

Just how many Jewish museums do we need?

BY SHARMAN KADISH

'MAKE synagogue the focus of expanded museum' ran the headline in the *Jewish Telegraph's* progress report on the Manchester Jewish Museum's Heritage Lottery funded development project.

The speaker, Cilly Kugelmann, knows a thing or two about Jewish museums. She is programme director at the Berlin Jewish Museum — the first Jewish museum to be opened in Germany since the Second World War.

She is also due to speak at a conference on Jewish museums and the 'Politics of Display' taking place at Leeds University next week.

Back in 1996, I wrote that the key to a successful Jewish museum is largely location. It needs to be at the centre of great cities where it can attract sufficient 'visitor footfall'.

Besides a central geographical location, a successful Jewish museum must also be located inside or beside a building of out-



MODEL CONSERVATION PROJECT: The Manchester Jewish Museum

equivalent of the East End of London.

Every summer, the museum runs regular heritage trails around the other surviving sites of Jewish interest in the neighbourhood, all of which, it must be said, are now sites at risk.

Manchester's Jewish Museum is a model conservation project. After at least three attempts, last year it finally landed its big HLF capital development grant, potentially worth more than £3 million.

This is well deserved. MJM has attracted 20,000 visitors annually, the majority being young people on school trips.

The restored synagogue itself has been — and will remain — its chief exhibit.

As Heritage Open Days regularly prove, there is no shortage of people, tourists and locals alike, who are curious, if sometimes

Museum runs regular summer heritage trails

coy, about visiting a synagogue, even one that is in regular use.

The thirst for accurate information about Jewish life, religion and culture is certainly out there.

The unhealthy obsession with dead Jews has run its course. Jewish museums that primarily serve as Holocaust memorials have been opened in many places, often in daring new buildings such as Berlin and most recently, Warsaw.

These buildings are the products of both restitution and regeneration.

I question the appropriateness of Holocaust museums in countries upon whose soil the atrocities were not committed and, moreover, that host sizeable Jewish communities today.

Outside Israel, only New York

City can afford the luxury of more than one Jewish museum — the original Jewish Museum housed in the former Warburg family mansion on Fifth Avenue's 'Museum Mile', and a completely separate new-build (1997) museum at Battery Park, a Holocaust museum in all but name; The Museum of Jewish Heritage.

Prime Minister David Cameron's pledge of £50 million last year to build a 'National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre' in central London is generous but misdirected.

Britain already has an excellent 'National Holocaust Centre and Museum' (formerly known as The Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre).

It was built from scratch in 1995 by dedicated 'righteous gentiles' James and Stephen Smith in the village of Laxton, outside Nottingham.

Holocaust Memorial Day, as even one of its 'architects', the late Professor David Cesarani, conceded, has become a focus for ethnicities competing for public space to out-do one another in genocides.

Thus, a modest Holocaust gallery that tells the stories of refugees and survivors who made it to London or Manchester, a display that sets their experiences within the local context, is all that is needed inside well-funded Jewish museums housed in historic synagogues.

An outstanding historic synagogue is enough to get the punters in. There is really no need to 'rebrand' our Jewish museums, certainly not as Holocaust memorials, nor as 'Centres of Tolerance', 'Museums of Immigration' or 'Museums of Identity'.

In Britain's big cities, especially in multi-faith Manchester or London, Jews should be proud of their identity.

Jewish museums should exude self-confidence. This is the most effective way in which they can help foster good interfaith relations.

They should be staffed both by Jewishly-educated Jews and informed non-Jews. If not, we will end up with watered-down Jewish museums stuffed with Chanukah bushes, pitted in competition against other institutions that do it so much better, like the Imperial War Museum.

Britain's senior 'ethnic minority' will lose out to newer-comers on the block, especially to the Muslims. After all, their numbers are at least 10 times greater than ours.

Just how many Jewish museums do we actually need? I will answer my own rhetorical question in a moment.

Remember that setting up a museum is one thing; capital development another; and long-term sustainability quite another altogether.

Since the 1990s, public funding has been generous in large part thanks to the National Lottery. However, the economic climate is now very bleak.

The Heritage Sector has suffered 40 per cent cuts over the past couple of years.

Britain's comprehensive system of Heritage Protection, delivered by English Heritage (now 'Historic England') and Local Authority Conservation Officers, has been emasculated. It used to be the envy of the Western world.

We Jews have always prided ourselves on our self-help philanthropy.

So the demeaning urge to 'get as much as we can' out of the state needs to be resisted more than ever before.

In any case, once the Government or the Lottery have made the capital outlay, the perpetual challenge of finding revenue funding for the boring stuff like staff salaries and paying the bills remains.

Public funders, private foundations and individual high-worth philanthropists usually want to fund a 'Project', not the people (myself included) who have to do the donkeywork.

So back to the question of how

many Jewish museums do we actually need in this country?

How many are viable and financially sustainable? My answer is: three fully-fledged national Jewish museums, combined with smaller 'Heritage Centre' type interpretative displays in historic synagogues around the country.

London needs its Jewish museum, but it also needs the biggest rethink about both its character and location.

Manchester provides the model. Glasgow has the potential to create 'The Jewish Museum of Scotland' centred on the historic Garnethill Synagogue.

The core already exists in the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre that has occupied the basement since 1987.

Rising Scottish nationalism provides the climate, while the synagogue enjoys an excellent location around the corner from Charles Rennie Mackintosh's world famous Glasgow School of Art.

Pity that Ireland squandered a similar opportunity back in 1999 when the 'cathedral synagogue' of Dublin at Adelaide Road was sacrificed to a greedy and overheated property market.

All that remained thereafter was the Irish Jewish Museum, housed in a former shtetl in Dublin's Portobello.

Gallery tells stories of refugees

It was a poor, cash-strapped affair until, in 2014, planning permission was granted to knock it down and replace it with a purpose-built museum to the tune of 10 million euros.

The source of this funding was unclear, a fact that helped fuel massive objections by locals, sometimes openly antisemitic, and the case went to appeal.

The appeal was upheld, but the development scheme has now been dropped.

From our perspective, it would have been deeply ironic if the undisclosed proceeds from the sale of Adelaide Road had been deployed to destroy the last vestiges of the material heritage of Irish Jewry in the name of a modern Jewish museum.

At Jewish Heritage, we have the experience and the expertise to help create a new, improved Manchester Jewish Museum fit for the 21st century and beyond. We await your call.

Dr Sharman Kadish is founder-director of Jewish Heritage UK. She is author of *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland* (Yale 2011). The new edition of her best-selling guidebook *Jewish Heritage in Britain and Ireland* was published by Historic England last year.

Visit www.jewish-heritage-uk.org where you can donate to the Annual Jewish Heritage Bedek HaBayit ('Repairing The House') Restoration Appeal.



CORE: Glasgow's Garnethill Synagogue, which houses the Archives Centre