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COMMUNISM ON DISPLAY. REPRESENTATIONS OF THE PAST IN POLISH HISTORICAL MUSEUMS

Abstract

The article analyzes museum representations of communism in Poland from the perspective of exhibition strategies influencing the public understanding of the past. Over the past forty years, Western museums have increasingly moved away from the affirmative model of presenting the past, dominating since the nineteenth century, towards critical paradigms and even those promoting social activism. The analysis of Polish exhibitions devoted to recent history carried out from this perspective allows us to reveal the functions fulfilled by museum institutions in the Polish social and political reality.

Key words: historical museum, communism, exhibition, museological paradigm

The critical deconstruction of national narratives about communism in Central and Eastern European museums¹ confirms the thesis that historical exhibitions are the key element of the processes of rationalization and institutionalization of history. Exhibitions legitimize and interpret the past for the audiences, and their wide impact and social authority make them jointly responsible for the shape of collective memory. At the same time, however, every museum is an element of historical policy, whose overriding goal is to shape the historical awareness of a community. In my studies the aim is to expose these functions of museums,

¹ The study was funded by the National Science Center, grant no.: NCN 2014/13/B/HS3/04886, the final result being a monograph, see Anna Ziębińska-Witek, *Muzealizacja komunizmu w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2018). I use “communism” in symbolic rather than legal-political terms, being aware of the complexity of the term and difficulties in using it in the case of different former people’s democracies.

which, invisible at first glance, serve ideological persuasion and current political goals, and I deconstruct the exhibition strategies used by authors of exhibitions in order to invest the past with the desirable meaning. The present text analyzes the representations of communism in Polish historical museums from the angle of three model ways of approaching the past: traditional (identity-based), revisionist (critical), and sociomuseological (museum activism).

THE TRADITIONAL (IDENTITY-BASED) MODEL

After thirty years since it regained full sovereignty, Poland (unlike most of the countries in the region) still does not have a museum that would represent the whole period of Soviet domination (1944–1989) or the history of People’s Poland (1952–1989). There are only museums devoted to historical processes or events selected from the communist past, the two most important being the European Solidarity Center (Europejskie Centrum Solidarności [ECS]) in Gdansk and the Museum of the Poznan Uprising – June 1956 in Poznan (Muzeum Powstania Poznańskiego – Czerwiec 1956 roku – a branch of the Wielkopolska Museum of Independence). The two institutions represent the official historical policy of the Polish state, which is part of the traditional model of historical exhibitions. .

The purpose of the traditional model of representing history in the museum, which can be also termed identity-based, affirmative or ritualistic, is to create the self-positive image of a specific nation and to present its uniqueness at the same time. This model (in its content) is close to the first nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historical exhibitions that present glorious and romantic visions of the past of specific national communities.² Both then and now they focus on political history. Despite changes in historiography, which, already since the 1970s, has gradually shifted its interest towards social history, micro-history and historical anthropology, the exhibitions of this type still follow the binding paradigm of traditional narrative conducted from the privileged (omniscient) point of view. Additional elements like the voices of witnesses (usually available from display screens) arouse empathy towards heroes and legitimize the narrative without, however, changing the overall order reflecting the principles of classical, objectivist narrative that assumes the form of visual reconstruction of the past “as it really was”. The clear narrative line excludes ambiguities and disputes. The subjects that might arouse doubts or provoke controversies are simply omitted. Apart from traditional exhibition methods, i.e. period artifacts, the identity-based exhibitions often present the most recent technological solutions, which enhance their attraction and “modernity” in the eyes of the audience. Visitors have access to multimedia and databases, which

² See Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion. An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums* (Nashville: The American Association for State and Local History, 1979), 79–95.

from the second or third narrative level. These elements serve, however, to only validate the presented vision of history; they do not represent a different perspective or at least some other aspects of a given fragment of the past. The exhibitions form a logical whole, and appear to be objective and scientific. In the case of representations of communism, identity-based narratives function as the founding myths constituting the basis for a new, free society. They present the heroic struggle for freedom emphasizing the martyrological independence ethos. Some objects (usually personal belongings of victims) function as holy relics, which enhances the highly sacred atmosphere of the exhibitions.

The European Solidarity Center and the Museum of the Poznan Uprising – June 1956 are exhibitions that present their versions of the past by using mainly moral categories (omitting the economic context), trying to express collective (rather than individual) experience and create or restore the feeling of national community lost after the transformation.

At both exhibitions we are dealing with a consistent narrative line: communism is presented as an alien and hostile force imposed upon the enslaved society, which, driven to the extremes and having moral advantage, ultimately wins albeit at the expense of many victims. The coherence and romanticism of the narrative are expressed in the names of the ECS exhibition halls: “Birth of Solidarity”, “Power of the Powerless”, “Solidarity and Hope”, “John Paul II”, “War against Society”, “Road to Democracy”, “Triumph of Freedom”. The exhibition mainly presents the history of “Solidarity” (it begins in 1980), which is highly convenient from the perspective of heroic and identity-based narrative. The events in Europe of 1945–1970 are confined to symbolic dates: 1953 (Berlin), 1956 (Hungary), 1961 (the Berlin Wall), 1968 (Prague), stressing, which is symptomatic, chiefly the acts of social disobedience and uprisings against communist authorities. Having focused only on the indomitable resistance and rebellion of the society, the narrative omits the issues of the wide adaptation of the Poles (and other nations) to the system, its causes and far-reaching consequences. A whole set of attitudes is thus consciously expunged, which Krystyna Kersten called “adjustment”.³ The wide circles of Polish society adjusted themselves in the past to the situation and did not feel alienated from the country in which they had to live. The identity-based museums readily “forget” about this daily life, presenting only exceptional and heroic events and persons. In the case of similar representations the facts that do not conform to the heroic narrative are not presented.

The Museum of the Poznan Uprising – June 1956 presents the first mass riots by the Poznan workers and inhabitants against the communist authorities. It is already problematic to call the workers’ 1956 riots an “uprising”, which places these events in the series of independence uprisings during the period when Poland was partitioned. The narrative line of the story is, as in the case of the ECS, the heroic tale about communism oppressing the enslaved society, which

³ Krystyna Kersten, *Między wyzwoleniem a zniewoleniem. Polska 1944–1956*, (London: Aneks, 1993), 15.

nevertheless, despite victims and apparent defeats, wins against the alien enemy. Again therefore, the Polish “love of freedom” appears as the crucial constituent of national identity. The exhibition omits the issues that could make the image of the first of the “Polish months” less clear-cut. Marcin Zaremba observes that the creation of the legend pertains to all riots against the authorities:

“(…) we are dealing in this country with the legend of heroic “Polish months”, as if this brave society only opposed communism. It was not as simple as that for the people did not oppose communism but only price rises. In December 1970 and in June 1976, acts of vandalism and robbery were committed and no instigators were needed for that. The working class was never holy. Looting during chaos, when the feeling of anonymity prevails, had also happened earlier.”⁴

Paweł Machcewicz writes in turn about the importance of the wider acceptance of the system in 1956 than in the later period – in the mid-1980s. “People wanted its profound changes: the departure from terror and collectivization, from the Soviet dictate, but there was still a prevalent belief that it is a political system that could implement the ideals of social justice, equality, and modernity.”⁵ Similar conclusions are, however, incompatible with identity-based narratives.

A typical narrative technique used at the two exhibitions is the creation of the collective subject. In the ECS it is “Polish society” on whose behalf and with whose consent a handful of opposition activists are acting. The exhibition emphasized the exception role of the Catholic Church in the transformations in Poland. There are two indisputable individual heroes in the narrative: Lech Wałęsa and John Paul II, whose pilgrimages to Poland are emphasized as events of great political significance. In the Poznan Museum this collective entity is the “city”, which rebelled but not on account of “economic difficulties” but because of “[...] existence, freedom and own identity. It was free for a dozen or so hours. It started a fight it was bound to lose. The wounds remained for decades: the city was not so eager to rebel in the next, groundbreaking years of People’s Poland.”⁶

In addition to positive heroes, the identity-based narrative requires defining the enemy, thanks to whom the history of heroism can confirm its importance and significance. As the studies on the European exhibitions demonstrate⁷, the enemy (or “stranger/alien”) alone is not so important as the enemy/hero relationship and tension, which is the foundation of the museum narrative in the case of affirmative models.

⁴ A talk with Marcin Zaremba in: Andrzej Brzezicki, *Lekcje historii. PRL w rozmowach* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo W.A.B., 2009), 200.

⁵ A talk with Paweł Machcewicz, in: Brzezicki, *Lekcje historii*, 94.

⁶ <http://www.muzeumniepodleglosci.poznan.pl/index.php?module=htmlpages&func=display&pid=5> (accessed: 13.08.2015).

⁷ See *The Enemy on Display. The Second World War in Eastern European Museums*, ed. by Zuzanna Bogumił, Joanna Wawrzyniak, Tim Buchen, Christian Ganzer, Maria Senina (New York–Oxford: Berghahn, 2015).

Identity-based exhibitions place the Polish society on the side of truth, morality and ethics, the enemy being indeterminate, however. Names appear that have a symbolic dimension, e.g. Wojciech Jaruzelski, who imposed martial law or those nationally “foreign” i.e. the Soviets, yet, essentially, exhibitions show an impersonal enemy in the form of the communist system. The hostile system at the exhibition is characterized by a set of features characteristic of totalitarianism: brutality, militarism, heartlessness, anonymity, a desire for all-powerful control, a striving to maintain power at all costs. This technique especially serves to create the identity-based narrative, whose authors face the problem of admitting that some part of the society identified with the system or even managed it. A possible deconstruction of the uniform image of the enemy would weaken the whole narrative, destroy the dichotomy, and the narrative would become less heroic and less convincing. What is worse, this would bring an unwelcome relativity threatening the existence of identity-based discourse⁸.

Poland’s uniqueness as compared with the region is especially accentuated at the exhibition in the ECS. The exhibition authors stress that the changes initiated in Poland by the “Solidarity” trade union and opposition movements resulted in transformations in the whole Eastern bloc.⁹ Building the feeling of pride in national history is paid, however, with the erasure of those elements of the past that do not agree with the positive national image. They are thereby condemned to oblivion. The affirmative picture of the community as a rule arouses the approval of the audience, who are not eager to confront the inconvenient (not too glorious) past, which increases the popularity of the museum. The black and white vision of the past and one-sided interpretation make it easy to create a strong feeling of unity within the nation but they do not help in critical thinking, in distancing oneself from the past and in understanding complex historical processes.

In formal terms, the Gdansk and Poznan exhibitions can be described as narrative reconstructions of the past, which look neutral and objective. The exhibitions are characterized by obvious realism, they obey the requirement of the scientificity of the exhibition, i.e. its logical ordering and the grouping and placement of the exhibits so that they form a cohesive and lucid whole. They are thereby easier to use for current political purposes since they present a consistent and clear-cut narrative leaving the audience no room for an independent and potentially alternative interpretation.

THE REVISIONIST (CRITICAL) MODEL

In the case of museum narratives I use the term revisionism to denote approaches that differ from official, heroic-identity-based visions of the past. Similar exhibitions, sometimes termed critical, present, apart from glorious

⁸ *The Enemy on Display*, 149.

⁹ See *Challenging History in the Museum International Perspectives*, ed. by Jenny Kidd, Sam Cairns, Alex Drago, Amy Ryall (London: Routledge, 2016).

history, difficult or controversial heritage, the one that some audiences may regard as problematic, harming the positive image of the community. Western museums more and more readily make an effort to implement similar concepts, assuming that histories of conflicts, exclusions, fights, domination, genocide, colonization (so-called *challenging history*) are also elements of national histories. It is a serious challenge, both to the institution and audience, yet in the case of the critical model the relationship between the museum and visitors does not consist in assuming the position of an arbiter and judging what is “objective history” or what should be a permanent element of collective memory¹⁰. The introduction of difficult themes into the exhibition causes them to shift from the private into public sphere and to provoke discussion, which ultimately influences social sensitivity and awareness. In such cases it is essential to make the curators’ decisions transparent and to explain to the audience what choice the authors faced and why they decided to present that set of themes rather than some other combination. Owing to such understanding of its functions, the museum enables changing the perception of controversial subjects into an acceptable vision of the past.

A critical exhibition starts from different questions than an affirmative one does. They relate not only to events that need to be presented and the ways of their representation, but also to specifying who is the “owner” of a given fragment of the past, who will be covered and excluded by a given narrative, whose memories will be privileged and whose will be omitted. Also important is the reflection on the ways of combining individual memories with the general historical narrative. It is worth presenting events from different perspectives, to include in the exhibition the opinions of persons previously not taken into consideration. The multi-perspective of the exhibition allows each visitor to find subjects that are interesting and correspond with his/her worldview, which neutralizes a possible disagreement with some theses of the curators. The multiplicity of problems and aspects facilitates building one’s own narrative and assessment as well as introduction of unobvious subjects into the public sphere.

It should be defined what revisionism in the sense of critical attitude is or could be in the case of Polish exhibitions devoted to communisms. Apart from the abovementioned social aspects related to complex and ambiguous attitudes of the Polish society towards communism, critical exhibitions should provoke reflection on the issues concerning the political system itself, which is not perceived at any exhibition as an unsuccessful modernization project or an unsuccessful attempt to raise the living standards of wide people’s masses, although it actually aroused such hopes and was supported as such by a part of society. Focusing on specific political events of the past (related to rebellions and resistance towards the authorities) excludes a different view of communism, e.g. from the perspective of achievements and successes in various areas of life

¹⁰ The nostalgic trend in museology is implemented mainly in small private museums, like the Charm of the Polish People’s Republic (Czar PRL-u) in Warsaw or the Museum of the Polish People’s Republic (Muzeum PRL-u) in Ruda Śląska, see. Anna Ziębińska-Witek, *Muzealizacja komunizmu*, 173–227.

(sport, architecture, *design*, culture and art in a broad sense, social policies). Critical exhibitions would therefore have to present themes concerning social history, history of everyday life or mentality, which are after all well examined by historiography. The point here is not to glorify the former system, but to include a broader range of issues than political ones, which could also help understand the intense nostalgia for communism that appears in all Central-East European countries.¹¹ The identity-based museum narratives described above present communism only as a system imposed by foreigners, which was fought against during the whole period of its duration, which entirely distorts the realistic picture of the past, and moreover, does not allow seeing positive elements of the communist legacy, which are still in the collective memory.

I found some elements of the model that I call revisionist and critical at the exhibition at the Depot History Center (Centrum Historii Zajezdnia) in Wrocław and in temporary exhibitions of the Museum of the Polish People's Republic (Muzeum PRL, hereafter the PRL Museum under organization) in Nowa Huta.

The Depot History Center in Wrocław, opened in 2016, is devoted to the postwar history of the city located in the so-called Regained Territories, granted to Poland after World War Two in accordance with the decisions of the Potsdam Conference. They consist of the territories east of the Oder River and Nysa Łużycka River (Lausatian Neisse), which constitute one third of Poland's present area. A tragic element of these decisions was an almost complete and compulsory exchange of the population. The Poles coming from different parts of the country, especially from Poland's former eastern territories lost to the Soviet Union, very often encountered Germans who were being displaced from their small homelands.

The exhibition at the Depot History Center focuses on "short duration" because the postwar period in Wrocław is barely a tiny fragment of its history. The rich prewar past is excluded from the exhibition; it is presented by the city's historical museum. Wrocław's history at the exhibition is divided into six overlapping time intervals: 1945–1948 ("Foreign City"), 1945–1955 ("The Strengthening of 'People's' Power"), 1945–1989 ("Behind the Iron Curtain"), 1956–1980 ("City on the Oder"), 1980–1989 ("Solidary Wrocław"), 1989–2016 ("City of Encounters").¹² The leading idea of the exhibition is to show how the coherent identity of the city and its community was forged over half a century from culturally alien population groups. A considerable merit of the representation at the Depot Museum is the broad socio-cultural and not only political approach to the subject.

In its part devoted to migration movements after WW2 the exhibition not only mentions the deportation of almost a million and a half Germans from the territories incorporated into Poland (including two hundred and thirty thousand from Wrocław alone) but also the brutality of so-called "wild expulsions"

¹¹ In practice the exhibition starts with the Prolog containing a romantic vision of social and cultural life in the so-called Eastern Borderland, as well as the World War Two. Without the two element it would be difficult to understand the subsequent history of the city

¹² Marek Mutor, "Centrum Historii Zajezdnia – przygoda z powojennym Wrocławem," *Światowid. Rocznik Muzeum PRL-u w Krakowie* no. 4 (2017): 22.

ordered by the Supreme Commander of the Polish Army without consultation with the Allies. Many expellees then lost not only all their possessions but also their lives. The narrative covers both the issues of the basic organization of life in postwar Wrocław and later years, the problems that the newcomers and inhabitants had to cope with, and the gradual rebuilding of the city and their lives in the initially unknown place. However, it was the facts of political life that were recognized at the as formative for identity. The other elements are, in a way, their result or response to them (particularly the cultural life). From the formal perspective the exhibition is scenographic, with a small number of original objects. Some reconstructions are based on objects (e.g. a train car filled with meager possessions of repatriates, which symbolizes migrations), others contain only photos, the conventionality of the presentation being very obvious, creating an impression of stage setting, which deepens the visitor's distance from the museum narrative.

The exhibition seeks to create a story that does not avoid difficult questions because to build its new identity the city had to overcome numerous difficulties, the process taking place at the expense of many human lives. In addition to political circumstances, the authors show the societal life of Wrocław inhabitants in the social and cultural dimension. About 80 percent of exhibits come from public collections carried out since 2007. The authors treat the exhibition as an open project, which still contains spaces left for possible complementation. They may be gradually filled with objects-souvenirs brought in by Wrocław inhabitants.¹³ This participatory element is originally meant to help transform the exhibition into a project combining the curators' narrative with the personal histories of Wrocław inhabitants.

The only institution that devotes a large portion of its exhibitions to the social history of the communist era is the PRL Museum (now Museum of Nowa Huta)¹⁴ in Nowa Huta. The town itself of Nowa Huta is a unique place on the map of the post-communist architectural and industrial heritage as a town built according to socialist-realist guidelines. Socialist realism in architecture was to dominate the town space, endow it with new symbols, show the successes of socialist development, educate people in the communist spirit, and to show the world as it should be in the aftermath of communist transformations.¹⁵ The plan of Nowa Huta built from 1949 for the workers of the metallurgical

¹³ The institution was founded in 2008 as part of Kraków's branch of the Museum of Poland's History. In 2012 the City of Krakow Council took a decision to establish the Polish People's Republic (PRL) Museum as an independent institution. In April 2018 the PRL Museum (under organization) was, under a resolution, merged with the City of Krakow Historical Museum. The resulting Museum of Nowa Huta is now a branch of the City of Krakow Historical Museum, see *Połączenie Muzeum PRL-u i Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa*, <http://www.mprl.pl/aktualnosci/395/polaczenie-muzeum-prlu-i-muzeum-historycznego-miasta-krakowa.html> (accessed 25.04.2018).

¹⁴ Maria Strelbicka, *Krótki przewodnik po architekturze socrealistycznej*, <http://belfer.muzhp.pl/?module=details&id=109> (accessed: 11.05.2016)

¹⁵ Magdalena Smaga, "Przyczynek do studium historyczno-architektonicznego kina «Światowid»,» *Światowid. Rocznik Muzeum PRL-u (w organizacji)*, no. 1 (2014): 150.

plant under construction was based on the concept of an ideal city, and the Polish architects creatively approached the subject and converted the European theories adjusting them to the binding doctrine. The oldest developments: Wandy, Willowe and Na Skarpie drew on the modernist traditions of interwar Poland, English ideas of city-gardens and on the German concepts of workers' settlements of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁶

The virtues of the architectural heritage of the communist period were praised already in the 1980s; however, more or less until the mid-1990s there was a prevailing criticism of the imposed doctrine and a highly negative opinion on the city of Nowa Huta. In 1996, the idea of ecomuseum formulated by Zbigniew Beiersdorf was discussed in the context of Nowa Huta, and in 1999 the category of the "dispersed museum" or "spatial museum" appeared. The point of the foregoing ideas was, according to Jacek Salwiński, "[...] to promote a new image of Nowa Huta, relieved from the burden of its People's Poland past."¹⁷ In 2004, on the initiative and under the auspices of the City of Krakow Historical Museum, studies were started on the plant in Nowa Huta, as a result of which the idea of the "dispersed museum" (or an industrial variant of the ecomuseum) began to take shape. The range of work covered the area occupied by the oldest plant facilities and those earmarked for demolition, archival documents (technical, architectural, photographic and files) were examined, on-site visits were made including in situ measurements and photographic documentation with the evaluation of cultural values.¹⁸ The whole project assumes combining several cultural trails in a small space, whose elements will include the industrial facilities of the former Lenin metallurgical plant, the architecture and urban development of Nowa Huta (especially during the first period of building the town, i.e. before 1960), the complex of relic facilities before the construction of Nowa Huta (the so-called rural part of Nowa Huta: manors, palaces, sacred objects, historical rural layouts, wooden architecture, forts) and natural values (taking Łąki Nowohuckie [Nowa Huta Meadows] into special account).¹⁹

A very important element of the Nowa Huta project is the temporary exhibitions at the "Światowid" cinema organized by the PRL Museum and continued by the Museum of Nowa Huta. The temporary exhibitions are shown in the Museum's seat, in the former "Światowid" cinema, which was the first panoramic cinema to be opened in Nowa Huta. In addition to exhibitions presenting the

¹⁶ Jacek Salwiński, „Muzeum rozproszone Nowej Huty. Idea” in: *Nowa Huta przeszłość i wizja: studium muzeum rozproszonego*, eds. Jacek Salwiński, Leszek J. Sibila, (Krakow: Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa 2005), 11–12.

¹⁷ Jerzy Duda, Henryk Kazimierski, Stanisław Pochwała, „Dziedzictwo przemysłowe kombinatu metalurgicznego w Nowej Hucie. Wstępne rozpoznanie na przykładzie walcowni zgniatacz” in *Nowa Huta przeszłość i wizja*, 149–151.

¹⁸ Salwiński, 17.

¹⁹ See: Zbigniew Sernik, “Muzeum PRL-u w Krakowie. Oddział Muzeum Historii Polski w budynku dawnego kina «Światowid» w latach 2008–2012,” *Światowid. Rocznik Muzeum PRL-u* (w organizacji), no. 1 (2014): 129–143 and Zbigniew Sernik, “Muzeum PRL-u – działalność wystawiennicza i edukacyjna 2014–2018,” *Światowid. Rocznik Muzeum PRL-u w Krakowie*, no. 5 (2018): 125–137.

political aspects of the working of the communist system (e.g. *Od opozycji do wolności* [From Opposition to Freedom] *Wojna polsko-jaruzelska* [the Polish-Jaruzelski War], the Museum offers the audience a vast array of themes in social life and daily life history. Worth mentioning among many is the exhibition *Do przerwy 0:1. Piłka nożna w PRL* [0:1 until Half-time. Football (Soccer) in People's Poland] (2012), which presents the history of postwar Poland through the phenomenon of popularity of football as well as mutual interrelationships between sports and the culture, economy and politics of People's Poland. Another interesting exhibition titled *PRL mieszka w nas? – kultura czasu wolnego* [People's Poland Lives in Us? – the Culture of Leisure Time] (2016) presented, by using objects of the period as well as photographs and information display-boards, characteristic microcosms in People's Poland, places where leisure time was spent most willingly (due to lack of other opportunities). Clubrooms, garden plots, cinemas, community centers/culture cafes as well as the "Empik" (Club of International Books and Press) bookshops were the iconic elements of the system to everyone who retained the memories of the not so distant era. The exhibition titled *Paczka z Ameryki* [A Parcel from America] (2017) raised the problem of People's Poland's contacts with the Western world, the leitmotif being the title parcel from the "free world", whose symbol was the United States at that time. The exhibition, interesting in terms of arrangement, touched upon a fundamental issue, i.e. coping with the "economy of scarcity". It presents such phenomena as receiving aid under UNRRA, private remittances, the organized action to send aid to Poland in the 1980s, and the ways of acquiring desired objects by the Poles: buying on the black market or labor trips called "trader tourism".²⁰ The most recent exhibition: *Wańka-Wstańka. Nowohucki pomnik Lenina* [Humpty-Dumpty. Nowa Huta's Lenin Monument] (2020) evokes the history of the Vladimir Lenin statue, well-known all over Poland, which stood for 16 years in Aleja Róż (Roses Avenue), the main street in Nowa Huta. The history of the statue, from its creation, to attempts to destroy it, to its final dismantling is also the history of the difficult post-communist legacy, with which all Central and Eastern European countries are struggling.

In addition to the changing temporary exhibitions, the currently most interesting element in the Museum of Nowa Huta is air-raid shelters prepared for visiting. The exhibition: *Atomowa groza. Schrony w Nowej Hucie* [Nuclear Dread. Air-Shelters in Nowa Huta] opened for the public in 2016 presents former air-raid shelters, refurbished and adjusted to museum requirements. The original elements of the exhibition are the layout of rooms, posters, archival photographs and display-boards. The hospital and communications section is additionally set up. The opportunity to touch the objects, and sense the specific smell intensifies the reception and impressions of visitors.

²⁰ Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, "Posterity has arrived: The necessary emergence of museum activism" in *Museum Activism*, ed. by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 1 and 6.

To sum up the activity of the Nowa Huta Museum, it is necessary to appreciate the diversity of viewpoints on the former system, and the multifaceted exhibitions, which, in addition to political events, also present social and daily life in their nostalgic dimension. The institutionalized narrative about Nowa Huta, or the “dispersed museum” project including a traditional museum institution, is an example of how the particular activities of the government or local government can change the negative image of a given area/city/quarter even if it appears permanently rooted in social consciousness. We can speak here of a specific worldview revision and revitalization, thanks to which both the tourists and inhabitants gain not only additional knowledge and the awareness of the place, but also a feeling of the positive uniqueness of the local environment and history.

THE SOCIOMUSEOLOGICAL MODEL (MUSEUM ACTIVISM)

At the close of the 20th century the concepts appeared in museology, which emphasized the necessity for museums to abandon the attitude of seeming neutrality, and promoted the agency of this institution. In their study of 2019, Robert Janes and Richard Sandell summed up the earlier debates and projects and introduced the category of museum activism in the sense of museum practice formed on the basis of ethical values and introducing real political, social and environmental changes. According to Janes and Sandell, in the face of the growing awareness of global challenges, the mission, role, values and duties of the museum institutions require radical rethinking and transformation. In this vision, museums become institutions that should provide their communities with tools for intellectual self-defense against manipulation and governance in the interest of the dominant political or economic goals. Activism also means resistance or, as Janes and Sandell sees it, the critical challenging and redefining of the *status quo*.²¹ Museums should participate in shaping conditions in which all social groups have a guarantee of equal rights or at least a possibility of enforcing them. The two scholars call the reflections and active pursuit of this aim the moral imperative of the museum as a civic institution.²² Under these circumstances, inaction appears as incompatible with the ethical obligations of museums, or even immoral.²³

The central feature of the museum practice in the 21st century should therefore be the necessity of taking a stand on many difficult issues despite the accompanying complex ethical dilemmas. The so-called policy of public advocacy helps define priorities and respond to moral and civic challenges. Another ethical responsibility of museums is to exert pressure on decision-makers in

²¹ Janes, Sandell, 6.

²² Janes, Sandell, 4.

²³ Janes, Sandell, 15.

situations and actions (or inaction) that may threaten the well-being of the people and the planet.²⁴

It is difficult to find a Polish museum institution or at least an exhibition actively responding to current controversial problems.²⁵ Curators shun subjects like that because, as the example below will show, they may become the germs of many conflicts. The closest to the model of museum activism was the temporary exhibition prepared for the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews on the fiftieth anniversary of the March 1968 events. The exhibition: *Obcy w domu. Wokół marca '68* [Strangers at Home. Around March 1968] was accompanied by an educational program containing lectures, workshops, scholarly conferences and film shows. By means of objects, pictures, documents and films of the period the exhibition presented the Jewish experience of March 1968 and its consequences, especially the forced emigration of thousands of people. The anti-Semitic campaign initiated by the Polish government was shown against the broader background covering the political events in the spring of 1968 (the revolt of young people at the University of Warsaw, the arousal of prejudices and resentments, and the evolution of the communist dictatorship).²⁶

In accordance with the assumed goals, the exhibition referred to universal experience, in this case – the existential fear resulting from the loss of the feeling of security. A narrative was created about stigmatization, uprooting and exile experienced by about thirteen thousand Polish Jews expelled from their motherland.²⁷ The exhibition also stressed the media hate campaign accompanying those dramatic events. It showed a critical picture of the Polish society, who largely remained passive in the face of the acts of aggression directed at their fellow citizens.

The exhibition, which is very significant and rare in Polish historical exhibition practice, was self-reflective. In the section: *Dworzec. Historia opowiedziana* [The Railway Station. The Told Story] the audience had an opportunity to listen to witnesses telling about their experiences of March 1968. Preparing this fragment of the exhibition the curators (Justyna Koszarska-Szulc and Natalia Romik) met head-on with a difficult situation (“unfortunate” as they put it), when the objectified historical narrative did not match the living memory of history actors.

²⁴ I would include in such measures the action by the director of the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau Piotr Cywiński, who intervened in September 2020 on behalf of the Nigerian thirteen-year-old Omar Farouq, who had been sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for blasphemy. Cywiński wrote a letter to the Nigerian President Muhammad Buhari and offered to gather 120 volunteers (he also volunteered himself), who would serve the sentence (a month each) for the boy, see Ada Chojnowska, *Dyrektor Muzeum Auschwitz chce pójść do więzienia za 13-latkę z Nigerii skazanego za bluźnierstwo*, <https://krakow.wyborcza.pl/krakow/7,44425,26342025,dyrektor-muzeum-auschwitz-chce-pojsc-do-wiezienia-za-13-latka.html> (accessed: 23.12.2020).

²⁵ Dariusz Stola, “Pół wieku po marcu” in *Obcy w domu. Wokół marca '68* (katalog), ed. by Justyna Koszarska-Szulc, Natalia Romik, Polin. (Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich 2018), 8–9.

²⁶ Justyna Koszarska-Szulc, Natalia Romik, “Obcy w domu” in *Obcy w domu*, 15.

²⁷ Koszarska-Szulc, Romik, 21–22.

“The memories of many of them do not have to make up a consistent narrative, they are rather separate islands drifting around the shared subject. Witnesses of history are a group, which tries to find a narrative about their individual fates at the exhibition. The curator also has to constantly take into account the discourse of historical sciences striving to formulate objective truths about the bygone reality. If, however, it is the recent reality, this objectivism is essentially unattainable, the mediation in one’s own experience (or the family’s experience) being in the way of it [...] The position of the curator of a contemporary history exhibition is thus doubly difficult. While exposed to criticism by historians and witnesses of history, s/he has to take an independent stance.”²⁸

Revealing their own perspective, the curators shared with the audience the dilemmas and problems related to the substantive concept of the exhibition, and by showing the “inside story” they gave up the position of the “omniscient” authority, thereby enabling the visitors to take their own stance on the problem.

From the perspective of the present text (and the paradigm of museum activism) what is most important is that the exhibition authors made reference to the then current political situation and devoted the closing part of the exhibition to hate speech in the comments found on web portals and repeated by popular media. The fragment of the exhibition *Nowomowa i ciągi dalsze* [Newspeak and Continuations] presented titles, headlines, excerpts from texts or tweets published mainly by the right-wing media in connection with the diplomatic conflict between Poland and Israel in the aftermath of the amendment to the bill, pushed by the Institute of National Remembrance, which imposed a fine or penalty of imprisonment on persons attributing to “the Polish nation or the Polish state the responsibility or co-responsibility for the crimes committed by the Third Reich”²⁹. In the opinion of scholars, this law could easily be used against researchers studying the complicity of Poles in the Holocaust of the Jews during World War Two. The discussion that swept through the media at that time revealed many anti-Semitic prejudices still present in the Polish society.

The exhibition allowed the audience to compare two seemingly different situations, which yielded similar results. The anti-Semitic comments of 2018 were strikingly similar to those of fifty years ago. The exhibition, by showing the dramatic effects of passivity in the past, confronted the visitor with the present-day problem of failure to respond and act against hate speech. The question about how a member of the civil society should behave in similar circumstances had to be answered by each visitor for him/herself; the museum, however, took a clear stand, giving up apparent neutrality.

The meaning and significance of the exhibition were quickly noticed by the decision-makers. Both the exhibition and its accompanying conference *Język nienawiści* [Hate Speech] were especially commented upon in the right-wing

²⁸ The bill was voted through but ultimately the penalty of imprisonment was withdrawn <https://www.wprost.pl/swiat/10135410/izraelski-dziennik-polska-wycofuje-sie-z-kontrowersyjnej-ustawy-o-holokaucie-rezygnujac-z-kary-wiezienia.html> (accessed: 05.12.2020)

²⁹ <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1109591,premier-marzec-68-powinien-byc-powodem-do-dumy-dla-polakow-ktorzy-walczyli-o-wolnosc.html> (accessed: 05.12.2020)

media. On public television (TVP Info), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture and National Heritage Piotr Gliński accused the POLIN Museum Director Dariusz Stola of deep political involvement. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki implied that the exhibition was a manifestation of anti-Polonism, as March '68 is the pride of the Poles because of the antigovernment demonstrations by young people.³⁰ Discussions around the exhibition and its ultimate consequences (the change of the director³¹) confirmed once again that historical museums are not merely memorial sites or history sites but the institutions for the development of historical awareness and the establishment of the official and desirable canon of knowledge. Their task is to select and interpret the past for its audiences in the way corresponding with the current objectives.

The analysis of Polish exhibitions devoted to communism shows that the majority of historical museums remain traditionally identity-based, presenting one-dimensional narratives and identifying with a specific vision of the past and with some of its actors, disregarding facts and processes inconvenient for heroic stories. Krzysztof Pomian stresses that such identification with one of many potentially possible perspectives is constitutive of memory, whereas, on the contrary, for history as science it is fundamental to distance itself from the past.³² Museum exhibitions are not (and have never been) a neutral and objective way of conveying historical knowledge: they have always been interested in having power and in promoting specific visions of history. Museums are certainly not the places where profound analyses of source material can be conducted by means of exhibitions, or disputes of historians can be presented; however, a far-reaching selection of presented events in practice changes the meaning of the past, which ultimately deprives museums of their cultural potential and authority. The above-presented examples of revisionist and socio-museological exhibitions, although now scarce, provide a hope, however, for changes in the approach of museum institutions to representing the past and for their deeper (and open) involvement in shaping the civil society.

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³⁰ In 2020 Dariusz Stola lost the post of the POLIN Museum director. Contrary to the competition decision, Minister Gliński never appointed Stola for a second term. The exhibition was not the only sore point between the Ministry and the Museum director, who had previously protested against the abovementioned amendment to the law on the National Remembrance Institute.

³¹ Krzysztof Pomian, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2006), 193.

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