

# POLIN Introduction

*For delivery at the museum lobby, 10:10–10:20*

Good morning.

Before we begin, I want to share why I believe this visit to POLIN is essential, not only for our trip, but for our understanding of Jewish history.

When many Jews come to Poland, the itinerary centers almost entirely on the destruction: Auschwitz, Majdanek. These visits are necessary. They give moral clarity and historical truth. And we, too, will be visiting these and other important sites during our trip.

But I believe that just as a trip to Israel is incomplete without both ANU and Yad Vashem, one illuminating the depth and diversity of Jewish creativity, the other confronting the catastrophe of the Shoah in all its moral, historical, and human complexity, so too a trip to Poland is incomplete without both Auschwitz and POLIN.

POLIN, since opening in 2014, has re-centered Jewish life in Poland as a thousand-year civilization, not only a place of loss.

There is a well-known tradition that when Jews first arrived in this region, they saw in the word *Polin* the Hebrew phrase *Po Lin*, meaning "*Here, dwell.*"

Commentators connect this to the idea that Jewish journeys are never random; they are part of a longer unfolding of Jewish presence in the world. For centuries, Jews did indeed dwell here, building communities, shaping culture, and contributing to Jewish and European history in remarkable ways.

As Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, said in a 2024 interview, the POLIN museum helps Jews see "not only how their ancestors died, but how they lived."

This matters because Jewish dignity matters. Jewish creativity matters. Jewish continuity matters.

## How We Will Use Our Time

POLIN is structured as eight chronological galleries, spanning 1,000 years of Jewish history in Poland, from the first Jewish arrivals to the post-Communist era.

Since we have roughly two hours, we will focus on six galleries that together trace a full arc:

*dwelling* → *daily life* → *transformation* → *modern vibrancy* → *rupture* → *return*

## The Six Galleries

**1. "Paradisus Iudaeorum" (Golden Age, 1569–1648)** A flourishing Jewish civilization with communal courts, economic influence, strong leadership structures, and brilliant religious creativity. Do not miss the wooden synagogue ceiling reconstruction.

**2. "The Jewish Town" (1648–1772)** Daily Jewish life as it truly was: the home, the synagogue, the street, the market, and the rhythms of community that shaped families for generations.

**3. "Encounters with Modernity" (1772–1914)** Jewish transformation during the modern era: political movements, Haskalah, Hasidism, a flourishing press, changing roles for women, economic expansion, and early Zionism.

**4. "On the Jewish Street" (1918–1939)** Interwar Poland was home to 3.3 million Jews, the largest Jewish community in the world outside America. Yiddish theater, Zionist youth movements, Bundist politics, Hasidic courts, secular intellectuals, Polish patriots. This is the "before" picture that gives the Holocaust gallery its full weight.

**5. "The Holocaust" (1939–1945)** The Warsaw Ghetto, resistance networks, underground education and documentation, and the struggle to maintain dignity during annihilation.

**6. "Postwar" (1945–Present)** Survivors returning to ruined towns, rebuilding under Communism, the challenges of identity, cultural revival, and the ongoing story of Jews in Poland today.

## Three Practical Things Before We Enter

- **Meet back at the cloakroom at 12:10.** We need to be out of the museum by 12:30 to make lunch at 1:00.
- **If you are running short on time, prioritize Galleries 3, 4, and 5:** Modernity, On the Jewish Street, and Holocaust. That is the emotional and historical core.
- **The Holocaust gallery is dense. Plan for 25 minutes there.** It is okay to sit with what you see. Take a breath before you enter Postwar.

One note: Gallery 1 contains a breathtaking wooden synagogue ceiling reconstruction. Many visitors linger there and then find themselves rushing through Gallery 5. Resist. Keep moving.

## Closing

We are about to enter a thousand-year conversation between our Jewish ancestors and their land, their faith, their neighbors, their ideas, and our future.

May these six galleries sharpen our understanding of what was built, deepen our sense of what was lost, and strengthen our commitment to what must continue.

This is not only history. It is our inheritance.

Let us begin.