



The Light of History: Through the Lens of a Polish Museum

Robert Kostro (Director, Polish History Museum)

Abstract

Together with literature, history has played a defining role in shaping the consciousness of the Poles. This reflected in the history of Polish museums where we can trace the indissoluble nexus between history and politics.

With the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 and the restoration of democracy the role the historical narrative should play in public debate needed to be redefined. These challenges would include: Polish identity and multicultural traditions. Reckoning with the communist past. A debate on “Historical politics” (i.e. what role history should play in the politics of the government). International debates on the Holocaust, German discussions on national socialism and the “victimization” of German social memory. New museology and international trends. As a result of all these processes and debates, around the year 2000 a series of new museum projects was launched in Poland including The Polish History Museum. The Museum’s narrative is buttressed by three pillars: 1) Democracy and freedom. 2) Identity issues including role of other ethnic and national group of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in shaping common heritage. 3. Everyday life and development of the civilization.

History as a Source of National Identity

Together with literature, history has played a defining role in shaping the consciousness of the Polish people. For Poles, arguably more so than for many other people, “the past is never past,” as the American Nobel laureate William Faulkner once remarked. It lies anchored in memory, and mingles forcibly with the present – never more vividly than does the memory of the nineteenth century, a haunted time of Poland’s partition among Russia, Austria and Prussia, later to become Germany. Ever present, the awareness of the abiding significance of history has always pervaded education in Poland. One of the most important books in the home education of Polish children in the first half of the nineteenth century was “Historical Songs” by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, an iconic work of poetic historical imagery.

History ranked foremost among the sources of inspiration for the great romantic poetry of Juliusz Slowacki and Adam Mickiewicz in the 1830’s and ’40s. Later, for Polish novelists Jozef Ignacy Kraszewski and – near the end of the century –for Henryk Sienkiewicz, history formed the lens through which the aspirations, triumphs and defeats of the human enterprise could best be understood. In like manner, history has often comprised the palette of inspiration for Polish painters, never more so than with Jan Matejko, the nineteenth century artist whose outsized canvasses depict the most glorious events of Polish history, including the battle of Grunwald, with its victory over the Teutonic order in 1410; the union of Lublin with Lithuania in 1569; and the establishment of the Polish Constitution on May the third, 1791.

No less than in literature and art, this razor’s edge of historical consciousness has long enlivened public debate in Poland, installing history and the interpretation of history at the center of the public sphere. One of the most passionate discussions has centered on why Poland was partitioned in the eighteenth century. Conflating history and politics, historians like Joachim Lelewel, Jozef Szujski and Michal Bobrzynski were also influential politicians. At times, history has been used as a kind of guise or metaphor to avoid censorship. It has also provided a weapon against Germanization or Russification of Polish youth. To legitimize the partitions, Russian and German schools made standard practice of presenting Polish history as though it had no foundational significance. To counter this theft of cultural identity, patriotic historians – and not without difficulty – looked back with pride to the achievements and grandeur of the past, and wrote unflinchingly about the iniquities of occupying powers.

Following the devastation of World War II, in which survival from one moment to the next eclipsed all other realities and priorities, the powerful undercurrent of the Polish historical consciousness in time reasserted itself under the yoke of communist dictatorship. One catalyst for this resurgence was the so-called “Katyn lie,” among the most egregious fictions in an indigestible diet of historical fictions fed from the top down to the Polish people. The principal narrative to legitimize communist dictatorship and the subjugation of Poland to the Soviet Union was that of the common fight during World War II against Nazi Germany. It was a mask of truth, disguising yet not disguising the fictions that lay beneath. The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939; the mass deportations of Polish nationals into Soviet-occupied territories in 1940 and ’41; the Katyn massacre itself committed by the NKVD on Polish prisoners of war in 1940; and, finally, the passivity of the Red Army in the face of the merciless German suppression of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, unveiled the true nature of Soviet imperial policies and of totalitarian terror. Not surprisingly, public writing and speaking about factual realities was strictly forbidden, lest

such discourse undermine the pose of official Polish-Soviet friendship. As in previous centuries, Poles like water flowing toward a sea of truth found ways over, through, and around the prevarications of spoon-fed history.

Forbidden history emerged as the favorite topic in the books and periodicals smuggled from the West after 1956, or printed in the underground in the late 1970s and '80s.

Museums and History, Museums Make History

It may come as no surprise, then, that in the history of Polish museums we can trace the indissoluble nexus between history and politics. The first Polish collection that merits the name “museum” – and perhaps the first museum of history in the world – was created by Izabela Czartoryska, one of the wealthiest and most educated Polish women of the eighteenth century. Confronted with the partition of Poland, by the end of the eighteenth century Czartoryska began to collect memorabilia and objects of art testifying to the grandeur of the once and future Poland. This collection was made accessible to a wider audience in Pulawy in 1801.

A second notable collection emerged as the Polish Museum, founded in Rapperswil, Switzerland in 1870 by Count Wladyslaw Plater. Devoted to the collection of artifacts, documents and books, the Polish Museum also functioned as a home away from home for Polish exile intellectuals determined to restore the country's unity and independence. After Poland regained its independence in 1918, memorabilia and other objects of significance to the history of the Republic were collected by the National Museum in Warsaw. During this same period, the National Museum in Krakow established an important art collection, and, in 1920, the Polish Army Museum was opened in Warsaw. However, national museums in Warsaw and Krakow were, and are today, focused principally on objects of art. No exhibition presenting nearly 1,000 years of national history was created.

Without question, the most significant historical museum project launched under the communist regime after 1945 was the reconstruction of the Royal Castle Museum in Warsaw in the 1970s. The capstone of the Warsaw Old Town reconstruction after the war, the Royal Castle Museum, also evidenced a key element of the political strategy by the new First Secretary of the communist party, Edward Gierek. Perhaps second to none, the Royal Castle had resonance as a symbol of Polish independence, and its reconstruction demonstrated a more positive assessment, under communist rule, of the significance of history in Polish life. By appealing to strong national sentiments, Gierek was trying to fortify the communist party's status within a society attenuated by political crisis dating to 1970.

History in a New Role

With the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 and the restoration of democracy, a seeming paradox emerged in the Polish consciousness about history: yes, the abolition of censorship created the opportunity to speak freely about the past; but, at the same time, the interest in, the passion for, Polish history diminished. Confronting this new reality, politicians and historians needed to redefine the role the historical narrative should play in public debate. Understandably, the traditional narrative focused on the struggle for independence was now less immediate and compelling. At the same time, new challenges presented themselves. These challenges would include:

- *Polish identity and multicultural traditions.* Poland's boundaries and ethnically homogeneous society are a result of the World War II that created them. The First Republic (Commonwealth) of Poland and Lithuania (including today's territories of Belarus and a large part of Ukraine) was populated by several national, ethnic and confessional groups. The collapse of communism engendered an interest in and need to discuss issues related to Poles and Polish neighbors. These discussions concerned the heritage of the First Republic and the relationship between Poles and (ex)compatriots of different ethnic origins: Jews; Ukrainians; Belarusians; Lithuanians. A separate issue has been the historical relations with both the Germans and the Russians.
- *Reckoning with the communist past.* Though Poland was the first country to overthrow the communist system, no in-depth reckoning with the past occurred. Many political iniquities and crimes of the past remained unpunished. No major action against the ex-communist party leaders was implemented. Efforts to vet security officers and shed light on the activities of agents were ineffectual. Meanwhile, the establishment of the National Remembrance Institute in 1999 in order to illuminate the dark corners of communism served to escalate the debate on the communist past.
- *"Historical politics."* Around the year 2000, a debate broke out about what role history should play in the politics of the government. In particular, a new generation of conservative intellectuals stressed the need to increase the role of government in the commemoration of the past. These views of the conservative intellectuals coincided with the approaching anniversaries of the founding of Solidarity and of the Warsaw Uprising, along with a growing feeling among Poles that the nation's struggle in World War II as well as Solidarity's role in defeating communism was being neglected in national and international memory.
- *International debates.* This last debate was also linked to international debates about how World War II is, and should be, remembered. For example, the view was expressed that the World War II discussion tended to focus on the Holocaust, often at the expense of preserving memory and commemoration of Polish non-Jewish victims. Also, new tendencies in Germany stressed the suffering of the civilian population, whether as refugees or as victims of the Allies' bombardment. In the soil of this thinking, the idea was planted to create Zentrum Gegen Vertreibungen in Berlin, still developing in modified form.
- *New museology and international trends.* The 1990s were also a period of emerging new historical museum projects: to wit, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum; House of Terror in Budapest, Deutsches Historisches Museum; and Haus der Geschichte are a few of hundreds of new museums that became a new and significant phenomenon of the memory debates.

As a result of all these processes and debates, around the year 2000 a series of new museum projects was launched in Poland. These projects included, among others: the Warsaw Rising Museum; the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw; The European Solidarity Center in Gdansk; and The Polish History Museum, also in Warsaw.

Concept of the Polish History Museum

The Polish History Museum as a legal entity was founded by a decree of the Minister of Culture in 2006. The museum has successfully completed two competitions: for the architectural design, and for the design of the exhibition. Work continues on its permanent exhibition. Plans are set to open the exhibition in 2018.

The structure of the museum narrative is buttressed by three pillars:

1. Democracy and freedom;
2. Identity;
3. Man and civilization.

Polish political freedom and the nation's republican and democratic experiences

The rules and limits of freedom. Poland – or, more precisely, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth – has a long republican tradition dating back to the fifteenth century. At the end of the fifteenth century, a national parliament was formed, dominated by the Polish gentry, which, as early as 1505, assumed supreme power in Poland. By 1573, we see the remarkable phenomenon in Poland of free elections of kings by the gentry.

This republican tradition, however, is not without a darker narrative as well. The system was effective until the first half of the seventeenth century. It was then confronted with, and undermined by, the rising strength of neighboring absolutist countries, as well as by the class egoism then prevalent in the gentry (*liberum veto*).

Fortunately, the eighteenth century witnessed new reforms, culminating in the grand triumph of May 3rd, 1791, when the new Constitution came into being. Widely regarded as the first modern constitution in Europe, this crown jewel of Polish democracy did not prevent the tragic partitions of the nation at the end of the eighteenth century.

Broadly speaking, the quest for the direct experience of freedom in Poland has spanned many eras, many dilemmas, many landscapes of Polish history: the struggle against the partition powers; the dilemma of whether to take up arms in insurrection, or pursue legal channels of opposition; the potent, courageous, underground movement during World War II, also known as the Secret State; the civic and anti-communist Solidarity movement. Nor, as we look at recent Polish history, can the critical role played by Pope John Paul II in this movement, and in the democracy-building process in Poland and Central Europe, go unacknowledged.

Multinational and multiethnic heritage as a source of identity

As far in the distant past as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Poland has been a country welcoming significant immigration. People of Jewish and German origins arrived to comprise large portions of the populations of cities. Marriages of family members in the Piast dynasty and unions with Lithuania spanning large territories of Eastern Europe led to a Polish Commonwealth populated not only by Poles but by Ruthenians (today Belarusians and Ukrainians), Lithuanians and many smaller ethnic groups (Armenians, Tartars, Dutch). Ethnic diversity also accompanied confessional differences – Orthodox, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Catholics of Eastern liturgy (Greek, Armenian) – all became significant contributors to the population. Until the seventeenth century, it is important to note that the Commonwealth,

undeniably, stood proudly as one of the most tolerant nations of Europe, where people of disparate ethnic origins and religious faiths could find not only a home but a safe haven.

Prominent in this safe haven was the largest Jewish community in the world, one accorded – and cherishing – the privilege of what was largely self-governance. A magnificent monument from this era was the Warsaw Confederation of 1573, in which religious freedom among the gentry of diverse Christian confessions was guaranteed.

Sadly, the unprecedented religious tolerance of this high order was undermined in the second half of the seventeenth century, when political turbulence and destabilizing wars ushered in ethnic and religious tensions not previously seen. Still, a remarkably high level of ethnic and religious tolerance helped to preserve the social order in the territories of the old Commonwealth until World War II.

But there were rents in the Polish social fabric. As the tide of nationalistic fervor rose in Poland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so did tensions between Poles and other nations and ethnic groups. In the Second Republic (1918-1939), ethnic tensions precipitated strong frictions, particularly in the intersections with Jews and Ukrainians as the Polish Republic confronted the looming shadows to either side of it of Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler.

With World War II and the “cleansings” perpetrated by German Nazis, Soviets, and the Ukrainian nationalist resistance (UPA), the stage was set for tragedy and overflowed with blood. We will not conceal the fact that a large part of the Polish Christian population remained indifferent vis-a vis Holocaust and some even collaborated with the Nazis in criminal work. We intend also to pay tribute to those who had the courage to resist. War and the deaths of millions of Polish citizens, Jewish and non-Jewish in equal measure, brought a tragic end, as well, not only to simmering ethnic conflicts but to political and social opportunities to settle differences peacefully between Poles and their compatriots or neighbors.

Man and Civilization

The third line of the museum focuses on the impact of progress on society. By progress we mean advances and innovations in civilization, accomplished in part through the application of science in technology. How, we want to know, have technology and science impacted social change? And how have the lives of ordinary people changed, as a result, throughout the ages? By examining such advances as the revolutionary discoveries of Copernicus, the printing press, the steam engine, the television, the computer – all milestones of human history – we can begin to fathom the power of the embodied idea, the conceptual made actual, in civilization as it has evolved. At the same time, we link the history of Poland with the history of the world itself.

Representation of History in a Contemporary Museum

Make no mistake: To create a museum devoted to history in a democratic society is no small undertaking. Sensitivities abound, to which a museum must be highly attuned, and which it must accord a full measure of respect and attention. In a democratic society, history – or, more specifically – the collective social memory of history – teems inevitably with conflict, with widely divergent points of view, and of necessity requires negotiation among disparate political groups and lobbies. Therefore it is crucial for a museum as an institution with its doors wide open to all

aspects of our Polish heritage, to abide by rules that welcome a broad spectrum of viewpoints – even those suspicious about the very concept of a national tradition.

1. In the very beginning, the museum confronted a range of questions and doubts, some from the media, others from academic circles. Concerns of this sort are understandable. In response, the museum prepared its program in an open way, consulting with leading scholars and welcoming to its supervisory body people from diverse academic, social and political circles.
2. An important element of the museum's strategy was to create exhibitions, as well as educational and scientific projects, that foreshadowed future realizations of the permanent exhibition, together with the museum's activities. As time passed, virtually all influential media, of diverse political orientation, came to respect, and willingly embraced, the main ideas and directions set out by the museum.
3. The historian is not a judge. The mission of a museum of history is to deepen the level of debate, to invite people to conduct broad dialogue. Many debates on the meaning and truth, of history cannot have final answers, and we should not pretend to have them. To be sure, we cannot ignore difficult topics; but this does not mean that answers will be forthcoming for every question. In our exhibitions at the museum, our goal is for our visitors not only to absorb what the exhibitions have to offer them, but to draw their own conclusions.
4. There is a delicate relationship between the role of museum curator, on the one hand, and that of historian, on the other. Creating an exhibition cannot be equated with writing an academic dissertation. Certainly an exhibition creator must respect historical findings, but building an exhibition is not an exact science. It is an act of creation, creation of sense and sensibility based on the work of scientists, but also governed by the rules of the arts. Building a narrative, tracing the ebb and flow of emotion, engendering new ideas that sometimes go beyond, even transcend, traditional interpretations – these all spring from the province of the artist. Ultimately, a museum of history should be an intriguing guide to our past that can help us frame the questions and sometimes, in some measure, help to answer them.

So what, in the end, do we at the museum – in partnership with our visitors – aspire to do? The answer is a set of active verbs. We aspire, first of all, to recollect. To recollect obvious facts, yes – but also to recollect the nuances, the subtleties of the past, that perhaps, heretofore, have been neglected. We aspire, in equal measure, to surprise our visitors by showing them something in our history they did not anticipate. When a person is surprised, the world expands; the horizon widens.

This element of surprise must also be coupled with the experience of building associations. Thus we also aspire to help our visitors build associations as they travel, through space in time, among the exhibitions. Sometimes, that building experience will pass through shame. Sometimes, it will walk the path of pride. These are the emotional fruits of a truthful encounter with history.

But always we aspire to engage our visitor fully. To expand awareness. To invite him or her to become the active verb of living interaction with the living past. For it is true that “the past is never past.” We are alive in it. And the past is alive in us.

The experience of the twentieth century in Poland brought home to the Polish people just how important history is for us, for our identity and for democracy. No museum, or any other institution, has the right to formulate a complete and closed vision of the past. Our task is far too vital to make that mistake. But, by the same token, we should never shrink from the responsibility of being interpreters of history, nor allow the understandable anxiety that responsibility entails to diminish the power of good ideas, of muscular and creative interpretations. Inevitably, a new generation beyond our era will re-examine our vision. That is as it should be. That is their right, their obligation even. In our own moment, we welcome our own grand opportunity to explore the past, to help people of all backgrounds discover history, to make from their encounter with history something dynamic and transformative in their intellectual life, and in the intellectual debate of the nation. That is our right, while we live, and our obligation.