

## **Advocacy and Funding: Identifying Some Effective Tools of the Trade**

by Neil Asher Silberman

It's hardly a coincidence that advocacy and funding are central concerns for European Jewish heritage for they are precisely the two main challenges encountered by heritage professionals and activists all over the world. Getting the word out about the significance of a site and the value of its preservation is an indispensable prelude to raising funds or gaining public support for the practical project itself. We all know that there are no magic solutions or foolproof handbooks to simplify the problem of public relations or to provide the address of a particular funding organization that will approve our grant applications every time. The best we can hope for is to identify certain underlying principles of successful communication that effectively convey the importance of the project and the great opportunity for constructive, active community involvement that it represents.

My perspective on the need for community involvement as a key to advocacy and funding is conditioned by the two major biases of my own professional experience. The first is archaeology, the art and science (and group activity) of excavating and analyzing buried material traces inside and around historical structures—and often in places where the standing structures are completely gone. As a supplement to archival study, oral history, historical research, and architectural restoration, archaeology has great power to illuminate important details of daily life and culture that may have seemed too insignificant at the time to be included in official

chronicles. Dinnerware used, the toys children played with, the coins from far-off lands used as amulets or in everyday commerce, and the small details of craftsmanship and folk art retrieved from buried layers—those “small things forgotten” to borrow the phrase of the American archaeologist James Deetz—offer a powerful voice for the historically voiceless part of every human community. And it offers a model for the active involvement of students, volunteers—as well as professionals—in articulating a site’s story as a site of both history and modern discovery. Community activities like this can, I believe, provide both power and a contemporary purpose for the advocacy of a heritage site.

In his presentation at this conference, Professor Jonathan Webber spoke eloquently about forgotten lives, hidden histories, and the multiplicity of meanings that cling to every Jewish heritage site. He spoke of testimonies and texts undiscovered and I would suggest that evidence for forgotten Jewish lives and personal stories also lie undiscovered beneath the ground of nearly every Jewish heritage site. And this is where archaeology may have an important role to play in the coming decades. It is enlightening to see how the hidden histories of other groups whose landscapes and cultures have been destroyed or transformed have been brought powerfully to life through archaeology. I need only mention famous heritage projects around the world like the African Burial ground in New York City; the District Six Museum about life before apartheid in Cape Town; or the Flanders Field Museum commemorating the lives lost and lives lived in the hellish trench warfare on the World War I Western Front.

All of these projects have integrated material culture—not impressive architecture or prized, precious artifacts of artistic value—but the personal possessions and living places that shaped human experience and were, in turn, shaped by it. And here is the element of community and personal involvement: just as the excavations of Masada in Israel in the 1960s transformed

the search for the past into a modern affirmation of identity and historical reflection, the organization of community archaeological projects—and active outreach to the schools and local antiquities services—provides an important structure for continuing research and reflection. For the story of a heritage site—European, Jewish, or other—is not only about past tragedies and achievements. To make it an effective tool for advocacy and funding recognition, it must be, above all, a story in which the people of the present play a significant and meaningful part.

Yet it is also important to be realistic about the possibilities for funding, even when powerful, personal stories are at hand. My perspective on *this* subject comes from my other major bias: my professional experience in Brussels, where I currently work as coordinator of international programs for the Ename Center for Public Archaeology and Heritage Presentation in Belgium, where I come into day-to-day contact with the heritage programs of the Council of Europe, the European Commission, ICOMOS, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, and a wide range of other heritage oversight and funding organizations. My institution, the Ename Center, is that rare publicly-funded research institute that focuses on the philosophy and techniques of what we call “cultural communication”—particularly multimedia and digital technology—but obviously also concerned with the funding, structure, and content of the public message, no matter how complex or simple that technology may be.

An increasing number of institutions have begun to study the techniques of site interpretation and public communication and have been learning the essential skills of narrative construction, visualization, digital interactivity, and educational programming, not only to construct increasingly sensitive and powerful site interpretation but to communicate directly with the general public and the press. Just as local volunteers and students can be actively brought into the work of exploration, digging, and documenting, they can be involved (and addressed) in

the wide range of communications media that every heritage project should utilize. There is a growing body of training courses and literature on this subject—and I encourage you to inquire about possibilities for participation of your project in the newly established EPOCH network of the European Commission—[www.epoch-net.org](http://www.epoch-net.org)—specifically designed to offer expertise in the arts and sciences of cultural communication related to cultural heritage sites.

At the Ename Center, we have gained many specific insights on the mechanics of heritage funding—as well as communication. One of the most important is that ultimate success is dependent on thinking about the long term. For some of the most sensitive and moving stories about some of the heritage sites we've worked on, utilizing some of the most effective communication tools, have brought a wave of initial positive, and even enthusiastic reaction from the general public. And yet they gained little if any continuing public support for the project itself. We have learned—sometimes the hard way—that the tools of communication must of course craft a moving or powerful story about a particular heritage site. They must speak to all the relevant audiences likely to be moved or affected, from local residents to international visitors. That is why I am convinced that the message of the site and its contemporary resonance must suggest a structure for continuing public activities. Without those public activities, in which a wide range of people can begin to feel involved and connected in practical ways with the site's significance, it will remain an isolated monument or tourist attraction. Its economic viability will then ultimately rest on public or philanthropic support merely to maintain the physical structure—or on the vagaries of international tourist flows.

Indeed, the relatively large amounts of funding that have been made available by the European Commission for local and regional heritage projects—and which should be of obvious interest to all involved in the field of European Jewish Heritage—are almost exclusively based

on their possible value for tourism and economic development. Because of this policy orientation, all who seek funds from the European Commission are consciously or unconsciously encouraged to market their sites or their potential projects in this way. Much has been written about techniques of applying for European funding; many experienced consultants are also available. But before urging you to make use of these resources, I would like to point out three overlooked factors which I believe should offer a note of caution in the basic shaping of a tourism-based funding approach.

First, tourist flows are notoriously inflexible, based more on decades of custom and convenience (i.e. airport locations, efficient itineraries for coach tours, hotels, and local guides' preferences). This makes a significant shift of cultural tourism to new areas and new sites extraordinarily difficult to maintain in the long term. Although the possibility of making a heritage site a new focus of visitation is often a major thrust of funding appeals, this is generally done without careful analysis of its realistic potential. Does it lie on a main, existing route of tourism? What are the numbers of visitors that can be reasonably expected? After considering the realistic costs of site maintenance and management, how much net economic benefit is likely to be realized? These are all questions that heritage planners must answer before answering calls for proposals for cultural tourism. A failure to do so will make unrealistically optimistic promises or projections extremely dangerous for the survival of the heritage site—even if the initial funding is obtained.

A second problem follows from the first. If the goal of a heritage site is to attract tourists, it is obvious that it will be counterproductive if any element of its presentation drives tourists away. As has become obvious in the general heritage field in recent years, cultural tourism is rapidly becoming yet another form of leisure time recreation—competing not with other forms of

culture, but other forms of recreation such as beach tourism, nature tourism, museum tourism, and so forth. In many cases, historical authenticity has been the victim. In an era when public culture budgets are shrinking and cultural institutions of all kinds are being forced to be self-sustaining, the viability of a preservation and presentation project is, in the long run, often tied to its success in stimulating economic development—by paid admissions, subsidiary sales of postcards and other museum-shop items, employment opportunities, and a steady flow of tourist revenue for hotels, shops, and restaurants in the immediate vicinity. Finances and balance sheets are the real tyrants in this age of increasingly self-supporting culture and they can determine both message and medium if they are not carefully controlled.

And that brings me to the last of my words of warning: even if funding is successfully obtained for a heritage tourism project, opening day is the beginning, not the end. Initial publicity and impressive ceremonies almost inevitably cause a temporary spike in visitation that will attract higher numbers than ever before. But after six months or so, the visitor levels almost always return to their normal equilibrium, appropriate to the geographical position and relative prominence of the site. There are exceptions of course when a combination of factors is already working to change the dynamics of cultural routes. But in the vast majority of cases the changes are not rapid enough to prevent the inevitable: that the numbers of visitors begin to drop off precisely at the time the maintenance and unexpected costs of site management are beginning to rise. Often this prompts more funding appeals and more investment, but the vicious cycle of temporary visitation increases and soaring costs of maintenance make the whole project ultimately unsustainable, with ever-growing deficits. And this has its own pernicious effect on the entire enterprise: a heritage site, initially promoted as a boon to the local economy, which

proves to be an economic failure is a powerful dis-incentive for further publicly funded projects of this type.

These then are the elements I urge you to consider in the initial shaping of a strategy of public advocacy and an appeal for funding programs. It is important that the Prague Conference be the first step toward the establishment of a more coordinated reflection by all participants in this field on the social and economic context—and on the landscape of bureaucracy and commerce on which heritage projects are built. This social dimension is, I believe, crucial to bringing Jewish heritage into the mainstream of international cultural funding. The integration of educational and volunteer archaeological programs is one possible idea. But it is essential that activists in European Jewish Heritage formulate a coordinated agenda and a strategy for the coming decades and be actively involved in Brussels, Paris, London, and New York in the shaping of funding and public policy decisions through coordination with other heritage advocacy groups. A consistent effort must be made not only to send out the message of specific needs and achievements, but to refine structures of wide participation in, and communication about, Jewish heritage within European and Jewish society as a whole.

In workshops, seminars, and site visits, local political leaders, scholars, community members, and representatives of the European Commission, UNESCO, ICOMOS, and other international organizations must be shown how Jewish heritage sites can avoid becoming static cultural attractions, and be transformed into sustainable modern social institutions with continuing positive impacts on the life of the local community and the larger public associated with the site. The Ename Center ([www.enamecenter.org](http://www.enamecenter.org)) can perhaps help by serving as a clearing house for contacts, advice, and cooperation—and I urge you to contact me at [neil.silberman@enamecenter.org](mailto:neil.silberman@enamecenter.org). For in understanding the significance of a particular Jewish

heritage site both in its historical and contemporary social context, we will be able to effectively utilize and continue to refine the present tools of advocacy and funding, to help better preserve the authenticity and unique value of our shared heritage.