

PARLIAMENTARY MUSEUM: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AS WELL AS CULTURAL AND POLITICAL ENTANGLEMENTS

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Sejm Library

Abstract: The goal of the article is to present parliamentary museum as an institution. In the introduction parliamentary museum is characterized as a peculiar type of historical museum. Subsequently, selected institutions of the kind in India, Japan, Jordan, and Belgium are discussed. Moreover, the political context

for founding the Museum of the Polish *Sejm* [Parliament] is described. This covers the time spanning from the late 1970s to 1989, as well as the operations of the Museum Content Department at the *Sejm* Library. To conclude, challenges and prospects for the planned Museum of Polish Parliamentarism are presented.

Keywords: historical museum, parliamentary museum, museum autonomy, historical policy, Museum of the Polish *Sejm*.

Parliamentary museums as examples of historical museums

The majority of parliamentary museums are examples of so-called historical museums. According to Zdzisław Żygulski Jr., *the task of historical museum is to present, within a given range, the historical past by means of material historic objects and other documents.*¹ The museologist, enumerating subtypes of historical museums dominating in the late 20th century, does not distinguish parliamentary museums. He mentions only the growing impact of historical museums dedicated to selected periods, events, associations or political parties, or illustrious political activists.²

Slightly different conclusions are reached by contemporary museologists. The sociologist Geneviève Zubrzycki during the debate instigated by the Polish History Museum, when analyzing the impact of the political transformation in Poland after 1989 on the condition of Polish museology, claimed: *In societies in which history forms an integral part of the cultural code impacting the image of the nation and*

*the basis of the political discourse, historical museums seem to be particularly important socially. They stand the chance of playing the role of the conveyor of change in the domain of social patterns and the way of thinking about politics: they serve learning, forming views of citizens and of international visitors.*³

According to the researcher, historical museums fulfil two basic functions. They are social institutions and, due to their function of supporting the state's authority, they are also instruments of power. They support the idea of a political community (mainly national, as seen from the perspective of the realities of East-Central Europe), as well as shape the collective identity of the country's citizens. In compliance with Eric Hobsbawm's ideas, they are to serve the purpose of *inventing tradition*, namely the process of demonstrating the relation between the past and the present, and the activities conducted by elites (usually political) for legitimizing purposes.⁴

It is necessary to emphasize that the majority of parliamentary museums were created at the moments of a

particular historical impact: in the periods of political transformation, of the exchange of the ruling elite. When analyzing the history of parliamentary museums it has to be observed that the very moment of initiating the debate on the shape of museum institutions is often connected with the need to provide structure to a new political narrative meant to sanction beforehand the status of the new authorities or to defend the *ancien regime* against social delegitimation. In the history of parliamentary museums one of the key challenges is thus the attempt to define the extent of programme and ideological autonomy of the museum in relation to its organizer and the degree of the entanglement of the display message in the political and party discourse.

Selected parliamentary museums around the world

The majority of parliaments have offices responsible for popularising the knowledge of their history. Most commonly, their scope of responsibilities includes preparation of information materials and taking visitor groups round the parliament building. Relatively few of those units implement classical tasks of a museum, namely collecting, storing, conserving, displaying, and popularizing collections related to the history of parliamentarism. More active in the field are the countries whose parliamentary tradition is relatively short, particularly those outside Europe. The institutions of the type include e.g. the Japanese Parliamentary Museum, New Delhi's Parliament Museum, and the Jordan Museum of Parliamentary Life. In Europe, the most prominent institution of the profile of parliamentary museum is the Parliamentarium in Brussels.

Tokyo's Parliamentary Museum started operating in 1970 on the 80th anniversary of the birth of Japanese parliamentarism. The choice of the date was thus not accidental: reference was made to the tradition of Meiji ('Civilization and Enlightenment'), when a thorough transformation of the country took place, modernizing it to resemble the Western model. Interestingly, the project to establish a museum was from the very beginning supported by Eisaku Satō, Prime Minister in 1964–72, the charismatic leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party, regarded to have been one of the co-authors of the economic success of Japan, as well as the advocate of a close cooperation with the United States.

The official opening of the permanent exhibition at the Parliamentary Museum took place in 1972. The institution is located in the immediate vicinity of the main building of the Japanese Parliament, and the building of the Parliament library. The display, combining traditional exhibits with modern multimedia, shows the work of the Parliament and presents its Speakers and Prime Ministers (however, with the opposition leaders hardly mentioned). The Museum exposes the role of democracy, marginalizing the political development of Japan from before the Meiji period. In the display narrative also the times of the Shōwa period, namely the 'Era of Enlightened Peace', the rule of Emperor Hirohito, covering WW II, are selectively tackled. The history of the country's political system is presented from the perspective which can be defined as America-centred.

The Parliament Museum in New Delhi initiated its activity in 1989, during the administration of Rajiv Gandhi, the son

of Indira Gandhi, with the Indian National Congress dominating the political stage. Currently, the institution forms part of the parliamentary office called Parliamentary Museum and Archives. Modernized in the early 21st century, it had its political narrative discretely modified to reflect that closer to the rightist ideology of the Indian People's Party (BJP). The exhibition is made up of three parts: the first shows the tradition of democratic institutions in India (including the Edicts of Ashoka hewn in rock in the 3rd century B.C.); the second (the most modest in form) analyses the importance of parliamentary institutions in selected countries; the third part introduces the legislative process in India. By means of a skilful division of emphases, the Museum's visitors become acquainted with Indian statehood: from the ancient times to today.

The Museum of Parliamentary Life in Amman, founded in 2010, had its permanent exhibition launched 6 years later. Reporting to the Ministry of Culture, the institution was located in the old Parliament building, a symbolical venue at which in 1946 Abdullah I bin Al-Hussein declared the independence of the Kingdom of Transjordan. The exhibition records the political and parliamentary history of Jordan. The narrative's goal is to expose the achievements of the Hashemites ruling Jordan to-date. Its mission can therefore be regarded as the creation of a narrative mythologizing the dynasty.

The Parliamentarium, namely the centre for those visiting the European Parliament, is located in the Espace Léopold complex in Brussels. The modern interactive exhibition is meant to show the way to the European integration and to introduce the modes of work of the European Parliament. Its message emphasizes the universalisation of the European values, while presenting the stories of individuals, communities, and nations from a multicultural perspective. The exhibition, available in every of the 24 languages of the EU, is divided into three parts: the past, the present, and the future. Its last segment provides the visitors with the possibility to describe their own vision of the future of Europe *integrated in diversity*.

Context for the foundation of the Polish Sejm Museum

According to the available archival records it seems that the initiative to found the Polish *Sejm* Museum was officially formulated in November 1979 by Kazimierz Świtała, a lawyer, former Minister of Interior in Communist Poland (1968–71), member of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (KC PZPR) (1968–71). However, it is difficult to consider Świtała the 'father' of the Polish *Sejm* Museum: in the period when the project was initiated, he was Head of the Chancellery of the *Sejm* who submitted the draft of a ready resolution to the Presidium of the *Sejm*.

The launching of the debate on establishing a new museum institution has to be put in a wider context. Upon Edward Gierek becoming the First Secretary of the KC PZPR, a partial shift in the formula of political legitimization took place, claims the historian Marcin Zaremba. According to him, the Polish authorities, trying to restore social confidence after the arms had been fired against protesters in Gdańsk and Gdynia in December 1970, purposefully

resorted to the national past, also the elements unspoken of in the first two decades of Communist Poland. Thus the authorities distanced themselves from the martyrology discourse. The official version of the history was corrected. *Jubilees of historical anniversaries stopped being celebrated 'against someone', and they were first of all meant to educate people,*⁵ writes Zaremba referring to the reconstruction of the Royal Castle and the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of Poland regaining independence.

The manifestation of the change of attitude towards national history could be seen in the establishment of several museum institutions in Warsaw in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1974–80, three branches of the Historical Museum of Warsaw were launched: the Wola Museum of Warsaw (1974), Museum of Printing (1975), and the Museum of Struggle and Martyrdom Palmiry (1980). In 1981, the Social Committee for the Construction of the Warsaw Uprising Museum was established, while 2 years later the branch of the Warsaw Uprising Museum was founded at the Historical Museum of Warsaw. In 1978, the Museum of Caricature was launched as a branch of the Museum of Literature. In 1980, namely a year after the first apostolic pilgrimage of John Paul II to Poland, the Museum of the Archdiocese of Warsaw was opened. In 1984, the Museum of the History of the Polish Peasant Movement was started. The institutions offered varied historical narratives, detabooising particular fragments of the panorama of national and political history, the latter including also the parliamentary one.

The conviction that the knowledge of the history of the *Sejm* should be conveyed to society in a comprehensible and attractive format can be reflected in the reconstruction of the old *Sejm* interiors in the rebuilt Royal Castle in Warsaw: the New Chamber of Deputies, Senatorial Hall, Guards' Room, New Chamber of Deputies, and the Antechamber to the New Chamber of Deputies. The decision to do so demonstrated a new field of interest in the history of the *Sejm* neglected in the prior research. Works on recreating the space in which the Constitution of 3 May 1791 was adopted required knowledge of architecture, history, history of law, and of history of art. The reconstructed *Sejm* halls became places where the history of Polish parliamentarism was popularized, turning them into a substitute of the *Sejm* Museum.

In the early 1980s, both academic and popular literature focused on the history of parliamentarism, actually more than in the previous decade; so the topics tackled were its beginnings under the Jagiellonian Dynasty, the Union of Lublin, Commission of National Education (KEN), namely the events and commemorative sites emanating the idea of strong statehood, civic education, and patriotic tradition. *Concepts such as 'Socialism', 'Socialist political system', 'society', were gradually replaced by the terms: 'state' and 'statehood'*.⁶ Manifestations of the type of discourse can be found in the justification to the draft resolution on establishing the Polish *Sejm* Museum submitted to the *Sejm* Presidium. The document reads, among others: *The Sejm constitutes an inseparable important element of the tradition of the Nation and Polish state; in the past regarded as synonymous with and an expression of state's sovereignty, in general awareness it has become an essential element of the bond of the nation with the state authorities. (...) Particularly over the last decade [the role of the Sejm] has found a gradually*

*fuller reflection in the political and legal praxis of our State, substantially benefitting the strengthening of the bond between the state authorities and the masses, as well as consolidating patriotic attitudes of the citizens. All these circumstances favour the undertaking of necessary organizational steps to allow to collect all the documents and mementoes of the history of the Polish Sejm activities in one place, for them to testify to the former and today's importance of the Polish Sejm, and for them to contribute to consolidating the awareness of the national memory of Polish parliamentarism and the knowledge of its challenges today.*⁷

Importantly, the document had been beforehand given an approval by Henryk Jabłoński, President of the Council of State, as well as Edward Babiuch, Chairman of the PZPR Parliamentary Club. The *Sejm* Presidium approved the motion at the session on 25 November 1979, and took the following resolution: *The Sejm Presidium has decided to found the Polish Sejm Museum as a publicly accessible public museum showing the long lasting and durability of Polish national parliamentary traditions; it will become a major instrument in the patriotic ideological, and educational activity, particularly among young people, teaching them the proper civic attitude to the history of homeland, and to contemporary Polish Socialist statehood.*⁸

Establishing of the Polish *Sejm* Museum

On 19 December 1984, the Presidium of the *Sejm*, in agreement with the Minister of Culture and Art, adopted a subsequent resolution to found an organizational unit called 'The Polish *Sejm* Museum'. This document being of a far more executive character than the one adopted 5 years earlier, read: *The task of the Museum is to collect, keep, conserve, scientifically elaborate, and make available to the public the collection related to Polish parliamentarism until the most recent times.*⁹ The detailed range of the Museum's activities and its internal structure were to be specified by the statutes to be provided by the Head of the *Sejm* Chancellery in agreement with the Minister of Culture and Art. The assumption was made that the supervision of the Museum's activity, in this case the selection of its Director, was to remain the prerogative of the Head of the *Sejm* Chancellery. The organization was to be financed by the Culture Development Fund.

In August 1985, a Team to Organize the Polish *Sejm* Museum was appointed, while a year later, the Opinion and Consultancy Committee for the Museum of the Polish *Sejm* was set up. The Committee was to be responsible for working out the script of the future exhibition, the supervision of the adaptation of museum rooms, and for holding academic conferences.¹⁰ At the same time it was agreed that the opinions formulated by the Committee were to be submitted to the Speaker of the *Sejm*, while their implementation was to be the responsibility of the Head of the *Sejm* Chancellery.

The design works meant to adjust the oldest buildings in the *Sejm* complex to serve museum purposes were begun in 1987, while the first renovation works were started in 1988. The furnishing of the interiors and the display were to be completed in February 1991. According to the decision of the Politburo of the KC PZPR, plans were made for the Museum to be opened on the 200th anniversary of adopting the 3 May Constitution: *It will constitute the central item*

on the national celebrations agenda related to the moment which seems to have been the most important moment in the history of Polish parliamentarism.¹¹

Restructuring of the Polish Sejm Museum

Soon after the partially democratic *Sejm* election, in December 1989, the decision was made that the renovated building meant to house the Polish *Sejm* Museum was to serve as conference rooms for the *Sejm* and Senate Committees (with the building actually serving this very purpose until today). The winding down of the Culture Development Fund resulted in the fact that as of 1 January 1991 the Museum's current operations were incorporated into the overall budget of the *Sejm* Chancellery, while new organizational regulations of the *Sejm* Chancellery founded the Museum Content Section, later restructured into a Department at the *Sejm* Library

The unit continues collecting, elaborating, and conserving historic objects (currently the collection boasts almost 10,000 artefacts related to the history of the Polish *Sejm*), and it displays them at temporary exhibitions (in 1986–2019, 37 such displays were held in Poland, and also in foreign parliamentary buildings). It is also the museologists' task to provide decoration of the *Sejm* stately interiors. Furthermore, the Museum Content Department staff hold scholarly conferences, and are responsible for sculpture projects (e.g. sculpture gallery of Deputy Chamber Speakers from the First Polish Republic, commemorative plates in the *Sejm*'s main hall), as well as for painting ones (painting gallery of the Speakers of the Second Polish Republic), additionally providing historic iconography to the *Sejm* Publishing House. Furthermore, the Museum Content Department's responsibility is the *Sejm* Virtual Museum and the uploading of a selection of parliamentary artefacts onto the Google Arts&Culture Platform.

Future of the Polish Sejm Museum

The restructuring of the *Sejm* Chancellery in 1989 did not mean closing up the debate on the Museum's future. Already in December 1991, different ideas were being considered: to locate the permanent exhibition at the Rembieliński Palace on the corner of Piękna Street and Ujazdowskie Avenue; in the pavilion of the former Ujazdów Hospital in Jazdów Street; in one of the residential buildings in Górnośląska Street; and in the planned new *Sejm* building at the junction of Matejki and Wiejska Streets. In the last edifice, however, put into service in late 2018, there was no room left for the Museum's permanent exhibition.

In the course of the 7th *Sejm*'s term of office, the idea to establish the museum of Polish parliamentarism was resumed. The project has to be put into two contexts: a global and a local one. The first is related to the so-called *wrzenie upheaval?*, museum boom; the second, also partially correlated with the first, is connected with the increase of financing allocated to the memory culture and historical policy in Poland under the administration of the Law and Justice Party (PiS).

The caesura for the 'museum upheaval' can be found in the opening of the Warsaw Rising Museum in Warsaw in 2004. Over the next decade many new museums were created, or

the old ones were entirely rearranged; these soon became well-rooted landmarks in Poles' social imagination, as well as in tourist guidebooks targeted at international visitors.

Interestingly, the resuming of the debate on establishing a parliamentary museum coincided with three jubilees important for the *Sejm* history: the 550th anniversary of the Piotrków *Sejm* (1468): the first in history two-chamber *Sejm*; the 100th anniversary of Poland regaining independence; and the 100th anniversary of launching the Legislative *Sejm*. In 2017, in compliance with the *Sejm* Speaker's decision, works were started to create the Museum of Polish Parliamentarism. The decision read: *The [Museum of Parliamentarism] Project is one of the initiatives related to the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of regaining independence. (...) The Museum will show Poland as one of the cradles of parliamentarism on the European continent, to a degree anticipating other European countries in this respect.*¹²

Over the recent years, the number of *Sejm* museologists has been increased, and the process of collecting exhibits intensified. The issues of the institution's future location have been retackled. However, unless the seat of the Museum of Polish Parliamentarism is decided, planning of the permanent exhibition will be unrealistic, and the activity of the Museum Content Department will focus on preparing temporary exhibitions and on further extending the parliamentarism-related exhibit collection.

Parliamentary museums are tools for implementing historical policy, creating historical awareness of citizens, and for patriotic education. As viewed from this perspective, they resemble state think tanks, consolidating democratic practices in society. On the other hand, however, historical policy also means working out the politically correct interpretation of history by referring to selectively chosen memorial sites (events, national heroes, historical anniversaries), since institutionalizing the discourse on the past means both the policy of memory, and the policy of oblivion: parliamentary museums relatively easily transform into monuments commemorating the success of the political group which happens to have the parliamentary majority at a given moment (or which is apprehensive about losing its political position), this confirmed by the history of the parliamentary museums in Asia.

The above conclusions are also partially reflected in the history of the idea of the Polish *Sejm* Museum. Over four decades the concept of an institution collecting Polish parliamentarism-related exhibits evolved: from the tool legitimizing the Communist elites to the project, revived in the 2nd decade of the 21st century, of founding yet another historical narrative museum, located in the capital, matching in importance the Museum of Polish History, whose main narrative axis of the Old Polish period is interestingly to be found in the history of the parliament.

The Polish *Sejm* Museum, and later the Museum Content Department, structure-wise have always remained under the auspices of the *Sejm* Chancellery. This affiliation on the one hand has provided their stability, however on the other, in view of the increasing number of *Sejm* committees, it has hindered the creation of an autonomous display on the parliamentary complex premises.

Endnotes

¹ Z. Żygulski jun., *Muzea na świecie. Wstęp do muzealnictwa*, PWN, Warszawa 1982, s. 98.

² *Ibidem*, s. 99.

³ G. Zubrzycki, *Między historią, pamięcią wspólną i mitologią narodową: wyzwania i szanse współczesnych muzeów*, M. Szukała (przeł.), w: *Historia Polski od-nowa. Nowe narracje historii i muzealne reprezentacje przeszłości*, R. Kostro, K. Wóycicki, M. Wysocki (red.), Muzeum Historii Polski, Warszawa 2014, s. 14-15.

⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *Wprowadzenie. Wynajdowanie tradycji*, M. Godyrń, F. Godyrń (przeł.), w: *Tradycja odnaleziona*, E. Hobsbawm, T. Ranger (red.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2008, s. 9-23.

⁵ M. Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, (wyd. 2), Trio, Warszawa 2005, s. 364.

⁶ *Ibidem*, s. 378.

⁷ *Uzasadnienie do Uchwały Prezydium Sejmu z dnia 15 listopada 1979 r. w sprawie powołania Muzeum Sejmu Polskiego*, k. 1.

⁸ *Uchwała Prezydium Sejmu z dnia 15 listopada 1979 r. w sprawie powołania Muzeum Sejmu Polskiego*, k. 1.

⁹ *Uchwała Prezydium Sejmu z 19 grudnia 1984 w sprawie utworzenia Muzeum Sejmu Polskiego*, k. 1.

¹⁰ Pod patronatem Kancelarii Sejmu w latach 1981-1984 zorganizowano 4 sesje naukowe: *Dzieje polskiego parlamentaryzmu w okresie przedrozbiorowym* (Kórnik 1982); *Dzieje parlamentaryzmu na ziemiach polskich w okresie porozbiorowym* (Kraków 1982); *Dzieje parlamentaryzmu polskiego w okresie Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warszawa 1983); *Dzieje parlamentaryzmu w Polsce Ludowej* (Lublin 1984).

¹¹ *Notatka informacyjna – Jak zrodziła się inicjatywa utworzenia Muzeum polskiego parlamentu?*, k. 4.

¹² *Muzeum Sejmu Polskiego na 100-lecie Niepodległej*, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=EE27EA87625F52A9C1258076005677E8> [dostęp: 25.01.2019]

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