The Synagogue at Babyn Yar
Turning the Nightmare of Evil into a Shared Dream of Good

In June 1941, having conquered most of Europe, Hitler turned his gaze toward the east. Driven by his hatred of communism and his promise to the German people of more living space, he launched an attack on the Soviet Union. On September 19, 1941, German troops entered Kyiv after a bitter, four-week-long battle. Two days later began the Jewish year 5702, initiating the Days of Awe that were to end at the conclusion of Yom Kippur on September 30.

On September 28 posters appeared everywhere in the city instructing all Jews—contemptuously referred to as "Yids"—to assemble the next day at eight a.m. near the Jewish cemetery. According to a German tally, 33,771 Jews showed up. The men of Einsatzkommando 4a (Special Operation Unit 4a), SS members and German policemen assembled to massacre Jews, marched them toward a nearby ravine, known in Ukrainian as Babyn Yar and in Russian as Babi Yar. There they ordered them to strip, and they machine-gunned the city's naked Jewish people in an eighteen-hour-long slaughter that ended on the eve of Yom Kippur. In the two years that separated the fall of Kyiv from the return of the Red Army, the Germans conducted further regular executions at Babyn Yar, mostly of small groups of non-Jews identified as enemies of Germany. In August and September 1943, a special SS unit created to obliterate evidence of the Holocaust oversaw the exhumation of the remains and their incineration on large pyres.

After 1945, the memory of Babyn Yar was suppressed by Soviet authorities. For the first two decades after the war, the attempt to erase the past included the transformation of the 2.5 kilometre-long ravine, after the construction of a dam at its mouth, into a dumping ground of industrial waste mixed with water produced by factories making bricks for the construction of large housing estates west of the ravine. On March 31, 1961, the dam broke, and the resulting mud-slide devastated a whole neighborhood, killing at least 1.500 people.

The man-made catastrophe of the lethal mudslide triggered a dissident movement in Kyiv, and in response, the government promised the transformation of what remained of the ravine—its shape had been radically changed as the result of the mudslide—into a public park that was to serve the residents of the newly constructed neighbourhoods surrounding the Babyn Yar site.

It was not until 1966 that the publication of Anatoly Kuznetsov's documentary novel *Babi Yar* shattered the official silence around the 1941 massacre and led to the construction of a memorial commemorating the "victims of the atrocities of fascism" (1976). It did not indicate that almost all the victims murdered at Babyn Yar were Jews, and that they had been murdered because they were Jews—a case study in Holocaust distortion.

To be fair: the erasure of a difficult past that occurred at Babyn Yar was not unique. Between 1945 and the late 1970s, the genocide of European Jews did not figure in the collective memory of World War II. When, finally, the Holocaust did become a prominent focus of research, testimony, and remembrance, the principal *lieux de mémoire* (memory places) to acquire great symbolic resonance were the sites of the German extermination camps, most importantly Auschwitz. The preservation of the original site, the presence of evocative artifacts—barbed-wire fences, gates, guard towers, barracks, crematoria—and thousands of testimonies by survivors transformed this site into the pre-eminent symbol of the Holocaust.

The gullies and ravines that had served as execution sites in eastern Europe were forgotten. The official suppression in communist countries of the memory of the Holocaust, the lack of specific structures associated with the massacres, the dearth of testimony and research, and the slow but sure transformation of landscapes by erosion and natural afforestation caused a total erasure of these sites as memory places.

From 1991 onward, the year that Ukraine became independent, a plethora of monuments arose at Babyn Yar, most of them commemorating non-Jewish victims of the German occupation. The largely unplanned proliferation of memorials turned out to be a demonstration of the truth of writer Robert Musil's 1927 observation: "Monuments possess all sorts of qualities. The most important is somewhat contradictory: what strikes one most about monuments is that one doesn't notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments." Yet despite this, Babyn Yar itself acquired an increasingly important place in Holocaust historiography as historians began to focus on the destruction of the Jews of Eastern Europe in what has become known as the "Holocaust by Bullets"—to distinguish it from that part of the genocide of the European Jews that took place in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other extermination camps and centred on gas chambers. The new interest in the Holocaust by Bullets, the size of the Babyn Yar massacre, its location adjacent to the largest city in the German-occupied Soviet Union, and its date in the Jewish calendar, slowly pulled Babyn Yar from the periphery of the collective memory of the Holocaust toward its core.

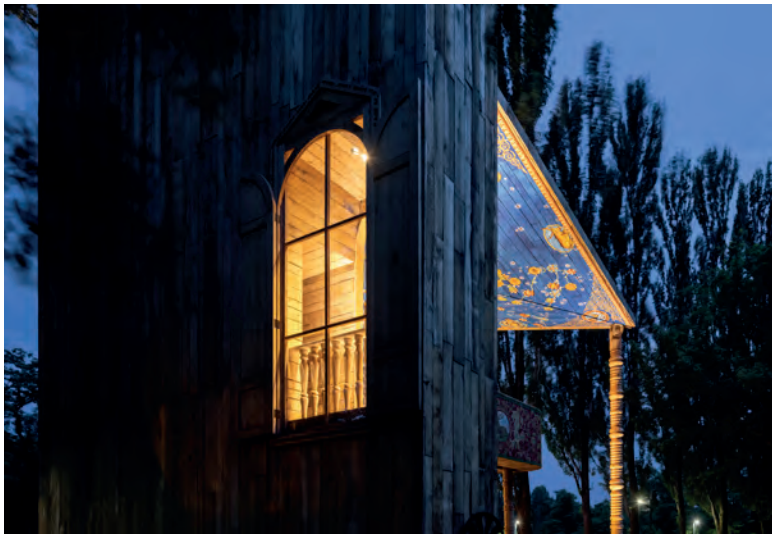
In response, in 2016 the Ukrainian government established the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center to serve as the steward of the site and its memory. In 2020 the Center appointed an Architectural Advisory Board. Some of the first meetings were dedicated to discussion on the nature of Jewish space. The key notion was articulated in Yiddish writer Abraham Golomb's interpretation of the second commandment, which prohibits the worship of images: "Everything in Judaism must remain fluid—streaming, changeable, on the running board of history." This led to a discussion of a project by the architect and architectural theorist John Hejduk for a monument at the site of the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. Instead of constructing a single, massive monument, Hejduk proposed many playful interventions on the site, to be constructed over

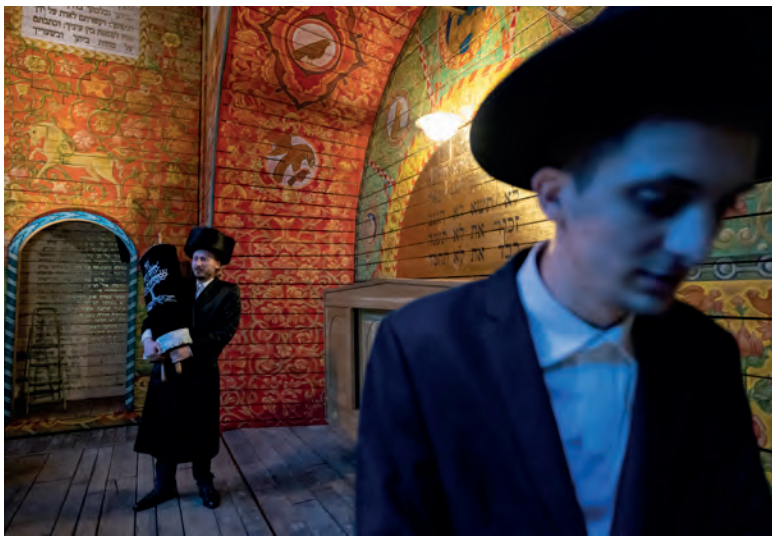
an extended period. He rejected the idea that a memorial had to match the importance of a historical event by means of its physical and visual weight.

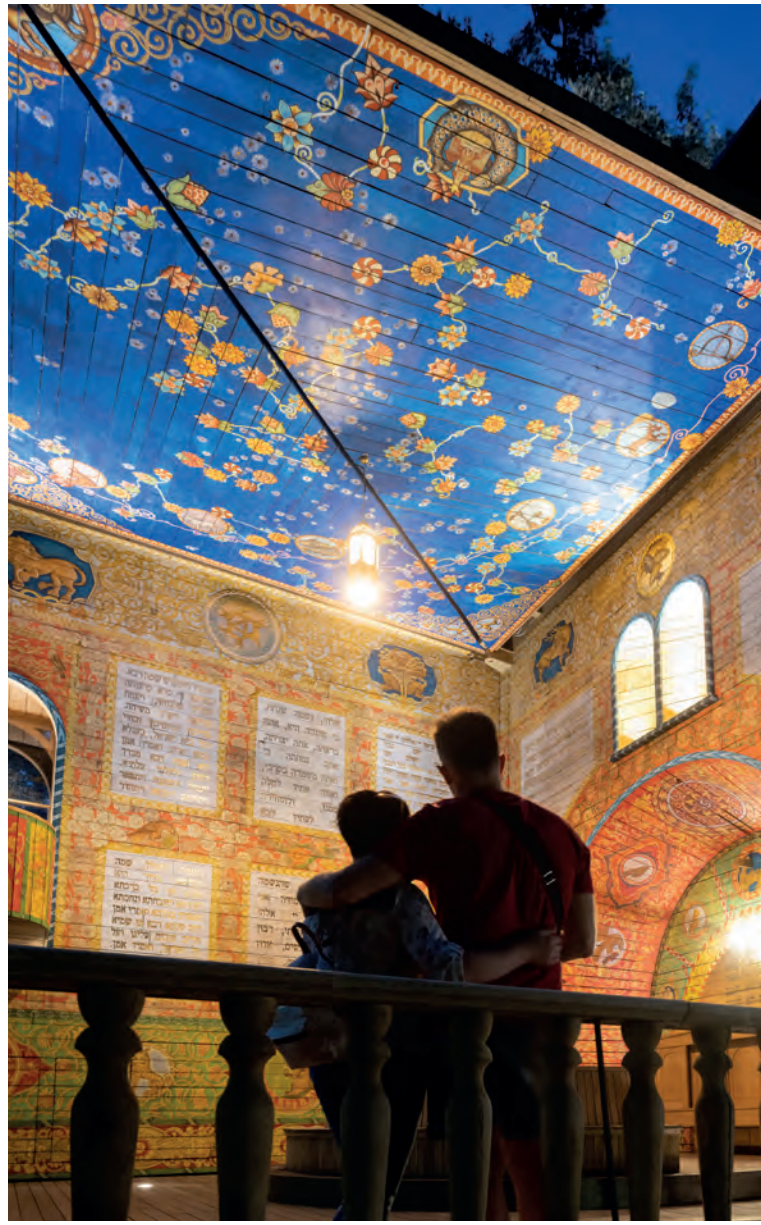
On advice of the Architectural Advisory Board, the Center decided in October 2020 to construct a small synagogue in the park, adjacent to an existing Jewish memorial and at some distance from the area where the slaughters had taken place. The building was to provide a place for communal prayer by Jewish pilgrims to the site. The synagogue was to be ready for the observance of the next Yom Hashoah, which was to begin just six months later on April 7, 2021. The Architectural Advisory Board invited Basel-based architect Manuel Herz to make a proposal for a building that could be realized in that time, from initial conception to dedication.

Three original ideas shaped Herz's Babyn Yar project. First, the synagogue was to be an oversize siddur (prayer book) that is closed when not in use, opened in a collective effort by the members of the community before the service commences, and closed again afterward. As a siddur, the Babyn Yar synagogue alludes to the sense of self-discipline and stubborn persistence generated by the lengthy set of prescribed prayers that religiously observant Jews conduct on a daily basis. The firmness of this thrice-daily custom provides the structure for all the other Jewish observances, and as such provides the most important foundation of the survival of Jewish identity.

A second idea was closely linked to the first: when the oversize wooden siddur synagogue opened, it was to unfold in the manner of a children's pop-up book, in which movable parts made out of specially cut and folded paper, by means of paper gears, pull tabs, or little strings, arise from a flat position into a complex three-dimensional scene with the unfolding of the pages. The pop-up belongs to a genre of children's literature that spurns a didactic purpose and instead aims to stimulate the imagination.







Finally, Herz aimed to repair the interrupted tradition of the eastern European wooden synagogues. Dating from the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, these buildings had dazzling polychrome painted interiors and were held in great affection by those who studied and prayed within them. Homes of the soul, born of a collaboration of Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors, they embody a vital and highly original architectural tradition that occupies a unique position in the artistic and cultural history of the Jewish people. Testimonies of the one-time relative affluence of the Eastern European shtetls, many of these synagogues fell into disrepair in the nineteenth century, when the prosperity of these shtetls declined as the result of urbanization and increasingly antisemitic policies. Then came the quadruple destruction of World War I; the Russian Civil War with its pogroms, massacres, and destruction of Jewish private and communal property; the anti-religious ordinances of the Soviet state; and finally, the Holocaust. By 1945 none of the hundreds of wooden synagogues remained—a catastrophic erasure of Jewish cultural legacy that accompanied the murders of millions of Jewish men, women, and children.

From the outset the Architectural Advisory Board recognized the philosophical rigour of Herz's proposal. The synagogue was to be constructed in wood. While this building material had been common in shtetl synagogues, it is an unusual material for use in commemorative building. However, the very fragility of the wood contained a lesson: wood obliges everyone to be tender in their relationship with the synagogue-memorial. Herz stressed that continual care is exactly what remembrance is about. And he responded to the paradox articulated almost a century ago by Robert Musil with a new one that points to a new beginning in the continuing history of monument design.

The Center enthusiastically welcomed Herz's proposal and promised to mobilize the necessary resources—political,

legal, financial, material, and above all human—to make it possible for the synagogue to be ready for a dedication on Yom Hashoah 2021, which would begin that year on April 8, 2021. Back in Basel, Herz and his collaborators faced the almost impossible task to create in a minimum amount of time the design for an unprecedented building. What were to the basic dimensions and proportions of the synagogue? What were to be the mechanisms for the opening of the building? How might the bimah (praying platform), aron ha'kodesh (cabinet for the Torah scrolls), the women's gallery, and the ner tamid (eternal light) be placed in this transformative and collapsible space? And to what extent was the decorative scheme of the interior to be based on those of the historical wooden synagogues of western Ukraine?

Amongst the many decision made, two stand out. The first concerns the blessings and prayers to be painted onto the interior walls. The text on the main wall that houses the aron ha'kodesh is a blessing that goes back to the Talmudic era and that occurred on the wall of one of the most famous wooden synagogues, constructed in the four centuries ago in Gwożdziec (today Hvizdets, 690 kilometres west-south-west of Kyiv). It seeks to turn a nightmare into a good dream. This blessing became the leitmotif for the project as a whole.

The second concerns the decoration of the unfolding ceiling, also referencing the historic wooden synagogues of the Pale of Settlement, celebrating a colorful universe. Herz proposed that the pattern of flowers was to precisely re-create the sky over Kyiv visible on the night of September 29, 1941. The painting of the ceiling was to anchor the building at an exact location in space on a specific day in history. In its discussion of this aspect of the proposal, one member of the Architectural Advisory Board quoted the testimony of a German witness of another massacre of Jews in western Ukraine: In his testimony about the murder of 5,000 Jews in Dubno, the German civilian

Hermann Friedrich Gräbe spoke with great empathy about the victims. One pair stood out: "The father was holding the hand of a boy about ten years old and speaking to him softly; the boy was fighting his tears. The father pointed to the sky, stroked his head and seemed to explain something to him." It is here, in the self-possession of the two whose lives are about to be extinguished, that Gräbe's account touches, if only for a moment, on the question of meaning, if not for the witness, then for two of the over 1.5 million victims of the Holocaust by bullets: a father and his son. Many of the Jews who were led to the edge of existing ravines or freshly dug mass graves must have looked at the sky and said the final sentences of the Viddui, the confessional prayer to be said at the moment of death: *Adonai melech; Adonai malach; Adonai yimloch l'olam va'ed* (God reigns; God has reigned; God will reign forever and ever). *Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va'ed* (Blessed be God's name whose glorious dominion is forever). *Shema Yisrael Adonai eloheinu Adonai echad* (Hear, O Israel: Adonai is our God, Adonai is One). But, undoubtedly, many will have also asked the question that provides another rhythm of Jewish history: "Where is God ... ?"

Once the Architectural Advisory Board had agreed to the general concept of the synagogue, and the Center ensured that the means were to be available Herz and his colleagues produced the final construction drawings that stipulated the technical details, and in a five month-period planners, designers, engineers, craftspeople, carpenters, painters, artists, artisans, and construction workers collaborated tirelessly, day and night, to solve the remaining problems, obtain building materials—the wood was to come from buildings constructed before 1941—and build the synagogue. The synagogue was formally dedicated in April 2021; the painting scheme was completed a few months later.

On March 1, 2022, a few days after the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, the Soviet TV tower located

at Babyn Yar was the target of a direct attack. Five people were killed in a sports centre not far from the synagogue. The next day, Manuel Herz wrote a short statement that was published in the venerable French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. The core of Herz's piece was a question that many are asking today: "What is the point of commemorating history, if the lessons to be learned are forgotten and ignored so easily? ... Compared to other commemorative architecture that is mostly built of stone and concrete, the fragility of the wooden Synagogue means that it must be cared for every day. This daily care, and its fragility, are precisely what represents actual commemoration. The Synagogue needs its community, its audience, and its visitors. With the site having become a war zone, it has been robbed of this community. I pray for the people of Kiev, and of Ukraine, for an end to the savagery of the war, and I hope that the Synagogue can eventually regain its community, so that the lessons of fragility are not drowned out by the cruel noise of the war."

More than a year after that initial attack on Babyn Yar, the synagogue still stands, and the community not only survived but, forged in the crucible of a war for survival, is stronger than ever, and reaches to the ends of the world. It now also includes, thanks to the Koffler Centre of the Arts, the city of Toronto.

Robert Jan van Pelt

The Synagogue at Babyn Yar
Turning the Nightmare of Evil into
a Shared Dream of Good

Commissioned by
Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center

Designed by
Manuel Herz Architects

Exhibition at Koffler Gallery, Toronto
17th April to 12th November 2023

Conceived and created by
Robert Jan van Pelt (Curator)
Manuel Herz (Architect)

Ukrainian murals specially
photographed by
Maxim Dondyuk
and directed by
Edward Burtynsky

Photographs of the synagugue by
Iwan Baan

Exhibition produced and installed by
Douglas Birkenshaw

Publication concept & design by
Louis-Charles Lasnier
Our Polite Society

Printed by
Wilco Art Books, Amersfoort (NL)

ISBN 978-1-928175-25-4

We are deeply grateful to all the donors and contributors to this exhibition and its associated Public Engagement and Education Program, without whose generous support it would have been impossible to realise.

Lead sponsors:
The Koffler Family Foundation

Major sponsors:
The Azrieli Foundation
The Lillian and Norman Glowinsky Foundation

Supporting sponsors:
Reesa Greenberg
The Shulich Foundation
The Shoichet Family
The Larry and Judy Tanenbaum Family Foundation
The Jack Weinbaum Family Foundation

Contributing sponsors:
Ron and Sharon Baruch
Helen Burstyn
The Delaney Family Foundation
The Linda Frum and Howard Sokolowski Charitable Foundation in memory of Caroline Gant
Heathbridge Capital Management
KPMB Architects
Liza Mauer and Andrew Sheiner
Audrey and David Mirvish
Jill and Joel Reitman
United Jewish Appeal

Exhibition supporters:
Anonymous
Michael and Sara Angel
anahita azrahimi and Diederik van Leere
Leslie and Anna Dan
Carl and Terry Goldenberg
Cynthia Good
Jacqui and Stacey Ison
Alison Jarvis
Brett Ledger and Patricia Olasker
Janie and Russell Rendely
Brenda Simpson and Len Goodman

We are very grateful for the support we receive for our work from:

Canada Council for the Arts
Ontario Arts Council
Toronto Arts Council
United Jewish Appeal
CIBC Wood Gundy

Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des Arts du Canada

ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO
an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

TORONTO ARTS COUNCIL | FUNDED BY THE CITY OF TORONTO

CIBC Wood Gundy

KOFFLER FAMILY FOUNDATION

UJA FEDERATION of Greater Toronto