

Albert Stankowski<sup>i</sup>

Museum of the History of Polish Jews

The initiator and coordinator of the Virtual Shtetl Project

***The Virtual Shtetl Project. The newest technology used in exploring and teaching history.***

***The meaning of the Virtual Shtetl cannot be overestimated. The project is a pioneering and inspiring step forward in teaching a very important element of the long and teeming with life history of the Polish Jews.***

Martin Gilbert

***Social network services are becoming the source of new types of interaction between the publicity and curators so far accustomed to cooperating only with groups of experts.***

„The New York Times”

The revolution in exploring and teaching history has been achieved with the development of the Internet as the platform of information exchange and a wider access on the international scale to the fast Internet connection. The beginning of the process, which started towards the end of the 1980s, was undoubtedly a huge change in the field of genealogical research. That was more attractive for the average Internet user than traditional historical research (demanding professional skills), because it brought about measurable effects – knowledge of the family micro history. Progressive digitalization of the archival fonds ensured results which were not possible without going for long journeys, often expensive, not necessarily resulting in finding useful information. The Internet development enabled unusually efficient genealogical exchange between the individual enthusiasts from all over the world – something, which once took place with the help of newsletters printed once for a while and sent to subscribers. Internet sites which enable finding relatives and ancestors in the thick of preserved documents or creating family trees have been a huge success, also a commercial one. It can be illustrated by the fact that about 60 million Americans consider genealogy one of their interests, to which they actively devote their time. The great majority of them use the Internet for this purpose.

The next stage in the Internet revolution in exploring history was the growth of educational initiatives, starting from professional ones, organized by universities, to popular science ones. By facilitated access to interactive maps, iconographic sources, and traditional written sources in digitized form the educational offer, which statistical teachers living in the localities distant from large scientific centers may suggest to their students, has been enriched significantly. An excellent example of such an initiative is the European project Judaica Europeana executed by 12 institutions (along with The Jewish Historical Institute of Emanuel Ringelblum), whose aim is to connect via the portal Europeana ([www.europeana.eu](http://www.europeana.eu)) European archives,

libraries and museums providing this way an easy access to Jewish culture . “Judaica Europeana will begin by digitizing millions of pages and thousands of other items selected from the collections of its partner libraries, archives and museums. The next stage will be to aggregate other digital collections on Jews in European cities - wherever they may be.” said Lena Stanley-Clamp, the project's manager and director of the European Association for Jewish Culture.

Moreover, what cannot be overestimated is the impact of the Internet development on the rebirth of the phenomenon of the so-called local history research, which at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century was removed from the main course of research and substituted by that conducted by professional historians in academic centers as it was considered much more significant. The access to the unlimited platform of knowledge exchange such as the Internet, which does not involve huge costs (undoubtedly not comparable e.g. to the costs of the publication of a scientific periodical), provided an opportunity to a lot of enthusiasts of their ‘little’, local history to share their findings with a wider group of target audience, which was not possible before. It facilitated the access to witnesses of events by the historians and enhanced the verification process of the information being provided (the Internet site can be updated on a regular basis). Finally, with the introduction of the latest solutions, such as Google Translate and Google Translator Toolkit, another barrier in the access to information is being slowly removed i.e. language limitations, which in the past on numerous occasions just obstructed the access to valuable historical studies written in foreign languages.

It is these three huge changes namely: providing the possibility to the enthusiasts to research their favorite and the most popular branch of history, i.e. genealogy, facilitation the teaching process in the situation of the scarcity of standard teaching materials and the restoration of the local micro history presence in the general consciousness that seem to determine the further direction in which the historical studies, whose presence is being more and visibly marked on the Internet, should go. What we should rely on in the future are the virtual platforms, which not only will connect all the elements of the modern history research described above, but also by using the so-called Web 2.0 standard (the best example being Wikipedia created by millions internauts from the whole world) they will create active and creative communities devoted to sharing the experience of exploration of the past with other community members and writing history. Such project is the Virtual Shtetl executed by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

**On 16 June, 2009 the Museum of the History of the Polish Jews launched the Virtual Shtetl portal ([www.sztetl.org.pl](http://www.sztetl.org.pl))**



The underlying idea of the medium created that way was to supplement the content of the Main Exhibition of the Museum with the local history. Out of necessity, the exhibition has to focus on the events and social processes which determined historical fate of the Polish Jews. It would not be complete without the two elements, namely presenting the local history of even the smallest places where Jews were a significant part of the society and showing their everyday life in small towns (Yiddish: Shtetl). Therefore, in the unlimited place, in the virtual space accessible to the entire world, the Museum has created the tool for research, documentation and popularization of the history of the Polish Jews.

While launching the portal, the knowledge and experience of the following websites were used: [www.izrael.badacz.org](http://www.izrael.badacz.org) (private website); [www.diapozytyw.pl](http://www.diapozytyw.pl) (portal of The Institute of Adam Mickiewicz), Jewish cemeteries in Poland [www.kirkuty.xip.pl](http://www.kirkuty.xip.pl) (private website), or [www.polin.org.pl](http://www.polin.org.pl) (the website of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage). The project involved cooperation of numerous historians, local researchers and enthusiasts of Jewish history. These people decided to share their knowledge and documentation on the history of Jewish community.

Thanks to the researchers' effort, already on the day of launching the portal, the Virtual Shtetl was one of the world's largest Internet databases of the local history of the Polish Jews, along with international projects such as: JewishGen ([www.jewishgen.org](http://www.jewishgen.org)) or Centropa ([www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org)). It contained articles on 800 localities from the territory of the contemporary and pre-war Poland. More than 900 000 photographs and 55 video recordings were illustrations to these localities. It took over a year to prepare these materials with the help of several co-workers.

Strona Główna Miasta Ludzie Galeria Słownik Bibliografia Pomoc Szukaj

Beta! | A A A | Zgłoś problem | 26 793 159 zn. / 35559 zdjęcia / 483 wideo / 62 audio / 1551 miejscowości

Wybierz język  
Google™ Technologia Przetłumacz

Logowanie / Rejestracja  
Mapa współczesna  
Mapa przed 1939 r.

**Dodaj:**  
Tekst | Obraz | Audio | Wideo

**Informacje o mieście**  
Lokalizacja  
Historia miejscowości  
Plany miasta, nazwy ulic

**Spoleczność żydowska przed 1989**  
Historia  
Demografia  
Organizacje i stowarzyszenia  
Oświata  
Legenda i opowiadania  
Relacje, wspomnienia  
Teksty kultury


**Warszawa – Historia**  
mazowieckie / Miasto st. Warszawa (przed 1939) > Warszawa  
> Społeczność żydowska przed 1989

Zydzi obecni byli w Warszawie przynajmniej od początków XV wieku<sup>[1]</sup>. Pierwsza wzmianka o nich pochodzi z 1414 r., znajduje się w Księdze Czerwiek<sup>[2]</sup>. Mówi o pieniądzach przyjętych przez Lazara Judeo de Warschovia. Kolejne informacje pochodzą już z ksiąg miejskich. Najstarsza z nich jest z 1421 r. Wymienia jedynie 10 Żydów, więc można przypuścić, że społeczność żydowska była niewielka. W Nowej Warszawie Żydzi mieszkali przynajmniej od 1414 r., z tego bowiem roku pochodzą najstarsze księgi ławnicze potwierdzające ich pobyt.

Ówczesni Żydzi mieszkali przy ul. Żydowskiej, posiadali murowaną synagogę, mykwe i cmentarz, znajdujący się poza murami miasta, w okolicach dzisiejszego Krakowskiego Przedmieścia. Świadczy to o tym, że byli dobrze zorganizowaną, choć niewielką społecznością, liczącą ok. 120 osób.


Niestety, wiedza o działalności Żydów w XV w. w mieście jest uboga i bardzo fragmentaryczna. Nie pozwala wysnuć jednoznacznych wniosków. Część historyków, w tym E. Ringelblum uważa, że Żydzi w XV w. doznali prześladowań ze strony benedyktynów i zostali wypędzeni z Warszawy przez księcia Bolesława w 1483 r. i powrócili dopiero w 1486 roku. Większość współczesnych naukowców (m.in. H.

**Autorzy**  
Aktualizuj artykuł  
Dodaj zdjęcie  
Dodaj audio  
Dodaj film



**Galeria**

[Główny obraz przy placu Tumackiem.](index.php?showimg&showimg=1)



The Virtual Shtetl uses the Web 2.0 technology for research and describing history. Thanks to it, each researcher, each person having documents or information may share his or her knowledge or materials with the other users. As a result, not only a full and reliable source of knowledge was created, but also the international community interested in history, ready to share information, pictures, and videos. The initiatives of people focused on the portal have been on many occasions materialized in specific activities aimed to commemorate or protect the Jewish heritage. The example of such an activity is the commemoration of the Jewish cemetery in Białogard.

Over a span of one year, thanks to the involvement of the registered portal users, we could see how incredible possibilities of research, documentation and teaching history are offered by the Internet and networking.

Strona Główna Miasta Ludzie Galeria Słownik Bibliografia Pomoc Szukaj

Beta! | A A A | Zgłoś problem | 26 793 159 zn. / 35559 zdjęcia / 483 wideo / 62 audio / 1551 miejscowości

Wybierz język  
Google™ Technologia Przetłumacz

Logowanie / Rejestracja  
Mapa współczesna  
Mapa przed 1939 r.

**Dodaj:**  
Tekst | Obraz | Audio | Wideo

**Informacje o mieście**  
Lokalizacja  
Historia miejscowości  
Plany miasta, nazwy ulic

**Spoleczność żydowska przed 1989**  
Historia  
Demografia  
Organizacje i stowarzyszenia  
Oświata  
Legenda i opowiadania  
Relacje, wspomnienia  
Teksty kultury


**Warszawa – Historia**  
mazowieckie / Miasto st. Warszawa (przed 1939) > Warszawa  
> Społeczność żydowska przed 1989

Zydzi obecni byli w Warszawie przynajmniej od początków XV wieku<sup>[1]</sup>. Pierwsza wzmianka o nich pochodzi z 1414 r., znajduje się w Księdze Czerwiek<sup>[2]</sup>. Mówi o pieniądzach przyjętych przez Lazara Judeo de Warschovia. Kolejne informacje pochodzą już z ksiąg miejskich. Najstarsza z nich jest z 1421 r. Wymienia jedynie 10 Żydów, więc można przypuścić, że społeczność żydowska była niewielka. W Nowej Warszawie Żydzi mieszkali przynajmniej od 1414 r., z tego bowiem roku pochodzą najstarsze księgi ławnicze potwierdzające ich pobyt.

Ówczesni Żydzi mieszkali przy ul. Żydowskiej, posiadali murowaną synagogę, mykwe i cmentarz, znajdujący się poza murami miasta, w okolicach dzisiejszego Krakowskiego Przedmieścia. Świadczy to o tym, że byli dobrze zorganizowaną, choć niewielką społecznością, liczącą ok. 120 osób.


Niestety, wiedza o działalności Żydów w XV w. w mieście jest uboga i bardzo fragmentaryczna. Nie pozwala wysnuć jednoznacznych wniosków. Część historyków, w tym E. Ringelblum uważa, że Żydzi w XV w. doznali prześladowań ze strony benedyktynów i zostali wypędzeni z Warszawy przez księcia Bolesława w 1483 r. i powrócili dopiero w 1486 roku. Większość współczesnych naukowców (m.in. H.

**Autorzy**  
Aktualizuj artykuł  
Dodaj zdjęcie  
Dodaj audio  
Dodaj film



**Galeria**

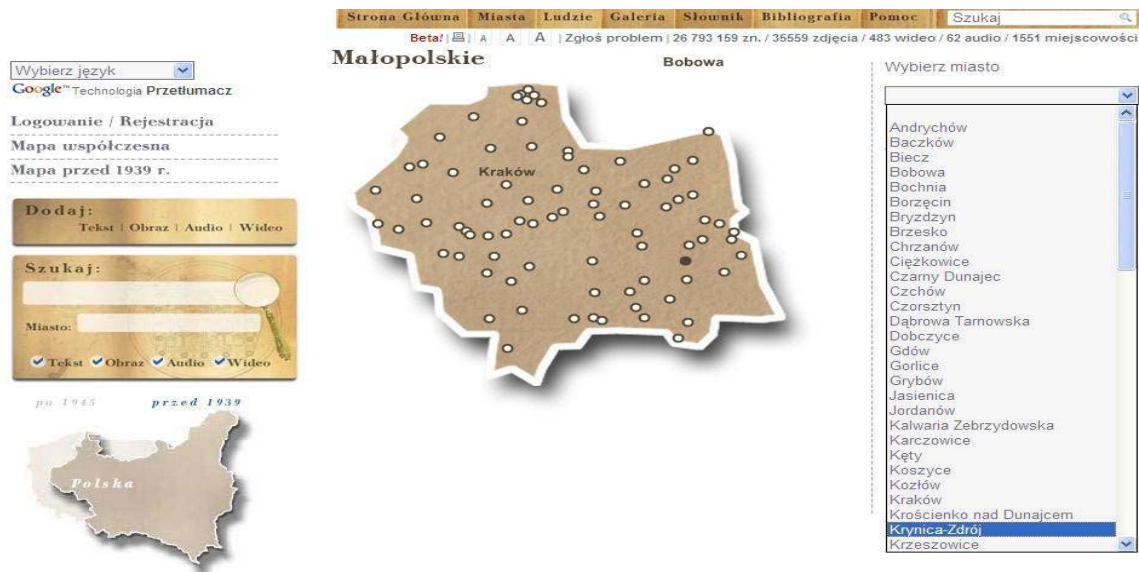
[Główny obraz przy placu Tumackiem.](index.php?showimg&showimg=1)



Over the year, the effects of the project's presence on the Internet have exceeded its authors' expectations.

In May 2010, within almost a year's time from the launching of the portal, the users community numbered 1500 internauts from all over the world, who publish texts, audio and video materials etc. Currently there are 1550 localities described. There are more than 35 000 photographs, 481 video materials, 62 audio materials (at the moment of launching the portal there were no pictures, audio, video materials). The

articles in the Polish version have 26.5 million characters, which corresponds to almost 15 000 typescript pages.



It is hard to imagine creating such a huge database in such a short period of time without the help of the Internet and the involvement of thousands of people from all over the world. On the other hand, the massive character of the project and the rapid increase in the number of materials implicate a question about their essential value.

The Internet gives a possibility of fast and easy content management. All the materials presented on the portal were divided into 17 geographical areas, corresponding to 16 contemporary Polish provinces and the last part – territories which before the World War II belonged to the Second Polish Republic. Each part is administered and co-created by its administrator – a historian or an enthusiast of the Jewish history. Thanks to the panel that is legible, intuitive and, consequently, easy to administer, each time newly material, text or question are added by the users, they are submitted to the administrator responsible for a particular area. It is followed by the first verification of the materials content. The next verification stage is carried out by users themselves. In case of any inaccuracy or error – people visiting the portal either update a given article themselves by introducing corrections (which must be also accepted by the administrator) or contact (by e-mail) the relevant administrator and inform about their doubts. Thanks to this double checking process, sooner or later, the contents of the majority of articles can be verified.

play | 1

**Judaika** *יהודאיקה* | *יהדות* | *קולנוע* | *קולנוע* | *ספרות*

Strona Główna | Miasta | Ludzie | Galeria | Słownik | Bibliografia | Pomoc | Szukaj

Beta! | A | A | A | Zgłoś problem | 26 793 159 zn. / 35559 zdjęcia / 483 wideo / 62 audio / 1551 miejscow

Wybierz język  Technologia Przetłumacz

Logowanie / Rejestracja

Mapa współczesna

Mapa przed 1939 r.

**Dodaj:**  
Tekst | Obraz | Audio | Wideo

**Szukaj:**

Miasto:

Tekst  Obraz  Audio  Wideo

po 1945 przed 1939

*Polska*

**Mapa przed 1939r.**

**Wybierz region**

- białostockie (83)
- inne (417)
- kieleckie (136)
- krakowskie (88)
- lubelskie (112)
- lwowskie (219)
- łódzkie (66)
- Miasto st. Warszawa (2)
- nowogrodzkie (15)
- poleskie (17)
- pomorskie (55)
- poznańskie (85)
- stanisławowskie (48)
- śląskie autonomiczne (33)
- tarnopolskie (51)
- warszawskie (112)
- wileńskie (14)
- wołyńskie (34)

Copyright © Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich | FAQ | Regulaminy | Mapa serwisu | 160.16ms, 18.2kB

Produced by: Multi Communications Design: At Wor

In a similar way the process of completing the articles takes place. When the first version of the text is submitted, users add single sentences, paragraphs. They share information, of which they are often the only depositaries. Thanks to that, a lot of materials came to light, which without the existence of the portal would be either lost after the death of people who possessed them or in the case of objects they could be either stored in the loft or discarded. Just to give a few examples: the photograph of the synagogue in Gryfice that no longer exists (added by Cultural Center in Trzebiatów), the unique photograph of the synagogue in Kołobrzeg added by a user, accounts and photographs of Israeli people of the Polish descent (collected within the framework of the project executed by the Museum of the History of Polish Jews – Polish Roots in Israel), interviews with elderly people conducted by students as part of the project “School Friends, Acquaintances from Neighborhood” or articles presenting, in all aspects of their existence, the overall description of Jewish communities who used to live in today’s West Pomeranian Province – the first study of this type in Polish.

What hampers the exploration of Jewish local history is the fact that most Polish Jews or their descendants are dispersed all over the world. That is why it is difficult for the researchers to get access to their accounts and documents they possess. Therefore, it is worth pointing out that every piece of information submitted in Polish is translated into English on an ongoing basis (90% of the information submitted to the portal has been translated into English - 24 mln characters). The materials submitted in English are also translated into Polish .

For almost a year since launching the portal we have recorded over 330 000 hits from 145 countries from all over the world, including all the European countries. We noted, among others, over 270 000 hits from Poland, 20 000 from United States, 7000 from Germany, 6000 from Israel, 5500 from the United Kingdom, 3500 from France, 1000 hits from Sweden and the Netherlands, etc. A lot of these people

registered on the portal adding new materials, submitting scans of family photographs, fragments of accounts.

There is a continuous process of re-establishing contacts with old acquaintances, family members and persons who used to live in the same locality. What we witness is the process of recording the history of individual persons, families, shtetls when there are no archival documents. Judaica from the regional or private collections gained the unique chance to be presented to the wider audience.

Beta! | | | | | Zgłoś problem | 26 793 159 zn. / 35559 zdjęcia / 483 wideo.

Wybierz język | Google™ Technologia Przetłumacz

Logowanie / Rejestracja

Mapa współczesna

Mapa przed 1939 r.

**Dodaj:**  
Tekst | Obraz | Audio | Video

**Szukaj:**

Miasto:

Tekst  Obraz  Audio  Video

po 1945 przed 1939

Polsha

**20.01.2010: W sieci – mysz rządzi muzeum**  
**The New York Times** | Alex Wright  
20 stycznia 2010

Pewnego ranka, jesienią zeszłego roku, Hudson Box wstał wcześniej, żeby zająć się końmi na swojej farmie w pobliżu Leesburga w stanie Floryda. Zanim jednak zdołał usiąść do śniadania, zawołała go żona, wskazując ich kolorowy telewizor, który – dzięki ustawieniom WebTV – pełnił w ich domu także funkcję komputera. Zbliżając się do ekranu, pan Box zaczął rozpoznawać obraz strażaka, biegnącego przez tunel.  
„Byłem kompletnie oszołomiony – wspominał później. – Zawołałem tylko: to mój syn!”  
[więcej>>](#)

**12.2009: Sztetl czyli mikrokosmos**  
**FOCUS.pl HISTORIA** | Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich uruchomiło portal [www.sztetl.org.pl](http://www.sztetl.org.pl), którego celem jest odnalezienie i opisanie miejsc związanych z lokalną kulturą żydowską [więcej>>](#)

**22.10.2009: Wirtualny Sztetl odbudowuje sztetle za pomocą Wiki-mocy**  
**Newsweek** | Gdy wspomina się polskich Żydów, przed oczami stają obrazy obozów śmierci i gett. Jednak działający od czterech miesięcy portal Wirtualny Sztetl mówi dużo, dużo więcej o tysiącletniej historii Żydów w Polsce [więcej >](#)

**15.10.2009: Wirtualny Sztetl na Dolnym Śląsku, Opolszczyźnie i Ziemi Lubuskiej**  
 | We wrześniu w południowo-zachodniej Polsce ruszył projekt edukacyjny Wirtualny Sztetl na Dolnym Śląsku, Opolszczyźnie i Ziemi Lubuskiej [więcej >](#)

The Internet and the portals as the one being described play a crucial role in the field of archival science. Scanned judaica, documents, photographs, letters from family collections have their place on the portal and are easily found. There are also large photograph collections from the National Digital Archive and a lot of materials from different local archives, museums, regional history centers. We are in the process of establishing contacts with other institutions of a similar kind, which usually results in the publications of archival materials.

The next activity to facilitate the user studies from all over the world is the research carried out by the portal personnel in periodicals, archives, in all accessible collections of historical information and that concerning Jewish heritage (e.g. output of the competitions “Jewish History and Culture” and “On the Common Land” organized by the Shalom Foundation), and then presenting the findings on the portal.

**The Virtual Shtetl is a modern tool for exploring and describing history but ,what is equally important, it is also a modern tool for teaching it.**



Thanks to the modern and intuitive way of presenting information (Google maps with tagged objects, developed navigation, glossary of terms in the form of links, biography database of the most exquisite Polish Jews) the Virtual Shtetl is an effective educational tool. Using the Web 2.0 formula it gives young people an opportunity to get the youth involved in researching the Jewish history, documenting Jewish inheritance in their localities and publishing their research. As part of the project “Young History Explorers”, which is being carried out, the young people document with the help of audio and video equipment the Jewish heritage preserved in their localities and send their findings (interviews, photographs of cemeteries, historic monuments, scans of documents) via the Museum. During the project “Memory in Stone” young Polish people will create virtual maps of Jewish cemeteries with the exact picture of each matzeva, their GPS coordinates, and young people from Israel will translate the inscriptions on these matzevot. Thanks to this, the memory of some inhabitants will be restored. The publication of the findings in a book form will be followed by next projects.

The findings presented on the portal will be published in a book form. In 2008, based on the materials acquired for the portal, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, along with the Jewish Historical Institute and the Gesher Foundation, published the book entitled “Śladami Żydów. Dolny Śląsk Opolszczyzna Ziemia Lubuska i Szkoły żydowskie we Wrocławiu.” [“The Jewish traces. Lower Silesia, Opole Land, Lubusz Land and Jewish schools in Wrocław.”] Currently, we are in the process of publishing of the book “Zabytki kultury żydowskiej w Polsce. Przewodnik” [“The monuments of Jewish culture in Poland, A guidebook”] with the Cart Blanca publishing house and “Cmentarz żydowski w Górze Kalwarii” [“The Jewish cemetery in Góra Kalwaria (Ger)”].

Thanks to the Internet any users can be not only the target audience for the history written by the others, but they can also conduct their own research and have the results published.



<sup>i</sup> While preparing this text the author used the materials created within the Virtual Shtetl project.