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# The Grunwald Swords and Lech Wałęsa's Ballpoint Pen. Ordinary objects – extraordinary events<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Battle of Grunwald; Gdańsk Agreement; museology; Central Europe; historical experience; semiophores

**Słowa kluczowe:** bitwa pod Grunwaldem; porozumienia sierpniowe; muzeologia; Europa Środkowa; doświadczenie historyczne; semiofory

**Abstract:** The article is devoted to the Grunwald swords and Wałęsa's ballpoint pen as material correlates of concrete events and objects that can deliver a message whose content depends on the current political, social and cultural context.

## Introduction

The metaphorical concept of cultural treasure has become well established in Polish. This term is used with reference to both movable and immovable monuments, as well as outstanding literary or musical works, whose role in the process of shaping collective identities seems to be special and unquestionable. Given they are movable objects, cultural treasures serve as famous exhibits in museum collections – regularly displayed, eagerly admired and evoking manifold emotions.

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<sup>1</sup> On the 610<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Grunwald and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of signing the Gdańsk Agreement.

While considering the status of such monuments, at least two theories at the intersection of museology and philosophy of science need to be put to use. In the context of artefacts collected in museums, Krzysztof Pomian's reflections turn out to be theoretically valuable. In his works on culture theory and the practices of collecting, Pomian distinguishes the so-called *semiophores*.<sup>2</sup> Semiophores are the objects which are intended to be seen but represent an unseen world to which human beings are attracted. Therefore, semiophores are intermediaries between us and myths, beliefs, and ideologies. Thanks to semiophores, the observer (perhaps when also touching the objects) can grasp the meaning of otherworldly things, which are abstract and beyond empirical experience. Semiophores are tightly bound to a certain area of meanings, as they are "two-sided objects that link the semiotic dimension with the material one."<sup>3</sup> The objects function in two realms: visible and invisible. Within the framework of the latter, the object is a carrier of meaning granted to it and is excluded from the utility function, as a consequence of which it is treated differently. The best example here are relics, but other objects as well, including those regarded as cultural treasures.

Another term that corresponds to the aforementioned and is worth examining in the context of further considerations attempted herein is the notion of a 'historical experience' put forth by Frank Ankersmit, Dutch historical theorist. According to Ankersmit, historical experience is the key to the past and the meanings enclosed therein; it allows oneself to speak the 'language of history'. The experience is:

(...) the sudden revelation of "what the past was actually like." This unexpected revelation of the past – often experienced by them [historians] as a sudden falling away of all temporal distance – is always accompanied by a conviction of complete 'authenticity'; that is, by the conviction that this experience of the past cannot be a delusion, but is as real and reliable as what is given to us in immediate sensory experience.<sup>4</sup>

The circumstances in which we experience this revelation turn out to be significant. Ankersmit – based on the proposal by Johan Huizinga – points to one of the crucial

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<sup>2</sup> K. Pomian, *Zbieracze i osobliwości. Paryż – Wenecja XVI–XVIII wiek* [*Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris, Venise: XVI<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*], trans. A. Pieńkos, Gdańsk 2012, pp. 43–45.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin 2006, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> F. Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie. Studia z teorii historiografii*, collective trans. ed. by E. Domańska, Kraków 2004, p. 223.

features of historical experience. Namely, this kind of experience is triggered by relatively trivial objects: an antique print, an old song, or entering a building that has not changed for centuries.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in this context objects re-appear as well, and they possess both the character of museum exhibits and a semiophoric nature.

In this article I would like to offer an analysis of two, or, to be more precise, three objects (since there was a pair of swords) as cultural treasures which have accumulated a variety of meanings since they entered their museum path, and even long afterwards. The symbolic and meaningful value of the exhibits and their axiological status is subject to constant renegotiation due to the dynamic nature of culture. Moreover, the selected examples demonstrate how formally and functionally simple objects can carve out a career for themselves in museum collections. These 'ordinary things' have indeed followed a peculiar path, marked not so much by their material character as by the events which excluded them from everyday life.

## The Grunwald Swords

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1410 one of the largest battles in medieval Europe took place on the plains near Grunwald. The Battle of Grunwald (also known as the First Battle of Tannenberg) was a crucial episode of the Great War between the forces of the Teutonic Order, supported by Western European knights under the command of Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen, and the alliance of Polish and Lithuanian armies (mainly Poles, Lithuanians as well as Ruthenians), aided by the Tartar troops and led by the Polish King Władysław II Jagiełło, the chief commander of all these formations. The battle ended with the victory of the Polish-Lithuanian army over the Teutonic Order.

The symbolic meaning of the Battle of Grunwald has been discussed at great length, generally in historians', archaeologists' and less often anthropologists' narratives,<sup>6</sup> while the symbolic and propaganda effects of Grunwald have been considered by the Swedish historian Sven Ekdahl, whose book *Grunwald 1410. Studia nad tradycją i źródłami* contains a subsection devoted to the presence of the Battle of Grunwald in the historical and political awareness of Poles and Germans.<sup>7</sup> It is worth

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<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> D. Kasprzyk, *Miecze grunwaldzkie. Materialne skutki mutacji idei*, Rocznik Muzeum Wsi Mazowieckiej w Sierpcu 4 (2013), pp. 55–70.

<sup>7</sup> S. Ekdahl, *Grunwald 1410. Studia nad tradycją i źródłami* [*Die Schlacht bei Tannenberg*

mentioning at this point that museologists have also contributed to the ongoing debate concerning the symbolic meaning of Grunwald. In the guide accompanying the exhibition *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem. Ikonografia i ideologia pomiędzy 500. i 600. rocznicą* organised by the Museum in Ostróda, one comes across an observation which is crucial for further reflections attempted herein: “The documentation presented here (...) provides a basis for the main claim – important events from the past are assigned such senses that are required in the present.”<sup>8</sup>

Immediately before the battle a significant event took place, which a Polish chronicler described as follows:

Suddenly, two heralds were announced, led under the protection of Polish knights in order to avoid an act of aggression. One of them, from the Roman king, had a black eagle on a gold field in his coat of arms, and the other, from the Szczecin duke, had a red griffin on a white field. They came out of the enemy’s army carrying unsheathed swords in their hands, demanding to be brought into the king’s presence. The Prussian Master Ulrich sent them to King Władysław, adding also an arrogant order to rouse the king to commence the battle without delay and to stand in ranks to fight. (...) And King Władysław, having listened to the boastful and impudent words of the Teutonic deputies, accepted the swords from their hands (...).<sup>9</sup>

Not all researchers investigating the consequences of the Battle of Grunwald focused on the swords and the symbolic use they acquired later, just as not all authors of other (non-scientific) texts devoted to Grunwald took this topic into account. Nevertheless, the images of the Grunwald swords have become material correlates of certain transformations of ideas that were created solely for specific moments in history.

The idea of commemorating the Grunwald victory by means of symbolic images of swords or swords themselves – although it seems so obvious and familiar today – is

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1410. *Quellenkritische Untersuchung*], trans. M. Dorna, Kraków 2010, pp. 31–50. At least two scientific articles are entirely devoted to the swords of Grunwald: Z. Spieralski, *O mieczach krzyżackich spod Grunwaldu*, *Zapiski Historyczne* 2 (1974), pp. 21–29; J. Wenta, *O dwóch mieczach z bitwy grunwaldzkiej*, [In:] *Balticum. Studia z dziejów polityki, gospodarki i kultury XII–XVII wieku ofiarowane Marianowi Biskupowi w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, ed. Z.H. Nowak, Toruń 1992, pp. 381–388.

<sup>8</sup> *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem. Ikonografia i ideologia pomiędzy 500. i 600. rocznicą*. An exhibition guide by M. Gałęziowska, Ostróda 2010, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Polska Jana Długosza*, ed. H. Samsonowicz, trans. from Latin by J. Mruk, Warszawa 1984, pp. 230–231.

just a variant which gained its justification only a few hours after the act of handing over the swords to Jagiełło and Vytautas by the Teutonic Knights' envoys. The swords were originally presented as a gift but were interpreted by the Polish-Lithuanian side (the royalty) as a provocation and a sign of the opponent's stiff-necked pride; yet this does not change the fact that, after all, they were meant as a gift with all the implications. Namely, the act of presenting the swords changed ordinary things (the Grunwald swords were battle swords typical for armament of that era – and that, unfortunately, is practically everything we know about them) into extraordinary ones. Surely, after the Battle of Grunwald no one thought of these swords as ordinary weapons. The act of offering the swords as a gift exempted them from being subject to the criteria of usefulness and money's exchangeability.<sup>10</sup> As a gift, they also gained the power to bond people, first, the Jagiellonian elite, then the people of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and finally – broad social groups – during the time of national captivity and in the People's Republic of Poland, to which I will refer later. In a wider sense, the swords of Grunwald were a message delivered within the framework of Polish-Teutonic and then Polish-German relations. Thus, before they represented a sign and were used as such, with the two swords being the signifier and the Grunwald victory functioning as the signified, an idea of a gift evolved. Its echoes persist in those narratives which begin with the statement that the swords "were gifted..."

Besides, the act of offering the swords turned them into a war trophy that stood out from thousands of other items captured from the enemy after the victorious battle. If these two ordinary swords had been found on the battlefield among thousands of other weapons, most probably they would not have become the object worth restorers' concern for the next 420 years, they would not have acquired the status of museum exhibits, symbols, valuable artefacts, and they would not have fired the popular imagination. The swords presented to Jagiełło and Vytautas by the Teutonic Knights belong to a small group of 'ordinary things' that were used in an extraordinary context, which impacted their 'career' later in the future.

The idea of a gift, which quickly became a war trophy won in combat, can therefore be regarded as the original idea on which the subsequent ones were founded. The gesture made by the Teutonic Knights was not an unprecedented event. Various forms of communication used by rulers commanding armies before battles, or by rivals before tournaments or duels were part of the knightly custom in medieval Europe. Sometimes – apart from challenging the enemy – certain details of the cla-

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<sup>10</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy. Zarys antropologiczny*, Kraków 2007, pp. 252–253.

sh were established in this way. It could also be meant as a sign of paying respect to the opponent. But sometimes the gestures were purely provocative. Indeed, the provocative character of the gesture was emphasized by the Polish propaganda that started after the battle of Grunwald. In truth, the Teutonic Knights were interested in accelerating the combat. There are sources which argue that the decision to send the heralds with swords was taken not by the Master but by the Marshal of the Teutonic Order. He was to be advised by Western knights familiar with the customs of war.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in this context it seems that primarily, challenging the opponent to battle similar to a challenge for a tournament duel was intended, with the Teutonic Knights being the initiating party, due to certain circumstances.

Olgierd Ławrynowicz, the author of *Treści ideowe broni rycerskiej w Polsce wieków średnich*, mentions the swords of Grunwald in the part of his work devoted to social aspects (other aspects he considers are religious and political). Ławrynowicz derives the gesture from the folk and chivalrous customs, which included tournaments.<sup>12</sup>

Jarosław Wenta additionally points out that the gesture made by the Teutonic Knights may have been related to the symbolic meaning, which in the Middle Ages was commonly attributed to two swords as signs of both spiritual and secular power.<sup>13</sup> During the time they administered the conquered Prussia, the knights of the Teutonic Order concentrated in their hands these two kinds of power in a unique way. In his speech delivered before Pope John XXIII more than a year after the Battle of Grunwald, Andrzej Łaskarz propagandised this symbolic meaning. According to the Polish side, taking over the swords from the hands of the Order meant that the Teutonic Knights lost power by God's will as a result of their unjust war, while the swords themselves were used to defend the people and the faith.<sup>14</sup>

Shortly after the battle, the Grunwald swords were turned into exhibits and deposited in the treasure vault of the Wawel Royal Castle, where they were kept together with *Szczerbiec*<sup>15</sup> and other regalia for several centuries. Over time, the Wawel Royal Castle collection containing objects of symbolic significance became

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<sup>11</sup> Vide: S. Ekdahl, *Grunwald 1410*, p. 158, note 219.

<sup>12</sup> O. Ławrynowicz, *Treści ideowe broni rycerskiej w Polsce wieków średnich*, Acta Archeologica Lodziensia (publishing series) vol. LI, Łódź 2005, p. 55. The author believes that a gesture of this type made during the period of war also acquired the character of a political act.

<sup>13</sup> Vide: J. Wenta, *O dwóch mieczach*, pp. 381–388.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, pp. 385, 387.

<sup>15</sup> *Szczerbiec* (lit. 'the Jagged Sword') – the coronation sword currently on display in the treasure vault of the Wawel Royal Castle National Art Collection in Cracow.

a visible symbol of unity – as one could say, “an extension of the collective self.”<sup>16</sup> Let us apply here a museologist’s reflection related to semiophores:

What is important is the moment semiophores are classified as timeless objects, as a result of excluding them from the ever-changing daily life routine, and assigning them to other practices which, because of their social importance, are given a unique role. Significantly, this shifting of objects existing in one sphere to another one does not prove that an eternal or extra-terrestrial world does exist, but rather that a community has come up with an idea, a set of myths of such a world. However, semiophores become necessary for people to be able to experience this unrepresentable, super-sensual reality through participation in a certain ritual.<sup>17</sup>

At least since the time of the Union of Lublin (1569), the Grunwald swords were carried in front of Polish kings during the coronation ceremony as symbols of the king’s reign in the Crown of the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Let us recall that one of the swords was to be given to Władysław Jagiełło by the Grand Master, while the other one was a gift from the Marshal of the Order to Duke Vytautas. To emphasize this symbolic meaning, the White Eagle was fastened to one of them and the Pursuer to the other. They were probably escutcheons, similar to the one on the *Szczerbiec* blade – the coronation sword of Polish kings saved from the turmoil of history. We also know that the swords were taken care of, as evidenced by the fact that their hilts were embellished with silver and gold, or even additional ferrules were made from these precious metals. Thus, attempts were made to erase their common material character.

The exact details of the coronation ceremony of Stanisław August Poniatowski are common knowledge. Probably not every coronation ceremony prior to Poniatowski’s looked identical, but preserving the main symbolic elements was a condition for declaring the whole ceremony valid. Therefore, it can be assumed that no significant changes were introduced in the ritual over the centuries. Besides the main regalia – the crown, sceptre, orb and the abovementioned *Szczerbiec* – our object of interest, i.e. the swords, played an important role in the ceremony. In the cathedral, after having been anointed and having received the royal insignia, the king took the swords from one of the bishops and passed them on to the sword-bearers –

<sup>16</sup> Vide: J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> M. Popczyk, *Estetyczne przestrzenie ekspozycji muzealnych. Artefakty przyrody i dzieła sztuki*, Kraków 2008, pp. 20–21 (my translation – D.J.).

the Crown (i.e. Polish) and Lithuanian – who stood by the throne and then carried them [the swords] in a procession to the royal castle. The swords thus served to deepen the meaning of coronation ceremonies, playing the role of national insignia (a similar role was played by the Crown and Lithuanian banners of arms carried by standard-bearers). Interestingly enough, in the few references concerning the coronation ceremony, the swords are not described as ‘Prussian’ or ‘Grunwald’. Thus, a transformation of an idea took place from that of a trophy to that of royal insignia and a ceremony. Although known to the ceremony participants, the Grunwald origin of swords ceased to play a leading role. The coronation ceremony was not about Grunwald itself, but about the splendour of the House of Jagiellon and then the coexistence of two nations under one sceptre.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the triumphant victory in the Battle of Grunwald was somewhat overshadowed by the military achievements of Chocim, Beresteczko and Vienna. In any case, the importance of the Grunwald swords was for the next 380 years connected with the coronation ceremony and the rituals accompanying the celebrations of holidays that were – as one would say today – religious and national in character.

The Prussians, who invaded Cracow in 1794, looted the Wawel Royal Castle and seized the Polish regalia. It is not entirely clear whether the Grunwald swords were also pillaged. Nevertheless, let us choose the version postulated by Zdzisław Żygulski (jr.), who, having accessed many archival documents, posited that the swords were not plundered by the Prussians, but that Tadeusz Czacki took them away from Cracow instead. Next, this education activist, historian and bibliophile handed them over to Princess Izabela Czartoryska, who established a museum in the Czartoryski Palace in Puławy. It was there that the memory of the abovementioned idea of a trophy was in a way rekindled. The Puławy collection presented the history with a particular attention to the moments of victory and glory of the Polish armies. It was organised according to ‘the principle of the temple and shrine’. It became a place to dwell upon the history, a place for poets to find their inspiration and for historians to conduct their studies.<sup>18</sup> Without a doubt, the collection gave contemporary people an impression of sublime communication with history – that was its message. The stage of sublime historical experience “may invite (admittedly highly impractical) questions about how the very notion of a historical past comes into being, about how we relate to the past, whether we should believe the past to

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<sup>18</sup> Z. Żygulski (jr.), *Muzea na świecie: wstęp do muzealnictwa*, Warszawa 1982, p. 57.



be important to us (or not) (...) – in short, about *what is the nature and origin of historical consciousness*.”<sup>19</sup>

It was precisely the awakening of this consciousness that was the main aim behind setting up the museum in Puławy. After 1831 both swords were stored by a parish priest Fr. Józef Dobrzyński in the village of Włostowice (now a district of Puławy), wherefrom were taken by a patrol of Russian gendarmes and taken to the Zamość fortress in 1853. There they vanished without a trace.<sup>20</sup>

The loss of the swords coincided with the awakening of interest in the Battle of Grunwald in the spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of fighting for Poland and freedom. It was then that the Grunwald tradition was enriched with popular science texts, poetry, songs, iconography and monuments.<sup>21</sup> Over time, images of the swords began to appear as iconic signs. In a way, this compensated for the physical loss of the originals. The swords represented the relation between the victorious and the defeated in the battle, much desired by patriotic circles and different from the actual political situation at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The images of swords were a *memento* to the political and ideological opponent. In Cracow, the celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle was accompanied by the construction of the Grunwald Monument, on whose front wall, just behind the figure of Vytautas, two bare swords were visible.

The Grunwald swords re-entered the propaganda and ideological arena during World War II. Their ‘use’ was postulated by conspiratorial circles. The ‘Anchor’, as a symbol of Fighting Poland, was selected from among 27 proposals submitted to the competition organized by the Information and Propaganda Bureau of the Home Army Headquarters. Two compositions were then considered potential winners. ‘Crossed Grunwald swords’ was second best. In the selection process, among other things, patriotic connotations, as well as simple and quick production were taken into account.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, the ‘Anchor’ was chosen.

A left-wing conspiratorial camp also reached for the representation of swords. In 1943, the Main Command of the People’s Guard established the Order of the Grun-

<sup>19</sup> F. Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie*, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> Z. Żygulski (jr.), *Dzieje zbiorów puławskich (Świątynia Sybilli i Dom Gotycki)*, Rozprawy i Sprawozdania Muzeum Narodowego w Krakowie 7 (1962), pp. 43–44.

<sup>21</sup> Vide: W. Filler, „*Oto jest olbrzymów dzieło*”. *Grunwald w polskiej literaturze i sztuce*, Toruń 2005, pp. 53, 65, 72; W. Mikołajczyk, *Grunwald 1410. Bitwa, która przeszła do legendy*, Zakrzewo 2010, pp. 209, 211.

<sup>22</sup> Retrieved from [https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Znak\\_Polski\\_Walczy%C4%85cej](https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Znak_Polski_Walczy%C4%85cej) [accessed 12.8.2019].

wald Cross. It can be assumed that it was precisely 'the Grunwald Cross' that fixed the iconic sign of two simple medieval swords situated parallel to each other, with their blades pointing downwards. Before, as can be inferred from the available iconography, the motif of crossed swords had dominated. In the following years, the Grunwald Crosses on the uniforms of Polish generals and Soviet marshals became the extensions of the heroes fighting at the front alongside the Red Army and the propagators of the new political system on Polish territories. Probably for this reason the order was withdrawn from the official system of Polish orders and decorations in 1992.

In the People's Republic of Poland, the symbols of Grunwald primarily served (i) to demonstrate that it was the Germans (those from the Federal Republic of Germany) who had been and still were Poland's chief enemy at that time, (ii) to prove that it was in an alliance with other Slavic nations (and, in a wider sense, Eastern European nations) that this enemy could be fought most effectively, and (iii) to symbolically entrench the rights to the so-called Recovered Territories. The battle anniversary celebrations were an occasion for an extensive use of the Grunwald symbols. The greatest of such celebrations took place in 1960 on the 550<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle and was part of the celebrations of the 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Polish State.<sup>23</sup>

The image of the Grunwald Cross and the swords themselves were also used by the Communist authorities to establish a symbolic domain. The northern and western lands annexed to Poland by the provisions of the Yalta Conference were among the territories that had to be included within this domain first. The material remnants of this process are particularly noticeable in the Piła–Drawsko Pomorskie–Szczecinek triangle. Several-meter high concrete swords, ornamented with the Eagle of the Piast dynasty, the name of the town and the inscription 'Wał Pomorski' (The Pomeranian Embankment), built there in the 1970s catch the attention of tourists on their way to the Baltic Sea. Using a term put forth by Florian Zieliński, one can say that a large part of Pomerania was ideologically 'marked' in this way.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, this marking was to commemorate the military action of destroying the

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<sup>23</sup> Vide: G. Miernik, *Obchody 550. rocznicy bitwy pod Grunwaldem. Studium propagandy politycznej w PRL*, [In:] *Bitwa grunwaldzka w historii, tradycji i kulturze 1410–2010*, ed. T. Ossowski, Kielce 2010, pp. 141–165; S. Ekdahl, *Grunwald 1410*, pp. 43–50.

<sup>24</sup> F. Zieliński, *Szata ideologiczna miasta – pomniki*, [In:] *Przemiany miasta. Wokół socjologii Aleksandra Wallisa*, eds. B. Jałowiecki, A. Majer, M.S. Szczepański, Warszawa 2005, pp. 222ff. It is worth quoting S. Ekdahl here: "In order to recognise the symbolic meaning of the Battle of Grunwald, monuments are particularly useful, as they reflect the 'collective' will, often stimulated by the state, much more than individual texts." S. Ekdahl, *Grunwald 1410*, p. 31, note 39.

German fortifications of the Pomeranian Embankment, while on the other hand, it was to proclaim the new order, to communicate that Western Pomerania was now in possession of another owner who needed to be specified. Today, this message is no longer so clear, but these 'marks' still dominate in the landscape of five counties. Probably those less historically oriented, random observers could regard these surprising constructions as peculiar outdoor sculptures. It could even be argued that these monuments 'are dying' because the figure of the enemy against whom they were erected, once crystal clear, has become blurred. On the other hand, far-reaching impact of the founding idea cannot be excluded. This scenario is considered by Lech M. Nijakowski, in the context of the Silesian-Polish situation:

The presence of monuments as permanent elements of the landscape makes the young generation integrate these monuments into their everyday world. And if this process is not accompanied by a negative attitude towards the monument and what it stands for imposed by prominent Others, the young person internalizes at least the existence of a given interpretation of history, if not the interpretation itself.<sup>25</sup>

Another transformation of an idea is demonstrated in the thousands of plaques located at places of national remembrance. Let us note that in Poland these are mainly places of martyrdom or massacre, where military defeats were suffered. These are often graves of resistance fighters, cemeteries of those fallen during the September 1939 Campaign, or places of mass executions. Never before had the Grunwald swords functioned in this context of martyrdom. It seems then that they became both a special and universal sign, triggering reserves of empathy between generations over the centuries, a feeling of an 'authentic' connection with the past.

After 1989, the Grunwald swords, especially one of their variants, i.e. the Grunwald Cross, became victims – as Janusz Tazbir put it – of “fights with monuments and about monuments.”<sup>26</sup> Many of these images disappeared, mainly from military or post-military areas, from the gates and fences of liquidated barracks and other facilities.

The Grunwald swords still accompany official celebrations. However, the great Grunwald narratives constructed in the works of Matejko and Sienkiewicz, by the

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<sup>25</sup> L.M. Nijakowski, *Domeny symboliczne. O znaczeniu pomników w przestrzeni dominacji symbolicznej na przykładzie Śląska*, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 3–4 (2001), p. 83 (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>26</sup> J. Tazbir, *Walka na pomniki i o pomniki*, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1 (1997), pp. 3–19 (my translation – D.J.).

Cross of Grunwald or the swords of the Pomeranian Embankment, have been replaced by the narratives of specific regions. There is no need to prove how significant a role is played today by the Grunwald symbols in the promotion of the Grunwald municipality, which, by the way, boasts two swords in its coat of arms. The above-mentioned concrete constructions of the Grunwald swords commemorating the struggle to break through the Pomeranian Embankment have got a second life today as supports for boards informing about an entry to a town, municipality or county. Today re-enactment groups prefer and popularise celebrations of the anniversaries of the Battle of Grunwald in a way which completely differs from what was prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The emphasis is now laid on entertainment and good fun, or on the self-fulfilment of individual participants.<sup>27</sup> However, this does not change the fact that the re-enactment groups and spectators who take part in the annual staging of the battle on the fields of Grunwald, waiting expectantly for the two Teutonic Knights' swords to be thrust into the ground, "are touching" history. The historical experience aims at regaining the past by crossing the border between the past and the present. "The sublimity of historical experience originates from this paradoxical union of the feelings of loss and love, that is of the combination of pain and pleasure in how we relate to the past" – according to Ankersmit.<sup>28</sup> In any case, today those re-enactment groups and experts in the promotion of towns and cities are superseding Polish poets and nationwide politicians as the guardians of the legend, the only difference being that the symbolic meanings are now chosen freely, depending on the *ad hoc*, local and individual needs.

Back to the re-enactment groups, let us remark here that the way in which they depict the history is not entirely devoid of any intentional ideological bias. A report published in 2017 under the significant title: *Grupy rekonstrukcji historycznych – działania oddolne na rzecz krzewienia kultury narodowej* [*Historical re-enactment groups – grassroots activities for the propagation of national culture*] shows that while for most re-enactors, participation in a re-enactment group is primarily a way to pursue their hobby, they also engage therein inspired by motives that can be described as ideological or at least with an ideologically oriented nature. Many join re-enactment groups driven by their desire to learn more about history and to demonstrate their patriotism. They intend to foster patriotic attitudes and promote Poland, and they list patriotism, service to their homeland, and the possibility of shaping the social

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<sup>27</sup> Vide: *Bitwa pod Grunwaldem*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>28</sup> F. Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie*, p. 47.

and political life of their country as the key values in their lives. Re-enactors take part in historical shows organized by local authorities, history lessons for children and work as extras in films, and almost 70% of them feel very proud to be Polish.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, it is worth noting that the Middle Ages is the most popular period for re-enactment, both in terms of the activity of such groups and the events organized.

Thrusting the swords in the ground during the Battle of Grunwald re-enactment is also an excellent example of what is broadly referred to as establishing the presence of 'sites of memory'. In the original approach proposed by Pierre Nora, the precursor of research in which the abovementioned category is applied, 'sites of memory' (*lieux de mémoire*) are primarily institutionalized forms of collective memories of the past. In this approach, the category of 'site' acquires a metaphorical meaning. This metaphorical status may also be held by objects. In this context, it is vital to realize that the past is given to us not only in the accounts of the witnesses of events but also via signs and symbols. Andrzej Szpociński situates contemporary 'sites of memory' in yet another significant context, which results in their alternative interpretation. Namely, adding visual and theatrical dimensions to historical culture manifests itself in the increased importance of various art-related events and performance activities as well as in the prevalence of visual impressions in the processes of transmission and perception of the past.<sup>30</sup>

Those who participate in the discussions about the legacy of the Grunwald swords which have been going on for years still hope that the original Grunwald swords have not been lost forever. For a long time many historians had not been aware of the existence of the documents that enabled Żygulski to reconstruct the fate of the swords of Grunwald until they were seized by the Russians.<sup>31</sup> Other swords from the Czartoryski collection were mistakenly considered the Grunwald swords due to the lack of reliable documentation. In 1974, Zdzisław Spieralski wrote

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<sup>29</sup> *Grupy rekonstrukcji historycznych – działania oddolne na rzecz krzewienia kultury narodowej*. A report by Biuro Badań Społecznych Question Mark, Warszawa 2017, pp. 55–66. Retrieved from <https://www.nck.pl/upload/attachments/318583/Grupy-rekonstrukcji-historycznych-raport-z-badan.pdf> [accessed 23.02.2022].

<sup>30</sup> A. Szpociński, *Miejsca pamięci: lieux de memoire*, *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2008), pp. 16–17.

<sup>31</sup> In the early 1980s, Sven Ekdahl was not aware of the results of the research conducted and published 20 years earlier by Z. Żygulski (jr.). In his book *Grunwald 1410. Studia nad tradycją i źródłami* [*Die Schlacht bei Tannenberg 1410. Quellenkritische Untersuchung*], which was translated and published in Polish in 2010 (German edition, 1982), Ekdahl only mentions the presence of the swords in the treasure vault of the Wawel Royal Castle claiming that "Nothing is known about their ultimate fate". S. Ekdahl, *Grunwald 1410*, p. 159, note 223.

in *Zapiski Historyczne* that one of the swords survived and could be found in the Princes Czartoryski Museum in Cracow. Karol Estreicher was of a similar opinion in the 1950s.<sup>32</sup> However, the enthusiasts who have believed Żygulski do not rule out the possibility that the Grunwald swords, which had a common use value, are now stored in Russian collections as exhibits of unknown provenance.<sup>33</sup> The discussions going on the Internet forums prove how much this issue fires the imagination of history aficionados.<sup>34</sup>

It is a pity that the Grunwald swords have been lost. However, one can pose the question: if they existed, would they not hamper artistic visions and projects, or limit artistic freedom to create meanings and multiply senses? Let us observe that Szczerbiec, which has survived unscathed, “has lived to see” an incomparably smaller number of artistic references and representations. At this point, the juxtaposition of the Platonic and Aristotelian visions of the museum once offered by Wojciech Michera is worth mentioning.<sup>35</sup> As copying the original was impossible, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a countless number of various images, constructions, installations exploiting the Grunwald swords as a sign and communicating messages depending on the current needs have been competing with one another. In all these attempts, the ‘Aristotelian’ plot is a significant element. The Grunwald swords, present in many open (public) and closed (collector’s) spaces, can therefore be seen as the remains of gigantic temporary exhibitions with an ideological message.

## Wałęsa’s Ballpoint Pen

Another object which satisfies the criteria of an ordinary thing that accompanies an extraordinary event, thus achieving the status of a museum exhibit with a considerable symbolic potential is a forty-centimetre plastic ballpoint pen with which Lech Wałęsa signed the so-called Gdańsk Agreement in the Health and Safety Hall of the Lenin Shipyard in 1980. The pen is almost entirely composed of a transparent

<sup>32</sup> Vide: Z. Spierański, *O mieczach krzyżackich*; Żygulski, Z. (jr.), *Dzieje zbiorów puławskich*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>33</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.kresy.pl/wydarzenia,kultura?zobacz/kto-rozpozna-miecze-grunwaldzkie-> [accessed 12.08.2019]; <http://www.polityka.pl/historia/sredniowiecze/1507282,1-grunwald-zaginione-nagie-miecze.read> [accessed 12.08.2019].

<sup>34</sup> For example: <http://www.historycy.org/index.php?showtopic=34147> [accessed 12.08.2019].

<sup>35</sup> W. Michera, *Tajemnica butów, czyli pochwała Muzeum*, Śląskie Prace Etnograficzne 2 (1993), pp. 19–25.

capsule holding a rolled-up postcard with the image of John Paul II.

Here is some background information concerning this particular artefact. After Karol Wojtyła was elected the Pope, Ludwik Górka – the owner of a small company and a resident of Myślenice – decided to start the production of ballpoint pens with the image of John Paul II. The product was distributed mainly in pilgrimage destinations: Jasna Góra, Niepokalanów, Góra Świętej Anny.<sup>36</sup> In August 1980, a participant or an observer of the strike in the Gdańsk Shipyard gave Wałęsa one of the pens produced by Górka. On 31<sup>st</sup> of August at 4:45 p.m. Mieczysław Jagielski and Wałęsa signed the agreement. To that end the leader of the Inter-factory Strike Committee used a characteristic, large ballpoint pen, which almost immediately elicited comments. At this point it is worth quoting Barański, whose remarks are crucial for further discussion attempted herein: ‘We do not assign them [things] any special role until they get damaged or noticed, or until they end up in a museum or are used in an unusual context.’<sup>37</sup> This unusual context of the strike, the success of the protesters and the hope for a change laid a foundation on which a peculiar ‘career’ of a ballpoint pen produced by an insignificant manufacturer from Myślenice has been built. In 1983, Wałęsa donated the ballpoint pen, along with his Nobel Peace Prize medal and diploma to the Jasna Góra Monastery. Over the course of almost 30 years, Pauline monks have lent Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen for various exhibitions. Among others, ‘Drogi do Wolności’ – an exhibition in Gdańsk in the Shipyard Health and Safety Hall organised to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of August 1980, or the exhibition ‘It’s our History’ organised at the Museum of Europe in Brussels to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the European integration. Outside Jasna Góra, Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen appears as a museum exhibit in a historical and political context and in the freedom movement context. The meanings ascribed to semiophores are dynamic and they also change depending on the context in which these particular objects are put into.

Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen figured relatively quickly in ethnological studies thanks to Czesław Robotycki’s article ‘Sztuka à vista. Folklor strajkowy’. Although the article was published in *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* in 1990, it had been written nine years earlier, before martial law was declared. Robotycki interprets strike folklore, including

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<sup>36</sup> D. Kasprzyk, *Długopis Wałęsy. W stronę eksponatu idealnego*, *Wieś Radomska* 9 (2011), pp. 13–14.

<sup>37</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 10; T. Dant, *Kultura materialna w rzeczywistości społecznej. Wartości, działania, style życia [Material culture in the social world]*, collective trans. ed. by J. Barański, Kraków 2007, p. 27 (my translation – D.J.).

its various manifestations in the form of graffiti on walls, spontaneous oral literature and *ad hoc* visual forms, as phenomena resulting from a “folk view of the world”. The mechanisms characteristic of the folk culture, triggered by an extraordinary atmosphere of the strike, sublimity, uncertainty and the feeling of danger, resulted in, among others, defining the most important symbols for the protesters and displaying them on the shipyard premises (especially at its borders). Apart from the national and patriotic, as well as plebeian symbols, religious symbols were also displayed in great abundance: crosses, images of both the Black Madonna of Częstochowa and John Paul II. All this, according to Robotycki, “...created a mosaic of pathos and a folk fair, determination and calls for God’s grace.”<sup>38</sup> In this peculiar melting pot of creative gestures, as well as individual and collective patterns of behaviour resulting from the folk perception of the reality, Robotycki placed the emblems used by L. Wałęsa:

The leader of the strikes was characterised by the tacky style, wearing devotional articles, signing a document of state importance with a gigantic, trashy pen. The attributes listed here, worn in the best faith, were at the same time an unconscious violation of the convention (a dream of many avant-gardists) and may be another example of the carnival (ambivalent) strike aesthetics.<sup>39</sup>

Let us pursue a few interpretation paths put forth by Robotycki. Among other things, Robotycki points to numerous analogies between the strike and the carnival time. ‘The world turned upside down’ following radical and rapid reappraisals. Various testimonies from different sources confirm these observations. Piotr Trzaskalski, film director, recalls: “At the beginning, a pen with the Pope seemed to me a funny – rather than extraordinary and grand – symbol. I thought that Wałęsa was a man gifted with a specific sense of humour if he used a tacky object rather than an elegant pen for such important signatures.”<sup>40</sup> Bogdan Borusewicz, on the other hand, claimed: “I thought this pen was a circus act. It did not suit the serious circumstances at all.”<sup>41</sup>

The aesthetics of the strike also stemmed from the need to differentiate oneself from the opponent, that is, the government. Many of the protesters’ acts can be

<sup>38</sup> C. Robotycki, *Sztuka à vista. Folklor strajkowy*, Polska Sztuka Ludowa 2 (1990), p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> K. Kowalewicz, *Długopis w rękach Lecha Wałęsy. Rozmowa z Piotrem Trzaskalskim*, Gazeta Wyborcza. Łódź, 31.08.2005, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> As cited in: P. Misior, *Długopis*, Tygodnik Powszechny 37 (1998), p. 5.



analysed as manifestations of proletarian familiarity in opposition to the nomenclature-based alienation of the ruling party. The pen used by Wałęsa did not suit the circumstances and was not supposed to. It belonged to a vast repertoire of elements that distinguished the protesters from the government. The religious attributes were perfectly suited to this, being the opposite of what was official, and at the same time, exposing the secular, godless nature of power. Besides, the pen represented the private sector, pushed by the political system to the margins of economic life of the country.

“I thought it was quite a pretentious whim”, Zbigniew Bujak recalls, “but I defended this pen from my friends who said it was a foolish act. I told them that maybe this big, colourful ballpoint pen distinguishes us, the opposition, from the rigid routine of the communist authorities. And there was an image of the Pope on it, and that mattered to all of us.”<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, Deputy Prime Minister Jagielski signed the agreement with a standard pen or a ballpoint pen, which, incidentally, did not go down in history or become an exhibit in a museum collection, although it served the same purpose as Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen.

Bujak’s reminiscences inevitably direct the discussion towards the question of religiousness. With regard to that issue, however, I propose to place Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen next to the image of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa fastened to the lapel of Wałęsa’s jacket and the rosary with which the leader of the protesters did not part during the strike. These attributes can be perceived as signs. According to Charles Sanders Peirce and his theory of signs put to use by Janusz Barański in his analysis, a sign is the most general mode of meaning. The typology of a sign comprises: a symbol, an index and an icon.

Indexes capture the dependency relationship between the signifier and the specific signified; smoke is an index of fire, whereas a wedding ring is an index of a marriage ceremony. With indexes, the presence of the signifier implies that the signified exists, unlike in the case of a symbol where the connection is arbitrary or in the case of an icon where the connection is that of a physical resemblance.<sup>43</sup>

In conformity with the abovementioned theory, it can be argued that a ballpoint pen with the image of the Pope has become an index of religiousness of the one who

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>43</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 120 (my translation – D.J.).

used it, and indirectly of religiousness of the protesters and of the entire Solidarity movement, as well. Wałęsa used this pen for religious reasons (motives). This is how Mieczysław Rakowski, who was probably one of the first to put his observations regarding the circumstances of signing the Gdańsk Agreement on paper, could have interpreted this sign. He wrote in his political diary on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1980:

Not long ago, persecuted by the SB [Security Service], Wałęsa, with the portrait of the Pope and the Black Madonna of Częstochowa plaque in his lapel, signed the agreement with a gigantic pen. The agreement was signed in the hall where on the one side there was a bust of Lenin, and on the other side there was a cross hanging on the wall. Wałęsa is a deeply religious man, there is no doubt that he is under a strong influence of the Church.<sup>44</sup>

Was the use of a pen with the image of the Pope an intentional gesture? This is difficult to ascertain, as Wałęsa's accounts of the event are numerous but ambiguous.

When it was about time we went to sign the documents, I thought to myself: if I have such a pen, why shouldn't I sign the agreement with it? The pen was big and uncomfortable, but it had a picture with the Holy Father... There was no calculation on my part. I used this pen by pure coincidence. That's why I didn't understand those who raised an immediate uproar that Wałęsa was fooling around with the pen.<sup>45</sup>

Yet another declaration in a similar vein:

It was a coincidence, in the middle of so many events, someone gave me a pen, I don't even know who. When it came to the signing of the Agreement, I had it with me and I just used it (...) The pen had the image of the Holy Father, who united us, gave us strength and faith to renew the face of this Polish land and thanks to this, it suited the circumstances best. It was a very important agreement.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> M.F. Rakowski, *Dzienniki polityczne 1979–1981*, Warszawa 2004, p. 242 (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>45</sup> As cited in: P. Misior, *Długopis*, p. 5. Ambiguity as a feature of L. Wałęsa's language was noticed by researchers investigating his rhetoric. Vide i. a.: M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, *Retoryka Wałęsy*, *Teksty Drugie* 4 (1990), p. 92; A. Łukasik-Turecka, *Wizerunek Wałęsy w świetle jego wypowiedzi*, Lublin 2000 (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>46</sup> As cited in: I. Truszyńska, *Długopis z Myślenic wszedł do historii*. Retrieved from <http://www.gazetakrakowska.pl/magazyn/299529,dlugopis-z-myslenic-wszedl-do-historii,id,t.html?cookie=1> [accessed 12.08.2019].

This inconsistency that Wałęsa manifests in his reports of the event, on the one hand, declaring that it was sheer coincidence and a spontaneous event but, on the other hand, mentioning the Pope's image placed inside the pen as the main motive behind the decision to use this object, seems to confirm the hypothesis that 'unconscious intentionality' was a characteristic feature of the behaviour of the protesters. Due to the number and variety of comments it sparked off, the use of such a ballpoint pen was a gesture worthy of a modern celebrity. Celebrities act in a calculated way, however, in advance planning to attract attention and gain popularity. Wałęsa's decision seems to have different grounds which might arguably be associated with folklore.

In principle, Wałęsa's ballpoint pen did not function as a sign-symbol until it became a museum exhibit. At that moment, it had already existed in the public perception as an object associated both with the events in which it 'participated' and with the leader of Solidarity. One can argue that there was a group of individuals with a certain political view and an outlook on life for whom the pen became a symbol of the struggle for a just cause, i.e. freedom and democracy. Placing Wałęsa's ballpoint pen in the context of freedom assumed and it still does that the recipient of the message of the exhibition associates the changes initiated by the protests of August 1980 with important values of democracy. Even if the recipient does not share this belief, the pen may remain for them a symbol of protest, defiance and change. This symbolic power is evidenced in a postcard depicting the pen, which can be purchased in the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk. Distributing a postcard with a picture of even the most bizarre ballpoint pen would be an absurd idea if it were not for the symbolic dimension of both the object and the place where the postcard can be purchased.

Within the framework of the museum exhibition, Wałęsa's ballpoint pen is both the signifier and the signified. The exhibition makes use of meanings but also has the power to assign them. Things acquire meanings in contexts, including those created by museologists. I think, however, that the process of establishing a ballpoint pen in its symbolic function began much earlier – even before it ended up at Jasna Góra and various freedom and Solidarity exhibitions. Shortly after the agreement was signed, Wałęsa left the Health and Safety Hall raising his hands up in a gesture of triumph, just as sportsmen do after winning the competition, presenting the cup – a symbol of victory. In Wałęsa's hand there was... a pen. One can argue that it was a ritualised semiotic gesture, and the object in question became its material component. The pen (together with other attributes) imbued the action of signing the

agreement with a spiritual dimension. When Wałęsa raised his arms up in a triumphant gesture, the pen became marked and brought down to the role of a trophy. Lifting, tossing and all the upward movements accompanying the gestures of victory make objects gain power whereas people seem taller and stronger.<sup>47</sup>

Ritualization is always connected to liminality, crossing borders that separate different conditions, states and qualities.<sup>48</sup> The pen as a symbol of change appears in different contexts. The most obvious for museum creations is the abovementioned aspect of political change. However, Wałęsa himself mentioned other transformations – including mental ones and those relating to one's personality:

During these extraordinary two weeks [August 1980 – D.K.] a great transformation occurred. Thousands of people, very different, with different lives – after all, not only workers – who previously might have led a life without religion, changed beyond recognition. We enforced a total prohibition. We learned from each other, we learned to cooperate. We learned to be citizens. (...) The strike was a great transformation for me, too. Every day, every hour changed me and my life.<sup>49</sup>

In turn, Jan Górka – the son of Ludwik, the pen manufacturer – mentioned the marketing success in the pre-advertising era, the 'sales madness', pride and joy of the family because of this unexpected course of events. The company started to produce several hundred pens a day. The price of one pen reached the equivalent of a dollar on the black market, which was a considerable amount of money in those days.<sup>50</sup> This aspect of the family and economic transformation was used by Piotr Trzaskalski, the director of the 9-minute film etude entitled *Długopis*, created on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Solidarity.

From the anthropological point of view, the Pope's image on Wałęsa's ballpoint pen, already mentioned in the context of religiousness, seems worth examining. It can be considered in terms of an iconic sign. The ballpoint pen contains the image of John Paul II, which was placed there intentionally, and the user of the pen has this

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<sup>47</sup> Vide: M. Brocki, *Język ciała w ujęciu antropologicznym*, Wrocław 2001, p. 263; P. Kowalski, *Leksykon znaki świata. Omen, przesąd, znaczenie*, Warszawa 1998, p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 122.

<sup>49</sup> L. Wałęsa, *Droga do prawdy. Autobiografia*. Warszawa 2008, p. 103. Piotr Trzaskalski believes that Wałęsa's ballpoint pen "shows that the changes initiated by Solidarity were to be (...) very human-oriented". As cited in: K. Kowalewicz, *Długopis w rękach*, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> I. Truszyńska, *Długopis z Myślenic*.

image at their disposal. Anthropologists analysing the mechanisms underlying the cult of John Paul II also considered the material component of the phenomenon of the Pope's image.<sup>51</sup> The presence of John Paul II's images in the broadly understood space of private and collective life is a cultural phenomenon that is still commented on and sometimes evokes considerable emotions.

Another issue – besides the one related to the form – is the multitude of meanings associated with the Pope's image. It might be argued that every decade and even every major social event has multiplied the range of meanings assigned to the Pope's image. It makes the attribution of meaning and value to an object a process, not a stable and always valid description.<sup>52</sup> In the 1980s, displaying the Pope's images was a declaration of joy and pride following the election of a Pole for the Pope and an ideological manifestation against the regime by analogy with numerous protests and strikes in those days. In the 1990s, faith and gratitude for the Pope's role in the process of obtaining the democratic freedoms and the joy from the Pope's visits to the country dominated. After John Paul II's death, his images became signs of mourning but also faith in the effectiveness of the beatification process. For young people – declared representatives of the 'JP2 generation', they were the images of a cultural intermediary. After the Smolensk air disaster, the images played a role in an ideological dispute between conservative-traditionalist and liberal forces, and since May 2011, they have been the images of a person whose public cult has been sanctioned by an appropriate church act. Future events will certainly affect the way in which the Pope's images – also the one placed inside Wałęsa's ballpoint pen – will be understood.

For several reasons it is justified to discuss Wałęsa's ballpoint pen in relation to the category of kitsch. Firstly – from an intersubjective perspective – this object was and is perceived as kitschy. It was regarded as such by the commentators, including some of the ones quoted above.<sup>53</sup> Secondly – from the theoretical point of view – if one were to employ the classic definition of kitsch proposed by Abraham Moles, it would turn out that Wałęsa's ballpoint pen satisfies a number of criteria ascribed to

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<sup>51</sup> Vide: P. Owczarek, *Karol Wojtyła – Jan Paweł II. Podhalańska opowieść o świętym. Od historii do mitu – studium antropologiczne*, Kraków 2006, pp. 401–405ff.

<sup>52</sup> Vide: E. Klekot, *Ontologia rzeczy – znaczenia*, [In:] *Rzeczy i ludzie. Humanistyka wobec materialności*, eds. J. Kowalewski, W. Piasek, M. Śliwa, Olsztyn 2008, p. 186.

<sup>53</sup> In their book *Wałęsa. Ludzie. Epoka*, Warszawa 2005, p. 77, Andrzej Brzezicki, Krzysztof Burnetko and Jerzy Skoczylas, used the aD.J.ective 'tacky' to describe this ballpoint pen.

kitsch, especially: combining incompatible elements, an excess of means of expression, mass production and the object's incompatibility with its primary function.<sup>54</sup>

Today, due to fashion, which is a powerful social phenomenon, describing an object, attitude or behaviour in terms of kitsch is not tantamount to rejecting any of them. Reaching for kitsch and putting it into use no longer results in being excluded from a given social group or class. On the contrary, kitsch may be approved of and attract interest as a tool for creating an individual style.<sup>55</sup>

Wałęsa's ballpoint pen can also be turned into a museum exhibit since it is part of the even broader aesthetic landscape of the People's Republic of Poland. Well-preserved objects characteristic of those decades are becoming less accessible, and thus more valuable as collector's items. An interest in them is also being stirred up by numerous popular publications available in bookshops, which depict both everyday life in the People's Republic of Poland and the objects used at the time. Even publications aimed at showing the absurdities of those times (is there an epoch devoid of absurdities?) have in fact a promotional character. The quality of the Polish design of the 50s, 60s or 70s is becoming discovered more and more eagerly. Wałęsa's ballpoint pen exemplifies poor design. It was produced as an object with a trashy and garish style and is considered to be such. Nevertheless, time blurs the once clear aesthetic oppositions by placing objects of various provenance under the common denominator of the aesthetic style of the People's Republic of Poland.

Wałęsa's ballpoint pen quickly ended its service life as a writing instrument. It has become both an extension of the user – which is manifested in the very term Wałęsa's ballpoint pen – and a carrier of religious, social and patriotic content for certain members of the August 1980 generation. With these associations, the ballpoint pen appears to witness the changes taking place on different levels, as a spiritual support in moments of uncertainty, as a material component of ritualised gestures, as a donation from the Nobel Prize winner. If we think of the pen as an object in the hands of the activist who signed the Gdańsk Agreement, our reflections will be probably directed towards the chief values, such as freedom and the desired ideas, such as solidarity. It is difficult to cast such historical associations aside. However, the number of meanings assigned to objects is enormous. A pen can remind some people of unfulfilled hopes, wasted opportunities, a breach of trust and even betrayal. However, it

<sup>54</sup> A. Moles, *Kicz, czyli sztuka szczęścia [Psychologie du Kitsch]*, Warszawa 1978, pp. 76–80.

<sup>55</sup> Vide: K. Piątkowski, *Kicz a obciach*, [In:] *Moda na obciach. Materiały z Ogólnopolskiej Konferencji Kulturoznawczej „Moda na obciach. Co Polacy robią z kulturą popularną?”*, ed. J. Nowiński, Elbląg 2008, pp. 188–189.

is worth forgetting – at least for a moment – about August 1980 and notice the tacky pen, which is probably a souvenir from a shrine or from the holy mass celebrated as part of another John Paul II's pilgrimage to Poland. A devotional object with an image of the person whose meaning is being rediscovered over and over again. The object whose form reveals the aesthetics of the era in which it was created and the modest possibilities of the private sector at that time. It is a ballpoint pen whose use by a young man today could be appreciated by his peers as a manifestation of an extraordinary personality achieved by means of an original gadget in the times of individualism and freedom of choice.

## Conclusion

Two seemingly disparate stories have been presented. What can lost medieval swords and a plastic ballpoint pen made around 1980 possibly have in common? Firstly, both stories prove that the practical usefulness of things does not exhaust their potential role in people's life and "matter does not consist of matter only".<sup>56</sup> Wałęsa's ballpoint pen may have been used only once, while Grunwald swords – who knows – maybe they were never used in direct combat? Secondly, the relations between people and things escape all possible rules and therefore can be completely unpredictable. They create an immaterial context, turning things that have a certain function and form into carriers of alternative content – symbols and meanings. This immaterial context ascribes a spiritual quality to things and transforms even mass-produced things – like swords in the past and pens today – into witnesses of unusual and diverse stories that sometimes become symbols of a specific event.<sup>57</sup> This immaterial context can expand considerably. Semiophores – things imbued with meaning – readily embrace those meanings that spectators are looking for. This is the third feature that the Grunwald swords and Wałęsa's ballpoint pen share. The former – though lost – can still communicate many different things as iconic signs in the future. The semiophores absorb meanings which have been affected by historical and cultural variables and changes of social conventions. We do not know what Grunwald and the Gdańsk Agreement will mean to future generations of Poles. "The number of possible 'readings' of the meanings that things are assigned will always

<sup>56</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 16 (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>57</sup> J. Święch, *Muzealium – między kryzysem a potrzebą autentyzmu. Odkrywanie kontekstu*, [In:] *I Kongres Muzealników Polskich*, ed. M. Wysocki et al., Warszawa 2015, p. 66.

substantially exceed the number of meanings intentionally written for and ‘written’ by means of those things”.<sup>58</sup>

In conformity with the key findings offered by anthropologists of things and sociologists of the object, things can be seen as extensions of individuals and communities. In other words, things reveal individual and collective identities, and contribute to the area of meanings relevant to the community. In this context, the Grunwald swords and Wałęsa’s ballpoint pen should be regarded as extraordinary objects. That is why I have decided to use a somewhat lofty term referring to them – i.e. cultural treasures. I think, however, that it is worth it. The metaphor of the treasure is very apt. For those cultures that need to keep updating themselves – by rebuilding and strengthening the network of common meanings – such objects are indeed extremely valuable. They are treasures. Although people assign (to a certain extent) importance to things, they (things) can empower people, both in the individual and community aspect. For things and people remain in a certain dynamic mutual determination relationship in cultural practice.<sup>59</sup>

With the help of the objects referred to herein, we can ‘touch’ (our own) history – of a nation or a country, and in a sense, the history of Europe. Although we do not usually touch museum exhibits, the tactile sense has not been brought up here by accident. By historical experience, we seem to be having an absolute and authentic contact with the past. That is why, according to Huizinga, the phenomenon of historical experience has more to do with the sense of touch than sight or hearing. Seeing or hearing provide a kind of an indirect experience, while the sense of touch enables “the most direct and immediate contact with the reality”.<sup>60</sup> Wouldn’t we like to touch the swords of Grunwald if they were found? Probably we would. Why? The answer to this question – although by no means an easy one – would define the essence of historical experience.

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<sup>58</sup> J. Barański, *Świat rzeczy*, p. 221 (my translation – D.J.).

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, pp. 108–109.

<sup>60</sup> F. Ankersmit, *Narracja, reprezentacja, doświadczenie*, p. 213.



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## Résumé

### The Grunwald Swords and Lech Wałęsa's Ballpoint Pen. Ordinary objects – extraordinary events

The article aims at an interdisciplinary reflection upon the objects related to two events which made a profound impact on the history of Central and Eastern Europe. Within historical narratives, such moments as the Battle of Grunwald (1410) or the Gdańsk Agreement (1980) are, above all, historical events that have causes, course and effects, as well as protagonists participating in them. As a rule, these narratives marginalize the role of objects that accompanied the events. These in turn appear to have a certain 'advantage' over the protagonists. This advantage consists in the relative durability of objects and their potentially unceasing symbolic influence. The article is devoted to the Grunwald swords and Wałęsa's ballpoint pen as material correlates of concrete events and objects that can deliver a message whose content depends on the current political, social and cultural context. The anthropological perspective offered in the article allows for switching between interpretative dimensions from historical, archaeological to that offered by sociology of things and museology.

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