



facultyprofile

A CHALLENGE TO THINK IN NEW WAYS

*Professor Samuel Kassow reflects
on his work as a consultant to the
Museum of the History of Polish Jews*

Professor Samuel Kassow, Charles H. Northam Professor of History, holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University and has lectured and taught in Mexico, Lithuania, Russia, Poland, and Israel. In 1993 and 1995, the Jewish Theological Seminary asked him to teach Jewish history in its Project Judaica program in Moscow. In 2002, he was a visiting professor at Princeton University, and has been a Lady Davis Visiting Professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has held National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright, Woodrow Wilson, and Danforth fellowships and has been an IREX Fellow at Warsaw, Moscow, and Leningrad universities.

Kassow is the author of *Students, Professors, and the State in Tsarist Russia: 1884-1917* (University of California Press, 1989), *The Distinctive Life of East European Jewry* (YIVO, 2003), and co-editor of *Between Tsar and People* (Princeton University Press, 1993). His book *Who Will Write Our History: Emanuel Ringelblum and the Secret Ghetto Archive* will be published by Indiana University Press this June. A child of Holocaust survivors, Kassow was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany.

He was interviewed by contributing writer Christine Palm.

Q. Let's begin by talking about your new book, *Who Will Write Our History*. What captivated you about Emanuel Ringelblum and the ghetto archive?

A. There are so many fascinating aspects to his work. Certainly his ability to gather such a disparate group—community activists, Zionists, Communists—60 people in all, of whom only a few survived. Together, they

amassed about 50,000 pages of material, from personal diaries to gum wrappers, and while only about half is accounted for, it creates an amazing time capsule of life at that time.

Q. So it's a glimpse into the lives of ordinary people. This is true of the new museum you're involved with, too, isn't it?

A. Yes. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews,

will be built in Warsaw, will allow visitors to see so much about the positive life of Polish Jews. You know, when American Jews go to Poland, they see the death camps. This museum will have 40,000 square feet of exhibits focusing on more than 800 years of Jewish cultural life. It's so important to honor that, as well as the victims of the Holocaust. We're not trying to point fingers; we're trying to challenge visitors to think for themselves, and in new ways.

Q. How interactive will the museum's exhibitions be?

A. Very. One of our team, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, from the Tisch School of the Arts, is a museum person, not an historian. She's helping develop a very interesting design with all kinds of exhibits, including 3-D animated figures to interact with visitors. There will be a completely reconstructed wooden synagogue, but the emphasis is not so much on artifacts, as it is on visual projections.

Q. I understand that in assembling the team, the museum's creators drew experts from all over the world.

A. The architect is from Finland, the exhibition designers are British, and members of the academic team come from the United States, Poland, and Israel. The Polish government has funded 50 percent of the total \$80 million. About half is yet to be raised.

Q. Along with Michael Steinlauf of Gratz College in Philadelphia, you are consulting on the end of the 19th century and the interwar period. What interests you about that particular time?

A. The years from 1860 to 1939 form a new period in Jewish Polish history, covering the Jewish emancipation in Congress Poland and Galicia, the January Insurrection, emigration, and so on. Between 1795 and 1918 Poland disappears and Jews are under different rulers. It was also a time of rapid urbanization—a very complicated period, leading, of course, to the eve of the Holocaust.

Q. How does your work as a consultant to the museum dovetail with your teaching at Trinity?

A. I teach Russian, German, and European history, so there's some overlap. I have the chance to talk about it a bit in my World War II class. Because Trinity's history department is so good, and history is one of our biggest majors, there is a lot of support here for my work. One of the exciting things for me is that many of our history majors go on to become teachers of history.

Note: Trinity hopes to sponsor a trip to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, once the project is completed. If you are interested in learning further details, please contact Maureen Farrell, assistant director of alumni relations, at Maureen.Farrell@Trincoll.edu.