Paweł Is a Dead Man

"Paweł is a dead man." In November 2015, ten days after the Law and Justice Party[1] formed the government in Poland, this short message was passed on to one of my colleagues at the Museum of the Second World War. It came from a mutual acquaintance, who was close to the new ruling party. He heard it, nice and clear, from the party's leadership. He also said that he had seen a list of staff to be fired from the Museum and that there was no chance that any of us would last.

The next few months were full of equally strong language and actions directed toward me and the Museum that I was creating. This was not entirely surprising since Law and Justice and its supporters had thrown accusations at us from the very beginning. The party's leader and the real ruler of Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński, had accused us of lacking "the Polish point of view" as far back as 2008. He had said that the Museum of the Second World War was a tool to "disintegrate the Polish nation." Others were saying that we were under directions from Brussels and Berlin.

Still, I could never have predicted the range of tactics that the government of my own country would employ against the largest historical museum being created in Poland in order to prevent its opening to the public and to change its exhibitions. I did expect to be fired, but I did not foresee that the minister of culture would create another, fictional museum that existed only on paper to extinguish the Museum of the Second World War. Nor did I think that one Friday night in April 2016 he would unexpectedly announce that our Museum would be merged with this nonexistent Museum of Westerplatte and the War of 1939. Not that long ago, I would have thought that this type of story could not really happen, that it belonged to the grotesque novels and dramas of Sławomir Mrożek.[2] I did not foresee that the Museum would become one of the most important public issues in Poland, a symbol of the defense of history and culture from political interference.

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1 Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) is a conservative party with strong nationalistic, conservative, and Catholic leanings. It was formed in 2001 by brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński. After Lech Kaczyński's death in an airplane crash near Smoleńsk in 2010, Jarosław became the sole leader of the party. Law and Justice won elections and formed governments in Poland from 2005 to 2007 and from 2015 to the present.

2 Sławomir Mrożek (1930 – 2013) was a Polish writer and dramaturg, known for his satirical and absurdist style.

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Yet, unlike so many other events that he was able to bend to his will, the story did not unfold entirely as Jarosław Kaczyński wished. We were not immediately squashed by the government and political forces, as they wanted. We mounted an opposition; we defended the exhibitions and tried to get the Museum open to the public. If I may use a wartime metaphor, this was Stalingrad, not the blitzkrieg the government had expected. Public opinion was on our side, and a court halted the closure for several months in response to lawsuits filed by me, Ombudsman for the Rights of Citizens Adam Bodnar, and Mayor of Gdańsk Paweł Adamowicz. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński appealed to a higher court, and the decision to close us loomed.

It was a race against time to complete as much as we could: to finish construction and begin installing exhibitions in such a manner that any future changes would be difficult to make. We were working under extreme pressure, under constant attack and threat from Minister Gliński and the whole state apparatus. Because I was stubborn, I became public enemy number one, and the politicians and the party's propaganda accused me of "lacking national sensibility," of "cosmopolitanism," and of conducting "German historical politics." As a historian, I was reminded of the Communist era in Poland, of the events of March 1968, and of "anti-Zionism."[3] All these charges were levied, then as now, by people who claimed to act for the good of Poland. I was also accused of misusing construction funds, an old and well-known authoritarian trick. Minister of Culture Gliński employed many of the resources at his disposal to find a "hook" with which to compromise me and my coworkers. Despite all this, they did not succeed.

For many people, our fight for the Museum was a source of hope that it was possible to successfully defend values and that we do not have to give up in the face of overwhelming forces. During these several months of work under extreme pressure, I did not believe that we could win and open the Museum to the public. But I did believe that we had to work to the end and do all we could. Still, I did not envision that I would, in fact, last until March 2017, when the Museum opened. I did not envision that I would lead in the very first visitor, ninety-six-year-old Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, a courier for the Union of Armed Struggle, a prisoner of the infamous Pawiak prison and the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and in the 1980s an active member of the Solidarity movement. For me, she was the symbol of all that is best about Poland. These are the people

3 A series of major anti-Communist protests organized by students and intellectuals took place in Poland in March 1968. The protests, brutally suppressed by the Security Forces, were followed by a wave of antisemitism, encouraged by the Communist government, which led to a mass exile of people of Jewish descent from Poland in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

whom the Museum featured, a fact that cannot be changed by all the lies that have been thrown at it publicly.

This moment of triumph was shortly followed by a complete change in fortune, which was typical of the roller coaster of the preceding few months. Two weeks after the opening, in April 2017, the Museum of the Second World War was finally merged with the Museum of Westerplatte. Proclaiming that the case was not within the jurisdiction of the courts, the Supreme Administrative Court declined to issue a ruling, which allowed Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński to implement his plan. The merger that started on a Friday night a year earlier was now completed. Our institution was formally abolished, stricken from the registry of museums. Nobody even had to fire me because the institution of which I was the director just disappeared. The minister of culture replaced it with a new museum, under the same name but now staffed with his own people, who were directed to change the exhibitions we had created. Yet what we accomplished cannot be erased. The Museum can no longer be simply closed, and the exhibitions have already been visited by hundreds of thousands of people. Any changes, implemented at the direction of this government, happen in an open forum and are carefully watched by the general public.

I think it is worth telling the story from the very beginning to show how the Museum of the Second World War came to be, how we created the exhibitions, and how we managed—despite the government—to open it to the public. It is a story even more worth telling because it is not possible anymore to visit the Museum as it was planned. Some parts of the original exhibitions have already been changed, and this book can serve as a witness of all that happened.