murder of hundreds of Jews in July 1941, without German intervention. **Christopher Browning**, in *Ordinary Men* (1992), showed how a battalion of German police, mostly ordinary men, not fanatics, participated in

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

mass shootings in Poland, guided not by coercion but by group conformity and a sense of duty. **Omer Bartov** analysed local violence in Eastern Galicia, where fragmented identities and social tensions facilitated collaboration (Bartov 2007). Contemporary historiography thus confirms that dehumanisation was not imposed solely from above: it required social acceptance, participation or silence. This idea, that there is no abstract "people" responsible, but rather networks of actors, decisions, inertia and cowardice, was visible in every display case at POLIN. The **objects**, far from being mere relics, showed how entire communities were affected by ethical and political decisions: choosing to help or denounce, hide or hand over, uphold dignity or abandon it. History ceased to be a struggle between victims and executioners and revealed a web of pressures, collaborations, fears and rationalisations. Added to this microhistorical dimension was the tragic geography that the museum reconstructed with precision. **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, operational between 1940 and 1945, where more than 1.1 million people were murdered; **Treblinka**, active between July 1942 and October 1943, with some 800,000 victims; **Sobibor**, between May 1942 and October 1943, with around 250,000 dead; **Belzec**, between March and December 1942, with nearly 435,000 murdered (Friedländer 2007). These were not names: they were landscapes designed for death. What is disturbing is that the bureaucratic rationality of modernity, described by Bauman, was present at every stage: transport, classification, extermination, concealment.

At the same time, ghettos emerged as places where daily life continued to exist under inhumane conditions. The **Warsaw Ghetto**, established in October 1940 and inhabited by more than 400,000 people, was a constrained but active society, with clandestine schools, theatre, libraries and solidarity networks. **Lodz**, under the strict control of **Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski** and the Judenrat, revealed ethical tensions over obedience and survival. Ghettos such as **Kraków**, **Lublin** and **Białystok** showed similar patterns: systematic segregation, planned starvation, constant surveillance. These spaces were laboratories of oppression, but also of passive resistance.

This resistance was powerfully captured in the **Oyneg Shabes** archive, directed by **Emanuel Ringelblum** from 1940 until his murder in 1944. Today, these documents constitute one of the most important collections of primary sources on Jewish life under occupation (Ringelblum 1958–1962). They contain reports on hunger, health, trade, religion, art, education and collective morale. It was an intellectual and ethical form of resistance: documenting in order to leave a mark, so that the future could know and understand.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

But memory did not end with the war. Institutions such as **Yad Vashem** (founded in 1953, permanent exhibition since 2005) and the **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum** (opened in 1993) have developed documentation, research and education centres that link the past with contemporary debates. And there are also forms of intimate memory, such as the **Izkor books**, compiled by survivors since the late 1940s, which rescue the local histories of devastated communities. Nearly a thousand volumes now make up an emotional and documentary cartography of the vanished Jewish world (Yerushalmi 1982).

As I reflected on all this, I realised that the Holocaust did not arise out of a vacuum: it was a cumulative process. The degradation of rights, the normalisation of hatred, nationalist propaganda, the decline of democratic institutions, indifference to growing injustices: all these were preliminary steps. **Saul Friedländer** insists that anti-Jewish radicalisation was neither linear nor inevitable, but rather a process of interaction between state policies and predisposed social climates (Friedländer 2007). This intertwining, rather than major events, explained the fragility of modern civilisation.

That is why leaving POLIN meant facing a mirror, and in it, the past illuminated the present. It was impossible not to think about current conflicts, about the resurgence of hate speech, about wars where entire populations are dehumanised. The memory of the Shoah, I understood, does not belong only to the Jewish people or to the European continent: it belongs to humanity as a universal warning.

At that moment, the phrase that had accompanied me from the beginning — *"Something is no longer as it was* before" — took on a definitive tone. Not as a melancholic echo, but as an ethical commitment. Memory cannot be just a retrospective exercise: it must become a compass for action. As **Primo Levi** pointed out, *"it happened, therefore it can happen again"* (Levi 1986, p. 227). That phrase is no longer limited to closing a chapter of the past: it opens up a responsibility towards the future, because preserving the memory of the Shoah means recognising that human dignity is fragile; that democracy can erode quickly; that discourses of exclusion are seeds of violence; that indifference can be complicit. It also implies remembering that, even in the darkest moments, human dignity can resist, through writing, archiving, education, and speech.

When I walked through the museum door, I was not the same person. And I understood that this change should not remain within me: it had to be translated into an attitude towards the world. In recognising the other as a subject, in rejecting dehumanisation, in upholding memory as an ethical tool. Because as long as there are those who remember, and those who act, there is still hope that history will not betray humanity again.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

When I left the museum building behind, I thought my tour was over. But as I walked down Anielewicza Avenue, I realised that the real visit was just beginning. What POLIN had awakened in me was not only memory, but an urgent need to understand, to reconstruct in my mind what documents, archives and historians had been trying to decipher for decades. I thought of the ghetto fighters, and the next day I returned to contemplate a dark and powerful block that emerges like a wound in the middle of the modern city. Around it, the traffic lights continued their indifferent course, and I thought of something Christopher Browning had discovered when studying the testimonies of Battalion 101: the violence was not perpetrated by abstract spectres, but by ordinary men, men who knew streets like these, men who perhaps never imagined they would be transformed by peer pressure, obedience or fear. In that nocturnal silence, the faces of those people seemed to blend with those of the former inhabitants of Muranów. I kept walking and the cold hit my face. Warsaw has a strange quality: it seems to contain both the weight of the irretrievable and the vitality of a city that has decided to move forward. I tried to imagine what it would be like to walk through this area in 1941, with the walls up, the trams diverted, the constant surveillance. I couldn't. But I knew, because I had read it so many times in the Oyneg Shabes archives, that inside the ghetto life went on in a surprising way: there were clandestine schools, literary debates, plays, improvised lectures. Ringelblum described it as a space where culture became resistance, where teaching a child or distributing bread was a political act.

I then thought of something that Saul Friedländer emphasises: that anti-Jewish radicalisation did not happen overnight, but was a process of mutual intensification between ideology and practice. That interaction had taken shape in these very places, where seemingly small decisions—an inspector ignoring abuse, a neighbour informing on someone, a bureaucrat signing a paper—paved the way to extermination. And suddenly, the weight of that idea hit me with almost physical force: the camps were not born in Auschwitz; they were born here, in the streets, in the offices, in attitudes.

I let myself be carried along by my aimless steps and, almost without realising it, I reached the intersection where a sign pointed to the old route to Umschlagplatz. I felt a shiver. Not because I was walking towards a symbolic place, but because at that moment I understood what Zygmunt Bauman meant when he wrote that modernity was not the negation of the Holocaust, but its condition. The road to the deportation point was linear, straight, almost too orderly. And that 'orderliness' was unbearable to me: it was the same logic that turned men and women into numbers, into files, into payloads for an efficient system.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

I kept walking, knowing that almost nothing remained of the original site. But I also knew that thousands of people had walked this same stretch, accompanied by screams, blows, children's cries, and curt orders in German. Hilberg described it with clinical precision: every institution—railways, police, civil administration, industry—had meticulously fulfilled its role. And I, walking through an almost empty space, could feel that invisible machinery still vibrating beneath the ground. When I arrived, there was nothing but a white, silent memorial. I leaned against the cold stone and closed my eyes. And that was when history ceased to be abstract: I did not think about figures, statistics, or chronologies; I thought about the small decisions that allowed this to happen. The woman who decides not to open the door to her neighbour; the civil servant who files a document without asking questions; the policeman who looks the other way. Because, as Jan Gross demonstrated in his study of Jedwabne, evil does not unfold only from above: it flourishes when society abdicates morally. I stayed there for a long time. When I opened my eyes, Warsaw was still moving around me as if nothing had happened. And yet something in me had changed: an inner shift, an ethical unease that could no longer fade away. I thought about what Omer Bartov says about Eastern Galicia: that communities did not collapse solely because of external violence, but because they had already been eroded by years of prejudice, tensions and exclusionary national narratives.

As I walked back to the tram, I understood that memory is not about knowing the facts, but about letting the facts force us to think. And that perhaps the most important lesson is not to be found in documents or statistics, but in the question that every generation must ask itself: What would I have done?

That question does not seek to blame, but to awaken. Because, as Primo Levi wrote, *"every era has its own fascism"*; and while contexts change, the social mechanisms that allow dehumanisation can resurface in new forms: nationalist discourses, wars that erase the adversary, propaganda that reduces people to categories.

Revista Argos
REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS LITERARIOS, LINGÜÍSTICA Y CREACIÓN LITERARIA
e-ISSN: 1562-4072
Vol. 13, número 31, enero-junio, 2026 DOI: 10.32870/revistaargos.v13.n31
CUCSH

References

Levi, P., 1958. *If This Is a Man (Se questo è un uomo)*. Turin: Einaudi.

Roskies, D.G. & Diamant, N., 2012. *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*. Brandeis University Press. [Printed 2012 / edition cited 2013]

Améry, J., 1990. *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. New York: Schocken Books.

Kassow, S.D., 2007. *Who Will Write Our History? Rediscovering the Oyneg Shabes Archive*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, 2013. *Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews*. Warsaw: Officially opened on 28 October 2013.