Museum, but What Museum?

Even before the Museum was formally established in December 2008, one of the first steps was to outline its initial shape and, above all, its exhibitions. This preliminary stage culminated in a study titled *Museum of the Second World War: The Conceptual Brief*, which I prepared together with Dr. Piotr M. Majewski, a historian from the University of Warsaw with whom I had worked previously on the monthly history magazine *Mówią Wieki*.

We stated that while Polish stories should have a special place in the Museum, they would be told in a broader context as part of the history of Europe and the world. We declared at the very beginning of our work that "one of the tools to achieve balance between Polish and 'foreign' issues can be comparative narration. This would allow the Museum to show the similarities and the differences in the character of the war and occupation between Western Europe and Central-Eastern Europe." We also emphasized that the specificity of the war and occupation in Pomerania should be depicted as much as possible, to make the museum part of the local historical landscape, which was itself fascinating and had many universal elements. We also pointed out that we planned to create a museum of war but not a military museum, of which so many already existed in the world. Our attention was centered on the civilian population, the war's main victim. This approach would later give rise to one of the constant lines of attack on our Museum, together with condemnation of our taking into account the experiences of other nations.

We also devoted a lot of attention to the topic of forced resettlement, at the time at the very core of Polish-German disputes.

> The narrative of forced migration should begin with the actions taken by the Third Reich and the USSR from the very beginning of the war and throughout its entire period, and include: displacement of Poles from Pomerania and Greater Poland as far back as 1939; pacification of the Zamość region; displacement of the population of Warsaw after the outbreak and fall of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944; resettlement by the Third Reich of Germans from the Baltic States, the USSR, Romania and South Tyrol; deportations of Poles and the Balts in 1940 – 1941; as well as the displacement of Germans of the Volga, Crimean Tatars, Ingushians, Karachay, and Kalmyks after 1941. It is in this context that we need to depict the escape of German civilian populations from the approaching Red Army and the displacement of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Yugoslavia.

Bearing in mind the Polish-German historical disputes, we emphasized that this was

> one of the most important topics of the exhibitions. It will show that the expulsions of Germans that followed the end of the war were not only an attempt to create an ethnically unified nation-state—as the Union of Expellees would have us believe—but most of all a continuation of the forced migration that was started on an unprecedented scale by the Third Reich and USSR. However, in this exhibition area, it is important to show that even during the most tragic episodes of the German civilian population's attempts to flee the Red Army, the Nazi crimes continued: the death marches from Auschwitz and other concentration camps or the massacre on January 31, 1945 (the day after the *Wilhelm Gustloff* was sunk) of prisoners from a concentration camp in Palmniki [Palmnicken] near the town of Piława [Peilau] on the coast of the Baltic Sea in eastern Prussia, where several thousand people were killed or died during the "evacuation."

We also planned to show in the exhibitions events that were very important to Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries but almost unknown in Western Europe—such as the crimes conducted by Germans against the Polish civilian population in September 1939 and crimes against Poles conducted by Ukrainian nationalists in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943 to 1944—and also the fact that the end of the war had such a different meaning for various nations. The Museum was to show that 1945 brought freedom to Western Europe, but for Poles liberation from the German occupation was the beginning of a new enslavement: subservience to Moscow and Communist dictatorship. This was only lifted in 1989, when the book was finally closed on the consequences of the war for the nations that found themselves in the Soviet Bloc.

When I read the *Conceptual Brief* today, after the Museum opened, I am struck by the consistency in our many years of work on the exhibitions. On one hand, the Museum's final shape really reflects the most important notions put forward from the very beginning of the whole undertaking. Even some specific exhibition ideas were already outlined at that time. For example, the display of an interactive model of the German Enigma encryption machine, whose code had been broken by Polish mathematicians even before the war, permitted visitors to write their own messages. And the *Gustloff* and the bell from the wreck of this ship, as the symbol of this tragedy, were used to show the suffering of the German civilian population. The display is complemented in the same room by the story of German crimes committed in the last weeks of the war. These crimes are exemplified by the death march from Stutthof and by the Palmniki massacre, an act perpetrated in part by young boys from the *Hitlerjugend*. All these stories were included in the 2008 *Conceptual Brief*.

However, during the eight years that we worked on the exhibitions, the reality around us changed. Public interest in the expulsions subsided. This resulted partly from the decreased importance of this topic in German politics and consequently in Polish-German relations. The forced expulsions—both during and

after the war—are an important part of the Museum, but they do not generate strong emotions and controversies; they were not part of the heated discussions that attended the last phase of the construction and the opening of the Museum.

From the very beginning we presumed that the plan for such an important museum would be subjected to public consultation. We shared the *Conceptual Brief* with most reputable Polish historians of the Second World War and with museum professionals, who all evaluated it in a meeting in Warsaw in October 2008. The meeting was attended by dozens of people. For the most part they were positive, even enthusiastic, about the plan. Professor Tomasz Szarota saw in it the potential for "a wise and courageous undertaking that will show the world the fate of Poles during the Second World War, and on the other hand will show Poles the suffering and martyrdom of other nations, the existence of a common destiny in the occupied territories, and the existence of an international resistance movement. In this sense, the future Museum of the Second World War may also fulfill the function of a specific antidote for the typical to us combination of megalomania and inferiority complex."

The *Conceptual Brief* was then published in the *Przegląd Polityczny.*[7] It was also available on the Museum website. Therefore, the process of developing the Museum was very transparent; it was first the object of a debate among professionals and then presented to the general public, an approach that was not at all a standard process in the development of other history museums in Poland.

7 Paweł Machcewicz and Piotr M. Majewski, "Muzeum II Wojny Światowej—Zarys Koncepcji Programowej," *Przegląd Polityczny* 91/92 (2008): 46–51; see also in the same issue a discussion among historians, "Wokół idei Muzeum II Wojny Światowej. Zapis dyskusji," 52–62, and a text about the concept of the Museum of the Second World War by a renowned historian and philosopher, Professor Krzysztof Pomian, 62–65.