

# The Synagogue at Babyn Yar:

Turning the Nightmare of  
Evil into a Shared Dream  
of Good





# Introduction



*The Synagogue at Babyn Yar: Turning the Nightmare of Evil into a Shared Dream of Good* is on view from 18 April to 12 November 2023 at the Koffler Gallery. The exhibit links three moments in time of exceptional global resonance – the first large-scale massacre of Jewish people during the Holocaust, that occurred at Babyn Yar on 29 and 30 September 1941; the creation and dedication of the extraordinary, jewel-like, wooden synagogue – including several maquettes used in the planning phase and a scale-model of the completed synagogue - and, the current Russian war on Ukraine. The exhibition holds space for both sadness and hope and explores realities of the Holocaust and current Russian war on Ukraine. Only 82 years have passed since the Holocaust ended and attacks to nearby grounds by the Russian Military are taking place, making this exhibit more pertinent than ever before.

Docents in the gallery provide tours and answer questions about the works, imagery, and books inside the gallery.

# More about the Synagogue

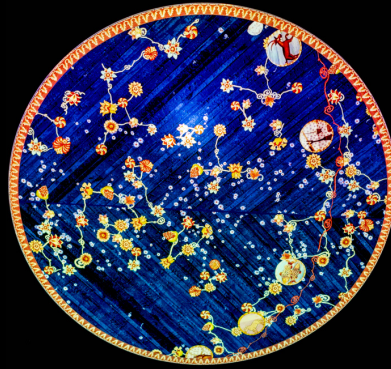
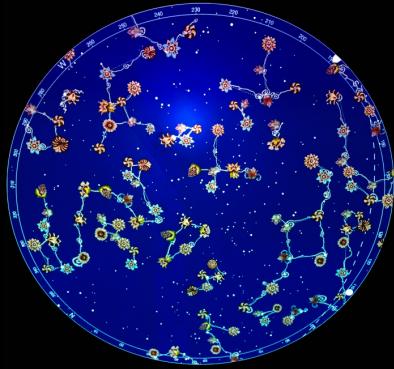


The Synagogue adjacent to the Babyn Yar ravine, designed by Manuel Herz Architects, is a beacon of hope for community gathering and prayer, designed with intentional openness, and intentionally mimicking characteristics of pop-up books. The shul (Yiddish for synagogue) opens like a siddur (Hebrew for prayer book) to evoke wonder, tranquility, and serenity. There is no way to be in prayer without the structure open; and even when it is closed, the ner tamid (Hebrew for eternal light) shines from inside out, casting itself on the surrounding grounds. It brings peace to those who lost ancestors in the Holocaust, those who wish to participate in prayer, and those who wish to observe. The wood used in the construction is reclaimed from buildings all over Ukraine that predated World War II. The intention of this was to build with wood that lived in a world before the massacre.





# Biographies



**Robert Jan van Pelt**  
*Curator of the exhibition*

Robert Jan van Pelt is curator of the exhibition. He is a Professor of Architecture at the University of Waterloo. van Pelt is an internationally recognized historian of the history of Auschwitz, the Holocaust and Jewish refugees. Among his recent publications are *Auschwitz: Not Long Ago. Not Far Away* (Abbeville, 2019) and *How Beautiful Are Your Dwelling Places, Jacob: An Atlas of Jewish Space and a Synagogue for Babyn Yar* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), the second of which includes contributions by Manuel Herz, Iwan Baan and others. van Pelt introduced the idea of building a synagogue adjacent to the Babyn Yar ravine.

**Edward Burtynsky**  
*Director of photography*

Ukrainian-Canadian photographer Burtynsky is widely regarded as one of the world's most accomplished and eloquent contemporary photographers. He is known for large-format photographs of landscapes around the world that bear witness to the impact of human industry on the planet. He worked collaboratively with Ukrainian photographer Maxim Dondyuk to bring a pensive eye to capturing the dialogue between the Babyn Yar ravine and the Synagogue.

**Iwan Baan**  
*Dutch photographer*

Baan captured images of the Synagogue from a distance and up-close details, as well as the daily use of Babyn Yar—a park with few visible reminders of the horrors that occurred during the war -- by residents of and visitors to Kyiv. Combining a passion for documentation of architecture with glimpses of the interactions that occur within architectural spaces, Baan's photographs reveal our innate ability to re-appropriate objects and materials in order to find a place we can call our own.

**Manuel Herz Architects**  
*Swiss Architect*

**Manuel Herz** is the Principal of Manuel Herz Architects, based in Basel, Switzerland, with a practice embedded in research and a wide range of typologies, locations, and scales. Herz was commissioned by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Foundation's architectural committee to design the Synagogue. He cites the *siddur* (Hebrew: prayer book), traditional wooden synagogues of Eastern Europe and pop-up books as key inspirations. With its *ner tamid* (Hebrew: eternal light) and brightly coloured interior—including the celestial sky from September 29, 1941 to situate it in time and space—the Synagogue serves as a memorial to horrific events and a playful beacon of hope.

**Maxim Dondyuk**  
*Contemporary Ukrainian visual artist & photographer*

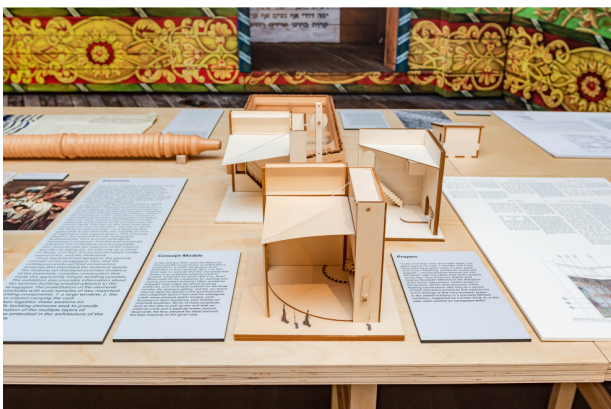
Dondyuk connected with Edward Burtynsky to show the Babyn Yar ravine and the Synagogue live on video. The two discussed the best strategy and camera placement to capture the large-scale photographic murals that wrap three-quarters of the exhibition gallery. Dondyuk's multimedia practice, often integrating archival material, explores history, memory and conflict, and their longer-lasting repercussions.

**Douglas Birkenshaw**  
*Canadian Architect*

As Senior Architect and a Principal at Douglas Birkenshaw Architects Inc., Birkenshaw sees large structures and infrastructure as positive forces in our communal landscape. He strives to make these more humane and technically excellent. Sustainability has always been a central driver of solutions and character in Birkenshaw's architecture—not an encumbrance or an afterthought to design. He produced and installed the exhibition.



# Discussion Questions for Students



## In the Classroom

*\*Recommended for students ages 10+*

Form a sharing circle without distractions. Ask students the following:

- Can you reflect on a moment where you saw yourself or someone else acting with courage?
- Can you think of a time when you followed the lead of someone else, but you knew it wasn't the right thing to do? Write down the incident and what you wish you did differently. Share with the class.
- Have you been singled out from your peers before? What does it feel like, can you describe the emotion?
- Do you know what injustice is? Can you give an example of what it looks like at school?
- Have you experienced loss before? If so, what does loss mean to you? If you haven't, can you discuss with a friend what loss felt like to them?

## During the Exhibition

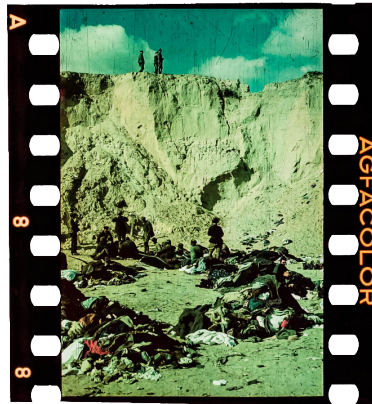
*\*Recommended for students ages 10+*

If the class can not visit the exhibition, teachers are welcome to show the photographs to them instead. Questions can be asked in the exhibition or in the classroom.

- What about the exhibition allows us to remember the victims? Name three things within the gallery space.
- What did you notice about the Synagogue? Reflect on what makes it referred to as "a beacon of hope".
- What makes you feel hopeful in a challenging time?



# Content on Babyn Yar for Teachers



Can be used to implement into curriculum and facilitate additional class conversation. Appropriate for Grade 6 learning.

Please note well-researched and potential answers have been given for ease of response to tough topics.

## ***What is a massacre?***

A massacre is a large-scale slaughter of people who are without defense to the murderer.

## ***Who were the victims of the massacre at Babyn Yar?***

A devastating 33,771 Jewish people were murdered in a two day period. Victims in the further massacres that followed also included patients and staff from a nearby health asylum, women, children, Romani people, and Soviet Russian citizens. The murders committed on September 29-30, 1941 were led by the Nazi's SS Obersturmführer (translation, Storm Military Leader), August Häfner. It is estimated that from 1941 to over 100,000 Jewish and non-Jewish people were murdered at Babyn Yar.

## ***What do we know about the memorial at Babyn Yar?***

Babyn Yar is a memorial site for the many victims from World War II. Robert Jan van Pelt, curator of the exhibition, explains that after Ukrainian independence in 1976, a proliferation of over 30 memorials were created across the Babyn Yar grounds. This includes memorials for Jewish victims, Soviet Russian citizens, Ukrainian nationalists, Romani people, streetcar personnel, German prisoners of war, Ukrainians forced to work in Germany, disabled people, asylum patients and staff, victims of the Kurenivka mudslide in Kyiv, women and children. In 2020-2021, in credit to van Pelt, the Synagogue was built as a beacon of hope and peace.



# Student Activities

## Activity #1

**Understanding Perspective & “I Saw” Poem**  
*Recommended for Ages 10+*

Allow the poem to be creative and a way to celebrate the students varying perspectives and the exhibition

The Babyn Yar exhibition has a small, circular “theater” enclosed by velvet curtains. The projector inside the theater projects the constellations of the night sky from 29 September 1941 (and the floral designs derived from them) onto the ceiling. The architect of the synagogue, Manuel Herz, suggested that the last thing some of the victims of the Babyn Yar massacre must have seen before they died was the night sky. Herz and the artists who painted the interior of the synagogue, including the ceiling, used historical books to figure out what constellations were visible that night, and depicted the constellations – but replaced the stars with flowers. Looking at the constellations is a way to remember and to honour the victims who were murdered in that specific place and time.

Considering the environment in which events occur is an important part to feeling connected to one another. Herz’s perspective allowed him to make this artistic choice. After all, the night sky is shared by everyone around the world.

Upon seeing the exhibition or photos of the exhibition, ask students to understand different perspectives. Ask students to do the following:

- Give students five minutes each. Allow them to circulate around the exhibition room on their own and note one thing that stood out to them the most.

- Come back together as a class and have each student share what they found to stick out to them.
- After sharing, ask students to swap their notable item with another student. Allow students another five minutes to walk around the exhibition a second time.
- This walk around, ask them to pay attention to the object that stood out the most to the person they traded with.
- Meet together as a class a second time, ask students to write a seven line poem as the perspective of the object they noticed and the object another student noticed.

The poem will encapsulate both what caught their eye in the first walk and what they paid attention to in the second walk. If a student is having difficulties, remind them this can be anything from the night sky, to the stars, to the books, or the trees.

If a student exceeds the seven prompt lines, allow them to. Each line should start with the following and expand creatively:

I saw the...      I felt the...      I heard the...  
They saw the...      I looked for the...      We felt the...  
I connected/didn’t connect with the...

## Activity #2

**What is a memorial and Draw your memorial symbol:**  
*Recommended for ages 12+ / suitable for a Grade 6 classroom.*

The exhibition introduces or reinforces the complex question of what a memorial is. Students who come from a Jewish background will most likely be familiar of Holocaust memorials. However, some students may not. Whether students are from a different culture but still understand memorials for their family because of another genocide, or without this experience entirely, this activity allows space for students to connect and understand over space dedicated to loss.

First, ask these discussion questions:

- Why are memorials a space where people can visit? Reflect on why the architect chose to make the Synagogue an open structure.
- Are there memorial spaces suited to your family that you have visited?
- Do memorials bring you comfort? Why or why not?

What is a place that brings you comfort? Connect it to something or someone you have lost or loved. Does this space help you remember what you have lost?

Provide students with paper and coloring utensils. Teacher’s discretion if the activity should be a 2D drawing or a 3D origami or paper structure.

- Ask the students to draw their memorial symbol. It can be one they have seen at an existing memorial, one that comes from their family home, or one they connect with.
- Have the students share the final product with each other. Ask them to explain what they chose to draw.



# Resources



## **In Conversation: Manuel Herz, Robert Jan van Pelt and Josh Heuman.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIdedRd5Wyo&t=1s>

This In Conversation features Architect Manuel Herz and exhibition curator Robert Jan van Pelt, moderated by Josh Heuman, the Koffler's Interim Head of Public Engagement. Their conversation focuses on the history of Babyn Yar, the synagogue, and future plans for the site. Questions were taken from the audience. The video can be used for post or pre-exhibition learning. It will provide context to students or for teachers to learn more.

## **Toronto Holocaust Museum**

<https://www.holocaustcentre.com/about-us/who-we-are>

Generating knowledge and understanding about the Holocaust through its museum, and school visit programs, the Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Education Centre serves as a forum for dialogue about civil society for present and future generations. Some of their year round programs include: International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Raoul Wallenberg Day, and Yom Hashoah.

## **Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Centre for Holocaust Studies**

<https://www.fswc.ca/our-story>

A non-profit human rights organization dedicated to Holocaust education and antisemitism programs. He believed that the power of education was the only way to end the cycle of bigotry. Their services offer Student Workshops, Professional Workshops and Training and ways to fight against antisemitism.

## **Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights**

<https://www.raoulwallenbergcentre.org/en/>

Specializing in protecting democracy, defending political prisoners and advancing women's rights, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human rights is an international consortium of parliamentarians, scholars, jurists, human rights defenders, NGOs, and students united in the pursuit of justice, inspired by and anchored in Raoul Wallenberg's humanitarian legacy.

## **Yad VaShem - The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre**

<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/international-activities/jewish-world/for-teachers.html>

Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, is the ultimate source for Holocaust education, documentation and research. Their archives documents from Europe and North Africa, the filming of survivors' testimonies, and the creation of the world's largest and most comprehensive repository of material on the Holocaust. Their website has a 'For Teachers' section that offers comprehensible guidelines for teachers.

## **Holocaust Encyclopedia**

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en/about>

One of the most comprehensive Holocaust resources online today. Providing accurate historical information about the Holocaust in article, video, photo, and other digitized collection format. Including discussion questions and responses on how WWII came to fruition. The Holocaust Encyclopedia includes over 950 fact based articles in English, and hundreds of these articles have been translated into 18 different languages including Arabic, Farsi, Russian, and Spanish.

## **The Ukrainian Museum of Canada, Ontario Branch**

<https://www.umontario.com>

Founded in Toronto in 1944, the Ukrainian Museum of Canada encompasses a collection of Ukrainian archives and holds contemporary Ukrainian-Canadian artwork in their collection. They frequently host exhibitions about facets of Ukrainian life and they have on-going events welcome to the public. They currently stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine of the current Russian evasion.

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# About the Koffler Centre of the Arts

## How to Book a Guided Visit

Wednesday to Sunday, noon to 5 pm.

To book an informative, discussion-based tour led by a volunteer Docent for your group - from a school, house of worship, social club, professional association, or other organization - please email [tours@kofflerarts.org](mailto:tours@kofflerarts.org) with the following information:

- Three preferred dates/times;
- Number of participants;
- Inform if participants are living with disabilities to help us prepare for any accommodation.
- Inform us if you have a specific focus for the tour (i.e., the Holocaust, architecture of the Synagogue at Babyn Yar, photography, Russia's war on Ukraine, etc.)

Established in 1977 as part of the Bathurst Jewish Community Centre to enrich the cultural life of the city through arts education and exhibitions, the Koffler Centre of the Arts has grown to inspire and enlighten the Jewish community as well as the broader public of Toronto and beyond. On July 1, 2009, the Koffler was incorporated as an independent not-for-profit charitable organization.

Over its 40-year history, the Koffler Centre and Koffler Gallery have offered a rich array of programmatic, education and learning programs, including exhibitions of contemporary art, literary programs, art classes, lectures, concerts, film screenings, and theater performances. The Koffler also serves public and private school students and their teachers through Koffler Gallery exhibition tours and workshops.

From 1980 to 2009, the Koffler Gallery was located at the Bathurst Jewish Community Centre. The Gallery moved its programming off-site in 2009 when the BJCC was redeveloped into Sherman Campus. Koffler's multidisciplinary programs continued around the greater Toronto area during this time.

In 2013, after five years of off-site programs, the Koffler Centre of the Arts opened its administrative offices and the new Koffler Gallery at Artscape Youngplace in downtown Toronto. The Artscape Youngplace facilities showcase Koffler Gallery exhibitions, public programs, expanded school and education programs, as well as Koffler cross-disciplinary programs – literary events, performances, speakers series, workshops and more.

### Education Programs at the Koffler

For information about the broad range of public engagement and education programs that complement the exhibition, The Synagogue at Babyn Yar, please visit [kofflerarts.org](http://kofflerarts.org).

The Koffler Gallery extends sincere thanks to Lisa Sheps, a teacher with the Toronto Heschel School, for aiding in the development of this Educator Guide.

### More Information

To stay up to date about goings on at the Koffler Centre please subscribe for our e-newsletter at:

<https://kofflerarts.org/News-Insights/E-News-Sign-Up>

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