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**SEARCH FOR UNIVERSALISM
IN A REGIONAL NARRATIVE.
THE CASE OF
THE NEW PERMANENT HISTORICAL EXHIBITION
IN THE SILESIAN MUSEUM¹ IN KATOWICE**

In 2012 politicians and some historians blocked the first (after 1989) permanent exhibition of the history of Upper Silesia. Its history turned out to be much more controversial and went beyond the framework of storytelling in a museum. Guidelines of the exhibition scenario have been consulted from 2010 with specialists and in the course of focus surveys. Result of the research and experts' opinions defined modern history (19th and 20th c.) as key period for understanding the heritage of the region. The authors of the project wanted to replace national and regional myths by new categories of two leading universal interpretation such as modernity and industrialization. The authors wanted to show the history of Silesia from the perspective of Poland, Germany and Czechia for their cultural presence etc. was significant in its history. The project was rejected and the script resigned from a multinational and European perspective.

Keywords: Silesian Museum, new history telling, contradictory perspectives, national perspectives, narrative of the dominant group, European perspective in regional narrative, history in museums

PREFACE

Disputes about interpretation of modern history are not unique, and for at least the past two decades they have fuelled public debate in Poland (Machcewicz 2012). Museums have obviously become part of this process (Smolorz 2012a: 6). Thus, the role historical museums could play in overcoming the contradictions between the national collective memories and perception of each nation's storytelling have become visible and have gained in importance (Jedlecki 2012: 1; Machcewicz 2012: 250).

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¹ Polish and original name: Muzeum Śląskie.

One of the possible solutions to overcoming this dilemma is to elevate the local and regional dimension of museums' narratives onto the universal level². To achieve this goal, a museum which decides to follow this path resigns from the narrative that would concentrate exclusively on one nation's historical experience. Instead, it looks for the values expressed by the different ethnicities and accepts the multicultural dimension of the past. Finally, it includes the roles of dominated and marginalised social groups (Szmaja 2017).

The universalization of narrative in museum exhibitions (and thus interpretation and reconstruction of the past in question) seems to be the key element to a successful presentation of the course of history, especially in those museums which are aware of the ambiguity of history they refer to and are ready to deal with the diverted and diversified forms of symbolic memory that function within the community/-ies in question. Last but not least, they are aware of the different and often contradictory roles played by different groups. They choose this approach as justified to secure the social recognition of their exhibitions and educational projects. This methodology allows them to voice a diversified sense of belonging and identification on the side of the audience and future museum-users (Nieroba et al. 2010).

Politics and politicians fiercely entered museums in Poland prior to 2013³ and from that point on they have remained. At that time it was a fairly new situation and from the present perspective quite prophetic in defining the course museums in Poland would take. On the other hand, this situation was not exceptional considering the nature of the postponed discussion on the International Council of Museums' new *definition of museum* in September 2019⁴. Both situations show in their own way that politics and social context matter to contemporary museums more than ever. If not regulated, politics and politicians will influence a museum's institutional framework as well as its programming (Piotrowski 2011)⁵.

The social context in which museums function poses the question of how they should respond to this challenge and whose narrative they should (finally) present. Should museums become a neutral medium or a mediator in the process, or are we perhaps at the very moment when museums should turn into active and independent subjects in this process and try to preserve their unique character as once defined by Peter Sloterdijk and preserve and regain their *distance from the rest of the world* (Sloterdijk 2007)?

Observing the worldwide development of historical policies implemented by governments, regardless of which continent or political system,⁶ one can wonder if museums are capable of becoming fora for 'inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue'⁷.

² This methodology was well-evident in the project of the permanent exhibition in the Museum of WWII in Gdańsk. For more see Machcewicz (2017).

³ 2013 was originally decided as the opening date for the Silesian Museum and its historical exhibition – author's comment.

⁴ New, proposed ICOM definition of a museum; see: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> [4.03.2020].

⁵ P. Piotrowski, a former director of the National Museum in Warsaw, brought the global discussion on socially involved museums to Poland and presented the positions Inew museology worldwide has taken on engaged museums concepts.

⁶ See the study on Japanese historical policy: Jodliński (2007).

⁷ From the proposed new definition of museum; see: <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/> [5.03.2020].

Another element of this situation derives from the fact that *post-modern societies* are now much more in favour of retrospective and historical approaches towards social phenomena than they used to be. What became significant at the turn of the century and then resulted in the development of *nostalgia industries* (for *nostalgia was turned into an everyday commodity* (Nieroba et al. 2010: 180) was a new approach towards the past.

The positive relation towards the past and sentiment over yesterday prevailed over acceptance living and managing in turbulent times (Drucker 1995) a refusal which resulted from attachment to identity and cultural heritage. Peter Drucker could write in 1980⁸ about ‘breaking free from what was yesterday’ (Drucker 1995: 49) but thirty years later it seems that it is the past that offers an attractive point of reference and sense of stability to the societies in developed countries.

New museology remains part of this process, since museums are perceived as a part of political systems and places where social and political agendas are formulated. It is no longer possible to see a museum as an island free from political, economic, and ideological practices and influences (Piotrowski 2011: 14). As Carol Duncan rightly observed, a museum is an institution where the community in question elaborates the principles of its identity (Piotrowski 2011: 22).

The museum institution as *vehicle of education* has become a *knowledge institution* and as such one has had to absorb and utilize diversified levels of exchange of that knowledge and to accept the diversity of experiences, opinions, and identities.

In fact, it was in recent decades that regional and local museums started to play a crucial role in becoming an asylum for what is local and places where the memory of various minorities (ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.) is likely to be voiced in the absence of any other institutions (Gajda 2019).

The case of the permanent historical exhibition of Silesian Museum will be presented as an example of searching for universalism in the museum narrative in Poland as a measure of overcoming contradictions among the collective memories of the different national groups and communities involved. In fact, as a means of avoiding the threat of turning museums into one-dimensional institutions which tend to protect what is only national and not civil.

The author poses the thesis that the universalisation of Silesian history meant ‘*telling a story anew*’ and from a completely different perspective. But not from the perspective of the government or informal corporate-like groups whose narrative dominated the 20th century and early 21st century⁹. In fact, the case of Silesian Museum was the first example among the Polish museums to put the viewer’s perspective at the centre of interest while defining the scenario of the exhibition from the very beginning and utilizing audience activism (Janes and Sandell 2019)¹⁰.

⁸ Drukcer’s book was originally published in 1980; see: Drucker F. Peter. 1980. *Managing in Turbulent Times*, New York: Harper&Row.

⁹ Namely political parties, religious congregations, especially the Roman-Catholic church in Poland. In the subject discussed the representatives of the regional Catholic Church were underlying their negative and critical attitude towards the concept of the historical exhibition in the Silesian Museum (see: Jedlecki 2013a), whereas the regional Lutheran Church appealed for restraint arguing that history of the Upper Silesia cannot be seized by anyone. Significant in that context was the interview given by the bishop Tadeusz Szurman, the head of the Lutheran Church in Katowice (see: Jedlecki 2013b).

¹⁰ The authors offer the broad analysis of the audience participation in museums’ activities.

In practical terms it meant creating new narratives in partnership with the communities, drawing on their skills and perspectives (Janes and Sandell 2019: 2). Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell rightly observe that a ‘museum exists to tell the stories’ (Janes and Sandell 2019: 2). The Silesian Museum needed a story, but a new one which would reflect and include all of society¹¹.

The article also discusses to what extent this new approach was successful and why it did not work as expected. Finally, tackles the issue whether it was politics and politicians (as well as other political actors) whose attempt to influence the museum’s programming stood behind the failure of the project.

The following analysis will be based first of all on primary resources, as they form a kind of museum *storytelling* since the author was involved in the process of designing, formulating and unsuccessfully implementing a project of the historical exhibition in Silesian Museum in Katowice in 2008–2013.

DEFINING THE PLAYGROUND

First of all, one should define the place and the context we are referring to. As this paper is limited in scope, the author will use some elements of the analysis of Upper Silesia formulated by Professor Ewa Chojecka in 2013 in Berlin (Chojecka 2014).

Upper Silesia is located in the southern part of the present territory of Poland. Historically this central-European region became famous in Europe for its rapid and dynamic industrialization process of the 19th and 20th centuries based upon the steel and coal industries. The history of the region is characterised by its variability of statehood affiliation. Upper Silesia consecutively formed part of the Polish Kingdom (until 1335), the Czech Kingdom (until 1526), the Austro-Hungarian Empire (until 1742), and the Prussian (German) Empire (until 1918), to become finally a region divided among Germany-Czechoslovakia and Poland (until 1945).

After 1945 the majority of the historical territory of Silesia was incorporated into Poland, including almost the entire region of Upper Silesia. Both territorial transfers (of Upper and Lower Silesia) should be seen as semi-compensation for the lost Polish Eastern Borderlands. The post-war communist propaganda tended to publicise it as among others ‘*Recovered Territories*’¹². This stereotype unfortunately still functions very well and influences the understanding of Silesia’s role in Polish history as regained old-Polish territories.

In symbolic terms the history of Upper Silesia can be viewed through three geographical names used over the course of centuries: *Górny Śląsk*, *Oberschlesien*, *Horní Slezsko* (Kamusella 2001) and by the fact that the region has no strictly defined borders (very little delimitation exists and fierce disputes surround this issue). Moreover, the historical domain has had different cultural and administrative centres shaping its cultural, social, and political

¹¹ This aspect is not as that new in the literature of the subject (see: Black 2005).

¹² See The Recovered Territories Exhibition in Wrocław in 1948. For more see online: <http://halastulecia.pl/en/about-the-hall/history/recovered-territories-exhibition/> [9.07.2020].

character, including Prague, Vienna, Berlin, and Warsaw, not to mention such sub-centres as Munich, Breslau (Wrocław), and Cracow.

The Upper Silesia melting pot can thus be characterised by the diversified ethnic (i.a. Polish, German, Czech, Jewish) and religious backgrounds (the Christian churches of Catholicism, Protestantism and Russian Orthodoxy, as well as Judaism) as well as strong agnostic and mystic movements¹³.

As one can see, even this limited and rather superficial enumeration (which omits the massive migration processes of the 19th and 20th centuries) evokes the variety of collective memories, diversified identities, and complicated dimensions of Upper Silesian heritage. Its present multi-layered structure is filled with elements that are both derived from Upper Silesian history and collective and individual experience, but is also filled with concepts and myths derived from the Polish Eastern Borderlands¹⁴ brought to Silesia by migrants from the lost Polish Eastern territories after WWII.

RECONSTRUCTION OR CREATION OF THE SILESIA HERITAGE? THE POLISH PATH

The dispute over historical rights to Upper Silesia with its roots in the late 19th century was a very serious controversy and a real burden to the German-Polish relationships after the Great War. After WWII, the attitude towards Upper Silesia (and Silesia in general) was, for different reasons, shaped by the official Polish historical policy and was based upon the process of defining a new heritage and a new identity for the region.

Robert Machray's book *The Problem of Upper Silesia* provides a good example of this early *battle for souls and minds* (Machray 1945)¹⁵. Although remote from any communist justifications of the takeover of the post-German territories, Machray's book expresses quite similar rights to the region. Representing the viewpoint of the Polish and in fact non-communist diaspora abroad, the book vehemently justifies the necessity of reunification of Upper Silesia with Poland.

This approach could be almost exemplary and it is evident that both the Soviet-installed government in Poland and the non-communist forces abroad shared the same attitude towards Upper Silesia and its heritage (Bahlcke 2001: 219)¹⁶. They almost completely ignored the German (not to mention Bohemian or Jewish) heritage of the region by replacing it with the new myth of the everlasting Polish Upper Silesia and its longing for Poland (Słupik 2013)¹⁷.

¹³ Some of these elements were also raised by Bishop Tadeusz Szurman in his interview from 11th January 2013. See earlier remarks.

¹⁴ Polish Kresy.

¹⁵ The book was written in 1942 and thus can be seen as an example of the perspective of the Polish government in exile on the issue of the Polish post-war western borders. Machray's book in fact reflects Polish historical literature on Upper Silesia from the beginning of the 20th century. For such an exemplary publication see Kłodziński (1914).

¹⁶ Polish edition.

¹⁷ The author enumerates the historical clichés elaborated with respect to Upper Silesia after WWII.

This narrative was well exemplified by the early work of Kazimierz Piwarski (Piwarski 1947)¹⁸. In a very symbolic way his book opens with a chapter entitled ‘*Silesia – the Land of the Lech Tribe*’ (Piwarski 1947: 9)¹⁹. Similar publications followed. The new mythology concerning the whole concept of Silesia’s past and its heritage has been elaborated by scholars and the popular educational sector as well as by propaganda fuelled by politicians (Smolorz 2012c)²⁰.

Six decades later, as communism collapsed, the legacy of this mystified heritage was so significant and immense in terms of various publications and pop-cultural products that Michał Smolorz coined the term *invented Silesia* (Smolorz 2012c). In his book *Śląsk wymyślony (Invented Silesia)*²¹ he argues that what is considered as Silesian tradition and tangible and intangible heritage is in many ways a *made up cultural product*: created anew, supported by (mass)-media. It is false, incorrect, mystified and strongly politicised.

These products of the *invented (Upper) Silesia* still function very well and to this day this approach propels pop-cultural perceptions of Upper Silesian heritage and its cultural landscape. A good example of its vitality is offered by reportage on Upper Silesia published by the Polish edition of *National Geographic* in October 2009. Both text and photographs reflect the stereotypic perception of the region and thus associate the place with hard-working miners, devastated post-industrial settlements, and the traditions of coal miners and the naïve art practised by the workers in their free time (Kortko and Tomaszewski 2009).

Instead of re-constructing Silesian heritage, the post-war Polish historiography has been in a constant process of creating it (and its elements) and adjusting them to serve the current political goals. It created a catalogue of axiomatic concepts which – by definition – were not to be challenged in any way by anybody (Marek 2013)²².

The museums in the region followed the same path and became hostages of this historical policy. Museums presented Silesian heritage as nearly homogenous²³ and as constantly aspiring (especially on the popular level) to become part of Polish identity, culture and tradition. Non-indigenous components of this identity were discredited and interpreted as those to be overcome, or eliminated as being alien to the actual and faithful Silesian and regional identity. ‘*Silesian*’ has become a synonym for being Polish, and this continued until the first decade of the 21st century. Even then it had strong political supporters as well as advocates in academia and the press (Myszor et al. 2013)²⁴.

¹⁸ The book had many further editions.

¹⁹ Pol. Śląsk – Kraj Lechicki.

²⁰ The book offers a comprehensive list of secondary sources enumerated there.

²¹ The book was an adapted version of his doctoral dissertation.

²² An interview offers representative idea of these dogmatic concepts.

²³ With simplified exceptions of the persons of non-German origin who were significant for the development of the region like John Baildon, a Scotsman and co-founder of steelworks in the Upper Silesia.

²⁴ In the course of the public discussion on the future historical exhibition in the Silesian Museum arguments of that nature were raised by i.a. Dr Krzysztof Krzysztyniak, Dr Paweł Ukielski and journalists like Teresa Semik (‘*Dziennik Zachodni*’), Piotr Semka (‘*Do Rzeczy*’) and Andrzej Grajewski (‘*Gość Niedzielny*’). The politicians were represented by i.a. Piotr Spyra (historian) and then the deputy Silesian voivode and Adam Matusiewicz, then marshal of the Silesian Voivodship. Piotr Spyra’s expression ‘there is too much about Germans here’

The German legacy was practically denied in spite of the fact that two hundred thousand German citizens were expelled from Upper Silesia after WWII (Linek 2014). They survived as a German minority, being today the visible sign of German presence in the region from 1742 onwards.

In fact, we can trace this old, almost *imprinted* denial of the inherited German legacy in the so-called Western Borderlands to the present day. A recently published book by Karolina Kuszyk with the symbolic title *Formerly German* is significant testimony to how deeply that perception exists (Kuszyk 2019). When it comes to Upper Silesia, the author refers to traces of the German presence on a very limited scale. Somehow the consciousness of the complex and ambiguous heritage of Upper Silesia is either lost or yet to be (re)-discovered by the next generations.

GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

On the other hand, what could be understood in Poland and defined as nationalistic perception of the Upper Silesian heritage was for other reasons (to certain degree) present in the post-war literature (both academic and popular) in Germany. The interpretation of Upper Silesian heritage and its cultural legacy was presented as the almost exclusive product of a German tradition and history and was heavily idealized²⁵.

However, with the decreasing political position of the unions and brotherhoods of the expelled, the issue of Upper Silesian heritage became in Germany more of an academic and historical issue than political. This heritage regained its political momentum in 1989, only to become officially insignificant after the Polish-German Border Treaty was signed on 14th November 1990 (Snyder 2009).

The above thesis might seem bold but, when one becomes acquainted with such publications like *The German Soul* (Dorn and Wagner 2011) or *The Germans and Their Myths* (Münkler 2013) the lack of any reference to Upper Silesia or to Silesia in general is striking and possibly disappointing to any German intellectual who might feel deprived from his past and legacy. In principle, Upper Silesia seems even more lost for Germans than Atlantis.

Fortunately, there are some exceptions to this rule which have tried to turn public awareness towards (Upper) Silesia. Hans-Dieter Rutsch's 2014 book *Das Preussische Arkadien. Schlesien und die Deutschen* is such an attempt (Rutsch 2014). It describes and reconstructs the lost memory and identity of the land. The author will refer to this book later, since its prologue is significant for the article's argument.

defined accurately the positions of the group in question (see: Jedlecki 2012) and on the German character of the exhibition content (Jedlecki 2013c).

²⁵ In their character and narrative profile these books recall the pre-WWII publications like Königer (1938). A later example of the popular literature on this subject is represented by Schlegel (1982).

BACKGROUND FOR THE CHANGE

The treaty and political reconciliation that followed after 1989 was certainly important for the perception of the Upper Silesian heritage in Poland and Germany, but it would be unjustified not to see signs of openness among the German scholars prior to that moment.

Already in the late 1970s and 80s²⁶ elements of both *Realpolitik* and political correctness had softened and broadened the German perception of the Upper Silesian heritage and its multi-ethnic dimension. This approach has meant inclusion of the other inhabitants of the region: Poles, Silesians, Jews, and Czechs. It bases its appraisal of the region's cultural identity on arguments and not exclusively on emotions.

From 1989 on, significant historical projects have been launched on Silesian and Upper Silesian history, including books such as those by Prof. Norbert Conrads (Conrads et al. 1994) and Prof. Joachim Bahlcke (Bahlcke 2001)²⁷ to name probably the most significant publications in the field. They voice more open and inclusive attitudes, like those described above.

Finally, the books representing this new approach and methodology have been produced by groups of international academics: German, Polish and Czech historians and experts in other fields. As early as the beginning of the 20th century Conrads' *Schlesien* and the other textbooks published at the beginning of the 21st century were of this character²⁸.

Some components of the regional cultural identity had been treated with a more comprehensive approach before 1989, such as classical modern art and modernist architecture. As aspects of international phenomena they were more inclined to be re-discovered and accepted by experts and scholars in spite of political and national dogmas (Jodliński 1994). Significant and meaningful were the first exhibitions and catalogues on Weimar architecture (Gussone 1992) and a growing number of books that for the first time were defining the artistic and cultural identity of the region as neither Polish nor German but Upper Silesian, as did an editorial team led by Prof. Ewa Chojecka (Chojecka et al. 2004).

The conviction that the interpretation of the Silesian past should be multifaceted and developed in a dialogue with other parties involved was connected with the emergence of a new generation in Upper Silesia and the decreasing political importance of the expelled Silesians in Germany.

The latter founded their own historical and political project in Görlitz and opened the Silesian Museum in 2006²⁹ offering a conciliatory vision of the history of Silesia (including Upper Silesia), but at the same time it was their historical *credo and testament*³⁰. It is both

²⁶ See the publications of cultural centres and museums in Western Germany; e.g. Oberschlesisches Landesmuseum Ratingen or even more radical Haus Schlesien in Königswinter.

²⁷ Original edition see: Bahlcke, Joachim. 1996. *Schlesien und die Schlesier*, München: Langen Müller.

²⁸ Herzig, Arno, Krzysztof Ruchniewicz and Małgorzata Ruchniewicz. 2008. *Śląsk i jego dzieje*, transl. A. Wziątek, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo VIA NOVA (German version: Hamburg 2008); Bahlcke, Joachim, Dan Gawrecki and Ryszard Kaczmarek (red.). 2011. *Historia Górnego Śląska. Polityka, gospodarka i kultura europejskiego regionu*, Gliwice: Dom Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej.

²⁹ Das Schlesisches Museum zu Görlitz (official German name) was opened on May 13th 2006.

³⁰ For some positive comments in the Polish press see: <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/niemieckie-muzeum-slaskie-chce-byc-pomostem-do-polski-6036598488167553a> [9.07.2020]. At the same time, former ambassador of Poland to Austria and member of numerous German-Polish political bodies, Prof. Irena Lipowicz, expressed

significant and symbolic that from its very beginning the Silesian Museum in Görlitz offered bilingual (German and Polish) descriptions of the objects, catalogues, and guidance for visitors.

These phenomena were accompanied by the fundamental change of the political situation in Europe (including EU expansion), the emergence of political movements in Upper Silesia itself (including one in favour of re-establishing an autonomous Upper-Silesian region) and the growth of new historical doctrines fostered by academic findings in both countries. The whole process turned out to be particularly dramatic in Poland, and it led to a new interpretation of Upper Silesian history³¹.

In social debates the attentive observer could notice a shift in interpretations and descriptions of Silesian heritage. The heritage of Upper Silesia was no longer *theirs* (belonging to the Germans) but *ours* (belonging to local communities)³².

Unfortunately, the process was left unfinished. For some debaters, Silesian heritage meant an exclusively Polish one³³. However, those of such beliefs and opinions were not as anti-German as they might have been in the late 1940s, or in the 1950s and 1960s when any sign of German cultural and historical presence was fiercely removed from the public space. That included the removal of inscriptions from gravestones, changing German-sounding names, and administrative penalties for speaking German in the public (Linek 2014: 192).

The acceptance of the German legacy in Upper Silesia (as well as any other than the Polish) remains limited to those situations where it could strengthen the notion of a '*historic path*' that brought Silesia from a once Prussian province into Polish statehood. It is a serious memento that a hegemonic Polish culture and historical tradition seems to be unable to accept the identities and legacies voiced by ethnic, social, and religious minorities in modern Silesia (Szmeja 2017)³⁴.

For the sake of consistency one should also bear in mind that, albeit on a minor scale, the process of redefining Upper Silesian heritage and defining regional (i.e. Silesian) identity has also been taking place in the Czech part of Upper Silesia since 2009. In fact, it was something the author described in 2019 as '*Silesianness reconstructed*', and by what he understands as the successful way the present inhabitants of that region have rediscovered and redefined the forgotten and lost identity of Czech Silesia (Jodliński 2016: 204–209).

THE NEW SILESIA MUSEUM IN KATOWICE. A SHORT STORY

The situation and the background described above allows us to embrace the temporal context of when the idea of founding the new permanent exhibition on Silesian history came into

her negative perception of the exhibition in Görlitz; online available at <https://archiwum.rp.pl/artykul/615409-Pamiec-ziem-utraconych.html> [9.07.2020].

³¹ In Poland one of the most controversial findings was made by Ryszard Kaczmarek, a professor of history at the Silesian University in Katowice. He questioned some of the facts of WWII in the Upper Silesia including the so-called defense of the parachute tower in Katowice, which turned to be simply untrue. See online interview from 2003 available at <https://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,1823285.html> [9.07.2020].

³² The best example of this approach represents the studies in art history of the region see: (Chojecka 2004).

³³ The idea of the journalistic dimension of this debate in the recent decade brings closer article (Semik 2012b).

³⁴ In her book Prof. Maria Szmeja defines as 'post-colonial' the attitude of the official decision-making centres towards the local/regional heritage and history of Upper Silesia.

being. But even saying that does not unveil the complexity of the situation. In order to obtain the whole picture we have to step back briefly into the history of the Silesian Museum itself.

The idea of the Silesian Museum originated in the interwar period. The architecture of the first seat of the museum, designed by Karol Shayer, was a good example of the functionalist style. The opening was scheduled for April 1940. Unfortunately, the museum became a quasi-hostage in the Polish-German conflict over the rights to Upper Silesia and was considered to be a significant sign of Polish cultural presence in the region. As such it was demolished to the foundations in 1944. Nevertheless the myth of its complete physical destruction survived, and for the subsequent generations the perception of its loss created a deep sense of longing for its reconstruction.

Over the following decades the idea of restoring the Silesian Museum became a public issue only occasionally. Practically, the idea was not welcomed by the communists for it was a symbol of remembrance and cultural policy of the pre-war government.

Finally, the situation changed in the mid-1980s when the central government, looking for various gestures that would ease social discontent, decided to restore the Silesian Museum in 1984. Even then, however, the new museum was provided with very limited space and there was no defined programme for the expositions and collections³⁵.

In 2007, after long discussions and various feasibility studies an architectural competition for the new museum building was launched, based on EU funds of approximately 60 million Euros. The new project was selected in June 2007 and construction started in 2011³⁶.

DESIGNING A PERMANENT HISTORICAL EXHIBITION

By the end of the day, in June 2008 the museum had an executive plan, but there was no space for an exhibition presenting the history of Upper Silesia³⁷. Although it may seem unbelievable and it is almost shocking, the Silesian Museum (located in the very heart of the centre of the region) was planned without any presentation of region's history even though it was designed for that purpose!

Finally, also thanks to the fact that EU funds were involved, a space for an historic exhibition was delimited. Unfortunately, the decision concerning technical conditions for the exhibition was belated, thus the allocated space for the exhibition must have been disappointing³⁸.

The process of elaborating the blueprint of the scenario started in 2009³⁹ and it consisted of four stages: collection analysis, experts' recommendations, public survey on the desirable exhibition content and elaboration of the guidelines for the exhibition as the starting point for the open competition for the design.

³⁵ Of course it was one of many decisions taken in the region. Museum was offered couple of rooms in the building that historically housed a hotel.

³⁶ The contract for constructing the new building of the Silesian Museum was finally signed on June 7th 2011.

³⁷ Based on documents in author's archives. Author was the director of the museum in the years 2008–2013.

³⁸ Finally offering 1 450 m² to the planners. By comparison the Chopin Museum in Warsaw has approx. 900 m², the Museum of Warsaw Uprising has 4 500 m² of the show room.

³⁹ Based on documents from author's archives.

As already mentioned, the process was preceded by analysis of exhibits owned by the museum which could be used for the presentation of the historical exhibition. This survey proved that the majority of museum artefacts originated from the 19th and 20th centuries. Although they insufficiently corresponded to the span of time, we wanted to refer to these objects as defining the very nucleus of the possible exhibition.

Parallel to that almost twenty external experts⁴⁰ from the region representing various disciplines of the humanities and ecclesiastical history were asked to present their opinions on the most desirable *themes* that should be presented in the exhibition and the *events* that in their opinion were the most significant for Silesian history.

In most cases the results of the enquiry confirmed that the last two centuries (namely 19th and 20th century) are crucial to understanding the history of this region, and form the very centre of their proposals. Having done this, the museum team proposed and prepared a working document entitled *Guidelines for the Exhibition*.

According to this paper⁴¹ the permanent exhibition was to be divided into two parts. The smaller one was to be filled with scattered so-called *capsules of time* presenting the crucial moments, documents, events, stories and personalities from Silesian history, from the prehistorical times to 1788–1790, prior to the first industrial revolution, which began in those years.

The other and bigger part of the planned exhibition formed its *core* and was devoted to the 19th and 20th centuries in Upper Silesia. This approach (also determined by the museum collections and space available to the museum) allowed building the narrative of the exhibition around two main *concepts* they chose and which – in their opinion – defined and accelerated the course of historical developments in Upper Silesia. These were: *modernity* and *industrialisation*. The author of the exhibition guidelines and the co-operating team believed that these two ideas would provide a new perspective on the historical panorama of the region.

Why did we think so?

First of all, both parameters allowed interpretation of the history of the region from a new standpoint (and not necessarily from the national perspective, or seen as a process of class struggle as it had been previously).

Second, it defined the industrialisation of Upper Silesia (being in fact the first on the European Continent) as the main factor of its social, cultural, national, and economic development as well as a new narrative axis of its history. And however paradoxical it may sound considering the economic context and identity of the region (Węgrzyn 2017), it was extremely innovative for it had been never used before in the Upper Silesian museology (Jodliński 2013: 35–48).

The industrialisation (which dynamically accelerated the modernization process) caused changes in social structure, induced new definitions of social principles and roles, and started migration processes. The national emancipation movements were present as well, but they were associated with the social, economic and religious turbulences of the epoch⁴².

⁴⁰ The complete list in author's possession.

⁴¹ Private archives of the author; the guidelines were divided into text and graphic parts. Unfortunately, they were removed from the website of the museum on demand of the authorities and thus are no longer accessible online. The author was the co-ordinator of the project and the author of the guidelines.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

The innovative thesis of *modernity drift* as the factor shaping the history of Upper Silesia allowed us to present for the first time various aspects of the numerous avant-garde movements that occurred in the region, especially in the 20th century. Phenomena that remains unknown to the broader public in Poland and in Europe were demonstrated as the factors that shaped significant and innovative developments in the Upper Silesian in areas such as architecture, city planning, arts, and mass housing. The achievements observed in Upper Silesia gained the European dimension in scale and in quality, and thanks to international actors they accumulated⁴³.

According to the draft of scenario, the beginning of this modern history of Upper Silesia was linked with Johann Wolfgang Goethe's visit to the small mining town of Tarnowitz (presently Tarnowskie Góry). There, more as a civil servant and minister than a renowned poet, Goethe came to see the first steam engine on the continent. Interestingly enough, the above-mentioned book by Hans-Dieter Rutsch begins with the same motif of Goethe travelling in 1790 to Silesia. Rutsch, however, uses this symbolic scene three years later (Rutsch 2014: 11).

The selection of this very historic event was meant both as the *grand opening* scene of the exhibition as well as the inception of its narrative. The idea of using it was to bring to the project the very European dimension and symbolism equal to Fukuyama's *great disruption* (Fukuyama 2000)⁴⁴. It was supposed to mark the beginning of the new era in which industrialisation commenced in Upper Silesia and in Continental Europe. Industrialisation was the Silesian *Book of Genesis* and we were to tell this new story to anyone who wanted to listen.

This metaphorical picture was attractive for another reason as well. Instead of the worn-out national narrative existing before 1989 it offered a *new founding myth of the region*, one appealing to the local community and inspiring for the international and European audience. This seemed crucial, for it gave the opportunity to go beyond nationalistic Polish – German – Czech constraints.

When we speak about the process of preparing the exhibition's scenario it is worth recalling that to obtain a favourable public opinion about its content and time span the authors of the project widely consulted the guidelines of the scenario in 2011 and early 2012.

The in-depth consultation process was based upon a professional questionnaire and workshops (including all age groups and a professional cross-section). It was conducted by the TNS agency⁴⁵ in selected locations in Poland⁴⁶. It addressed the selected target groups with questions like 'what history should be presented in the new Silesian Museum?' and 'which

⁴³ The remark applies especially to the inter-war period of 1922–1939 with the presence of such modernists as Hans Poelzig, Erich Mendelsohn, Peter Behrens, Dominikus Böhm, Karol Schayer, and Andrzej Pronaszko. For more on this subject see Strótkuhl (2018).

⁴⁴ The author refers to the Polish edition: Fukuyama (2000).

⁴⁵ Conducted by TNS Agency. See: TNS Agency (ed). 2012. *Oczekiwania wobec przyszej oferty Muzeum Śląskiego i wystawy stałej Historii Górnego Śląska*, Katowice (April) (unpublished, computer printout; in author's archives).

⁴⁶ Starting from Katowice and Upper Silesia region; but also including Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, Gdańsk for it aimed at obtaining a national survey over perception of modern Silesian history and clichés referring to Upper Silesia.

elements of that history (complicated and viewed from the different national perspectives) are the crucial ones from the point of view of the audience's expectations?'

The outcome of the surveys and workshops (like the already mentioned experts' analysis) decisively pointed at *modern history* (of the 19th and 20th centuries) as the period crucial to understanding the history and cultural legacy of the region. The respondents were also in favour of modern means of interpretation and presentation of the regional history, but at the same time were advocates of the sufficiently good presence of the museum objects on display.

WHOSE HERITAGE?

As already mentioned, the result of these consultations additionally confirmed the necessity of dealing with some clichés about the region's identity and the stereotypes about Upper Silesia existing in Poland. On a limited scale the opinions of foreign tourists coming to Upper Silesia were examined as well, in order to obtain information on their consumer expectations and define the means of delivering the museum's content to this category of visitors.

The authors were aware of the fact that the historical narrative of such complex nature would be extremely difficult for those from outside the region with a limited historical background to grasp⁴⁷. On the other hand, we were sure that this data would allow us to simplify communication with the museum audience to the benefit of all visitors. A separate group was set up for disabled persons to prepare the profile of the exhibition that would meet their needs and expectations.

The survey additionally confirmed the rather negative reputation of the region⁴⁸. Its outcome also made us realize the expected (albeit additional) role the Upper Silesian Museum could play as a medium of building a positive perception of the region. Using the museum's means of communication and education we planned to create a portrait of a new, regional identity that would definitely break with these outdated stereotypes.

By choosing modernity and industrialisation the authors of the project were hoping not only to respond to public expectations (which were an important factor since the social demand for the museum was the rationale for the re-establishment of the institution in 1984), but to replace the set of outdated schemes (mostly created by the nationalist and communist propaganda prior to 1989) with new social expectations, aspirations and contemporary academic findings.

The new interpretations of Silesian heritage were first of all intended to be collateral with domestic and international studies on Upper Silesia. Second, the proposed concepts were linked with the results of contemporary historical studies (Bahlcke et al. 2011) and museum projects conducted both in Poland and in Germany⁴⁹ as well as in the Czech Republic⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ The foreign tourists for the surveys were foremost selected from Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

⁴⁸ They pointed at i. a. the devastated environment, spoke of culturally handicapped region and hardworking inhabitants but with low aspirations. The materials in the possession of the author.

⁴⁹ Silesian Museum in Görlitz (historic exhibition opened in 2006).

⁵⁰ Silesian Provincial Museum in Opava (historic exhibition opened in 2010).

EUROPEAN HERITAGE A PLATFORM FOR DIALOGUE

This approach meant that the authors of the project were determined to establish an exhibition disengaged from the simple one-sided national narrative that had functioned since 1945.

Instead, they wanted to make it participatory, open to discussion and interpretable from various perspectives⁵¹. Last but not least, the authors of the guidelines for the exhibition (and consequently of the scenario) expressed their postulate to present the regional history of Upper Silesia as part of European history, since its underappreciated and profoundly European dimension makes it a genuine European phenomenon.

The European and not exclusively regional approach offered diversified perspectives on Silesian history from the standpoint of Poland and Germany (and to certain extent the Czech Republic). After all, their cultural, social, and economic presence in the region was significant for the Upper Silesian past. In practical terms it meant search for more universal interpretation of Silesian history and resigning from strictly national aspects in defining the characteristics of the problem.

The authors viewed elements like industrialization as a factor of social changes and the impulse of modernity in town planning and architecture, the emergence of a new cultural landscape or changes within societies, including new patterns of family life.

The new narrative was to create a new, more complex and updated (meaning contemporary) identity. The presentation of new leading themes within the exhibition, corresponding with the European experience, offered an opportunity to address these issues to outsiders (inhabitants of other Polish regions and foreigners) as well. This approach was overtly inclusive and not exclusive because it was based not on national dogmas but on a community of collective experiences. The audience would be encouraged to recognize and trace in the exhibition's program using for that purpose their own identity and cultural experience. The same of course was meant for any religious and ethnic minorities like Silesians or Jews, groups which have been rather neglected within the public debate and (museum) presentations (Szmeja 2017: 214).

The European perspective was the only way to overcome the limitations of the regional and national alternative. Nonetheless, the nationality theme remained present as well, although it received a more complex and diversified profile. Luckily, due to the multinational context and the European background it was potentially more transparent for anyone from outside and thus credible for it was based on complex arguments.

The European background seemed to be a natural element in a region where an ordinary worker at the turn of the centuries and before the WWII was able to communicate in three

⁵¹ One should keep in mind that consultation of the exhibition guidelines was followed by the popular collection of the various items that people considered to be significant for the planned exhibition. The project was very successful and only in December 2012 did the total number of donations reach more than 1,050 objects. The subject was intensively covered by the local and regional press (see: Przybytek 2012).

languages (Polish, German, and Silesian) and the history of the region was deeply embedded in the history of Czech Republic, Austria, Germany and Poland⁵².

The Europeanization of Silesian history has an additional goal in marking the new perception of Upper Silesian heritage. It allowed presenting it as intellectually wide open since it referred to various connections and international interactions.

The idea to bring the museum to the people enabled the visitor to participate in a dialogue. The participatory formula would mean the possibility of posing questions and conducting debates (also on a very limited family level) which had previously been excluded from the public debate. The negative reaction on the side of the critics of the guidelines might have indicated that the authors had taken the right direction, encroaching on the land of the taboo, and raising a dispute that was waiting to be started. Unfortunately, the critics of the project and the *guardians of historical status quo* were unable to accept the polyphonic character of the contemporary museum narrative⁵³.

One should also note one more final aspect of this European narrative.

The authors of the project did not lose sight of the fact that the museum and planned exhibition was a truly European project, including its infrastructural side⁵⁴. This obligation was perhaps more of a moral than factual character, but it posed an exceptional challenge to the exhibition team.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

THE NARRATIVE OF THE DOMINANT GROUP WINS

The proposed project was finally rejected, censored, and modified. It was replaced by a plan that resigned from this multithreaded perspective in favour of a national one.

Why did it happen?

The simplest answer leads us to the conclusion that the process of elaborating the guidelines of the exhibition was interrupted and violated by politicians.

Their extreme opinions voiced during the 'dispute' over the historical exhibition have left no doubt about the character and aim of their intervention. Having said that 'the Voivodship Board will decide about the final shape and content of the exhibition'⁵⁵ the Marshall of the region and decision maker of the epoch defined the real nature of the decision process and its actors. At the same time it showed the limited freedom of the programming left to the public museum.

⁵² The author refers to the present political entities; historically they formed (or were parts of) political structures different from those of today.

⁵³ In this context see the opinion of the president of the region, Marshall Adam Matusiewicz who in August of 2012 said that the exhibition 'was a scandalous scenario'. In fact, saying it publicly he addressed the guidelines and not the scenario, which at that time did not exist. In his interview he described the elements the exhibition would include and called the original project 'extremely pro-German'. For more see: Semik (2012c).

⁵⁴ 85% financed by EU resources.

⁵⁵ Opinion expressed by Adam Matusiewicz, the president (marshal) of the region in October 2012 (see: Pustułka 2012). The author of the text, relating the whole issue, underlined the great political turmoil concerning the project.

In the end it was not museum experts as argues Małgorzata Stolarska-Fronia (Stolarska-Fronia 2018: 110) but politicians who decided and finished the project⁵⁶. The exhibition was realized with the supervision of politicians and under their strict control. From the legal point of view that meant also violation of the subjectivity of the museum safeguarded in the law of museums⁵⁷ and overtaking its competences. The fate of the permanent exhibition in Museum of WWII in Gdańsk (Machcewicz 2017) proved that the case of Silesian Museum was the first but not the only one. Sadly enough, the politicians were not alone in Katowice, being supported by conservative forces including the Catholic Church and right-wing and nationalist groups (Semik 2012a: 6).

The latter element leads us to the other reason why the exhibition project in Silesian Museum failed. The consolidation of so-called nationalistic and patriotic groups⁵⁸ allows us to formulate the thesis that from their perspective the proposed guidelines of the exhibition undermined the doctrine of the *Polishness* of Upper Silesia, which is the cornerstone of the narratives of these groups (Smolorz 2012b: 8).

In order to defend this dogma all of the political forces concerned were consolidated and the new narrative was labelled as, among others, *pro-German* and *anti-Polish*. This way of acting and first of all undermining the authority of the experts proved to be effective. From a theoretical point of view the dominant group wanted to sustain its position, showed no concern in elaborating any compromise and was completely uninterested in including within the main narrative the history of the dominated groups (Wajid and Minott 2019: 25).

Behind the failure of the concept of a universal and not regional narrative also stands the long imbedded doctrine of the history of Upper Silesia elaborated and developed by communist propaganda⁵⁹. This may sound paradoxical, but the once communist concept of the Silesian history (seen as the long-time struggle to become part of the Polish statehood) remained attractive for the conservative forces. In this respect they did not want to accept the new academic findings or to include elements of the collective memory of the other actors present the region's history, such as Germans, Czechs, and Jews.

The European perspective as the basis for the new narrative was not acceptable for the decision-makers and for the large part of the conservative audience. Apart from political reasons this resulted from substantial knowledge deficits regarding regional and European history, and it was not limited to right-wing and anti-European circles. Of course, their lack of expertise in history of Silesia could be covered by the museum experts, but this was not an option, as the experts were left out of the decision-making process.

⁵⁶ By saying that, the author opposes the argument raised by Małgorzata Stolarska-Fronia that the political influences concerning the content of the exhibition were finally withdrawn on the later phase of realizing the final version of historical exhibition, for they were based solely on director's statements delivered by Alicja Knast (director of the museum in the years 2014–2020).

⁵⁷ Ustawa z dnia 21 listopada 1996 r. o muzeach [Museums' act from 21st November 1996], Dz.U. 2007, nr 5, poz. 24 (with amendments).

⁵⁸ They were represented in this dispute by Piotr Semka, the right-wing journalist working at that time in the weekly 'Uważam Rze'. Semka's texts on Silesia and the exhibition were the subject of the numerous essays by Michał Smolorz.

⁵⁹ The author already has pointed out that this tradition is much longer and steps back to the inter-war period; see earlier remarks.

Therefore even such a harmless idea as Goethe's visit to Upper Silesia was not welcomed and heavily criticised on the highest political and academic levels. Though it was mere symbolic gesture to mark the European dimension of the exhibition, it was considered to be pro-German and hostile. The critics of the permanent exhibition vehemently spoke more about Goethe's presence in the project than about the exhibition itself.

Using Charles S. Maier's definition concerning *hot* and *cold* memory (Maier 2002: 109–119) the history of Upper Silesia must be perceived as a part of exclusively Polish history and as such one seen as *hot* and *sacred memory*. In the case in question it meant that it would be unconditionally protected and used by the dominant group at the expense of other actors and regardless of the social interest.

Instead, the history of *industrialisation* and *modernity* of the region was seen as *cold* and remained partly alien to the audience and completely alien to the decision-making bodies. It did not raise *symbolic* and *patriotic* emotions.

Finally, the authors of the guidelines underestimated the fact that in spite of the changes that occurred in 1989 and afterwards the Polish historical narrative (of which the museums are a part) remained highly nationalised. The case of the Museum of World War II in Gdansk three years later and controversies concerning some projects at Polin Museum in Warsaw in 2018 confirmed that the way of dealing with museums and museums' narrative presented originally in Silesian Museum was not an exception and unfortunately was perpetuated (Machcewicz 2017).

In the case of the Silesian Museum, the politicians went so far that we can speak about open instrumentalization of the exhibition and of the institution of the museum itself. The protagonist of Siegfried Lenz's novel *Heimatmuseum* (Lenz 1991: 1–55) decides to burn down his local museum in order to protect its collection from manipulation and misuse by the local politicians. The authors of the project in Katowice could not, for obvious reasons, react in this manner, and were not interested in acting so dramatically. They had to step down and reformulate the whole project.

The final version of the exhibition was completed in 2013–2015. It resigned in principle from using the universal dimension and references within regional storytelling.

Opened in June 2015 and entitled '*Light from Silesia*', the exhibition in question stays within the limits of national narrative and rather outdated symbolism. Its regional and one-dimensional concept only pretends to include the perspectives of minority groups. It is in fact superficial and insignificant in this respect. It fails to do so to the degree that it does not even use the Silesian dialect anywhere in the exhibition or for the description of the objects. The history of the presence of the Silesian Jews has been totally ignored. These are only a few examples.

Today, the historical exhibition reflects expectations and goals of the official Polish historical policy vis à vis Upper Silesia. It omits controversies and does not build a forum for discussion, reflection or public activism. It avoids difficult issues and does not lead to any mutual recognition of the rights of other nationalities and minorities who otherwise might identify themselves with the regional history, and currently do not.

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POSZUKIWANIE UNIWERSALIZMU W NARRACJI REGIONALNEJ.

PRZYPADEK NOWEJ STAŁEJ WYSTAWY W MUZEUM ŚLĄSKIM W KATOWICACH

W 2012 roku politycy i niektórzy historycy zablokowali przygotowania do pierwszej (po 1989 r.) stałej wystawy historii Górnego Śląska. Okazało się, że historia Śląska budzi o wiele więcej kontrowersji i wyszła poza ramy opowiadania historii w muzeum. Projekt i wytyczne scenariusza wystawy były konsultowane od 2010 roku ze specjalistami i w toku między innymi badań fokusowych. Zarówno wynik badań, jak i analiza ekspertów określiły współczesną historię (XIX i XX wieku) jako kluczowy okres dla zrozumienia dziedzictwa regionu. Autorzy projektu chcieli zastąpić niektóre mity narodowe i regionalne nowymi kategoriami interpretacji, jak m.in. nowoczesność, industrializacja, pojawienie się nowego krajobrazu kulturowego czy zmiana ról społecznych spowodowana rozwijającym się przemysłem. Wystawa miała pokazać historię Górnego Śląska z perspektywy Polski i Niemiec (i Czech), których obecność kulturalna itd. była znacząca w tej historii. Poszukiwano uniwersalnej interpretacji, rezygnując z narodowych odniesień w jej przebiegu. Projekt został odrzucony, a scenariusz rezygnował z wielonarodowej perspektywy.

Słowa kluczowe: Muzeum Śląskie, nowe opowiadanie historii, sprzeczne perspektywy, perspektywy narodowe, historia w muzeach, narracja grup dominujących, europejskość w narracji regionalnej

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