The First Months at the Office of the Prime Minister

On September 1, 2008, I became Prime Minister Donald Tusk's advisor and his special commissioner for the Museum of the Second World War. This enabled me to take the first organizational steps, even before the Museum was formally established a few months later by the minister of culture. I invited Piotr M. Majewski and Janusz Marszalec to join me. Piotr worked at the Historical Institute of the University of Warsaw as well as at the historical magazine *Mówią Wieki*. We became acquainted when Majewski submitted his articles to *Mówią Wieki* in the 1990s. At the time, I was an editor in the magazine's twentieth-century history department. Piotr specialized in the history of Czechoslovakia and the diplomacy of the 1930s and 1940s. He had published very highly regarded and award-winning works on Edvard Beneš, Sudeten Germans, and the Munich crisis. I had known Janusz Marszalec, a graduate in history from the Catholic University of Lublin, since 2000, when we created together the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN). In the summer of that year, after being appointed director of the Public Education Office and becoming its first employee, I found a pile of CVs submitted to the Office by historians who were seeking employment. I chose Janusz, who was the best candidate to create a branch of the Office in Gdańsk. His expertise was in the Polish Underground State, a wartime resistance organization; his PhD, enthusiastically received by historians, dealt with the security forces of the Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising.

After a few months, at the turn of 2009, Rafał Wnuk joined our museum trio. Rafał, was a professor of history at the Catholic University of Lublin as well as head of the Public Education Office in the Lublin Institute of National Remembrance. He was an expert—in my opinion the most knowledgeable in Poland—on the underground independence movement in Poland after 1945, and he also specialized in Polish intelligence during the Second World War. He was a member of the Polish-British government commission to examine the wartime activities of Polish intelligence; as part of this task force, he had conducted archival research in London and Washington, DC. Wnuk was also the coordinator and editor in chief of the monumental *Atlas of the Pro-Independence Underground in Poland, 1944–1956*. The latter was a true magnum opus that chronicled all major actions undertaken by various resistance units. However, Wnuk's critical position on the term "cursed soldiers," used as a token of admiration by Law and Justice followers to describe anti-Communist armed postwar opposition, earned him many enemies on the political Right and in the IPN itself. Rafał Wnuk always spoke against the politicization and instrumentalization of

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history, and as a leading expert on the postwar underground—not only in Poland but also in the Baltic states—he repeatedly spoke out against the political manipulation around "cursed soldiers."

In 2008, Marszalec and Wnuk no longer felt at home at the Institute of National Remembrance, as they did not accept the vision of its president Janusz Kurtyka, who wanted the institution to represent historical politics and to be an ally of the Law and Justice Party. Independent and moderate staff members were marginalized or encouraged to leave. Many of them left willingly, preferring not to be part of the politicization of the Institute. In anticipation of these developments within the IPN, I left in January 2006, just after Kurtyka took over, in order to return to academia and research activities. I approached Marszalec and Wnuk to jointly create the Museum of the Second World War at just the right moment in their professional lives, when they were open to the prospect of change and building something new. We were united by our age group: I was forty-two at the time, and they were a year or two younger. Piotr M. Majewski was a few years younger than us. The three of us had also experienced together the creation of the Institute of National Remembrance from the ground up and had worked there for many years. Without this ability to function in a state institution, with all its regulations, procedures, and rules for spending public money, none of us would seriously have considered partaking in such a crazy undertaking as the creation of a large historical museum from scratch. Working at the Institute of National Remembrance was, however, in some respects also a negative experience. For us, the Institute was a well-organized yet extreme—one could say Byzantine—bureaucracy, with all its directors, especially of regional branches. We wanted to create the Museum of the Second World War as a kind of antithesis of the Institute of National Remembrance: without bureaucracy, with more direct interpersonal relations, and as a relatively small team connected by a common task rather than a large institution. Although initially very slim, the team grew with time, especially as the opening approached, and it became difficult to fully maintain this "antibureaucratic" style.

The meeting space in Warsaw and the organizational foothold, in the form of a one-person secretariat, were very helpful for the project, which from the beginning was conceived not only as a local enterprise in Gdańsk but also as a nationwide endeavor supported by a network of extensive international contacts. I also knew that the road from the prime minister's initial announcement of the decision to create the Museum to its actual opening would be long and bumpy. If it was to be more than a "virtual museum," we needed to overcome many bureaucratic obstacles and secure substantial funding—not an easy task when the government was consistently attempting to reduce the budget deficit. Being attached to the Prime Minister's Office and my having the title of special commissioner of

the prime minister for the Museum of the Second World War gave us a chance at more effective operation.

Yet I would pay the price for that; Law and Justice would persistently allege that I became a politician. I do not consider these allegations to be justified, because I did not deal with any issues that would go beyond the Museum's affairs and other topics related to history. Notably, the same people who raised allegations against me were not bothered by the fact that the director of the Warsaw Rising Museum, Jan Ołdakowski, was a Law and Justice MP and, unlike me, was involved in real parliamentary and party politics. However, as these allegations keep surfacing, I will provide an account of my work within the Prime Minister's Office; after all, it was mainly concerned with the very beginning of the Museum, before the Gdańsk team took over.

In the first weeks, the most important issue was to decide where exactly the Museum would be located and how that would affect another planned project, the establishment of the Westerplatte Museum. The latter had its roots in the first Law and Justice government from 2005 to 2007. It was promoted by then deputy minister of culture Jarosław Sellin, originally from the Tricity area (Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot), which was probably one reason he so fiercely opposed the Museum of the Second World War. From 2005 to 2007, the project to create a new museum at Westerplatte remained in the conceptual stage. Paradoxically, the Westerplatte plans were taken up by a politician of the Civic Platform Party in Gdańsk, Sławomir Nowak, one of the closest and most influential collaborators of Prime Minister Tusk. Nowak and a group of his Gdańsk associates, young activists of the Platform, apparently wanted to repeat the success of the Warsaw Rising Museum and to build their public careers on that project.

Nowak expanded Sellin's idea. A kind of "historical park" was to be built at Westerplatte, using both the preserved objects of the Military Transit Depot, a pre–Second World War Polish military site in the free city of Gdańsk, and historical reproductions. It was to be supplemented with a new marina and other facilities intended to attract Gdańsk residents and tourists to Westerplatte. One of Nowak's close relatives, a Gdańsk Civic Platform councilor and the former head of his parliamentary office, was to become the director of the Westerplatte Museum. The relative was not a historian and admitted that he was not interested in history; this was supposed to be an advantage, allowing him to resolve disputes between professionals impartially. The public did not receive this proposal well. There were accusations that this was a clear example of political nepotism on the part of the ruling party. By the way, I thought that the idea of reconstructing the nonexistent objects of the Military Transit Depot was completely groundless, because it would lead to the creation of a kind of historic Disneyland. The true

merit of Westerplatte was its authenticity, preserved guardhouses, and ruins of the barracks, which ought to be protected.

The establishment of the Westerplatte Museum was announced on September 1, 2008, the same day that I became the special commissioner of the prime minister for the Museum of the Second World War. This caused some confusion, which Tusk resolved quickly. He invited me to a meeting in his office (I met him personally for the first time then), which was also attended by the head of the Prime Minister's Office, Tomasz Arabski, and by Sławomir Nowak, Wojciech Duda, and Grzegorz Fortuna. All the participants at the meeting but me were from the Tricity; Duda, Fortuna, and Tusk had published a photographic album titled *There Once Was Gdańsk*, which explored the city's past and was immensely popular. Tusk asked a question about the sense of creating two historical museums dealing with the war in one city. He stated that the Polish state could not afford to finance two such large projects simultaneously and asked the invitees to express their opinions. Apart from Nowak, everyone present strongly indicated that Poland needed a museum that showed the entire experience of the war rather than a seven-day defense of the Military Transit Depot. The nation needed an institution that would influence European debates about history, which was also important in the context of plans to create a museum of expulsions in Germany. There was also the question of where to build the Museum of the Second World War. Two locations were considered: on the Westerplatte itself and on Wałowa Street, right next to the Main Town, where the Wiadrownia district (Eimermacherhof) was completely destroyed in 1945. Since the 1970s, a square and a bus depot had stood there, and now the Gdańsk mayor, Paweł Adamowicz, was ready to donate this site for the construction of the Museum. Westerplatte was rejected due to its considerable distance from the city center, which right away would limit the number of visitors. The plot at Wałowa Street seemed like the perfect choice. It was a few minutes' walk from two tourist destinations: a busy pedestrian promenade on the historic Motława River Embankment (Długie Pobrzeże) and the famous Gdańsk Crane. The Polish Post Office (Poczta Polska), which had symbolic meaning as the site of one of the first acts of the war and of the Polish resistance, was also nearby. By the conclusion of the meeting, the prime minister had decided that the Museum of the Second World War, not the Westerplatte Museum, would be built, and its headquarters would be at Wałowa Street.

As a consequence of Tusk's decision, the Westerplatte Museum, which had existed only on paper since September 1, 2008, was transformed into the Museum of the Second World War, which was formally established at the turn of December of that year. With that act, the Civic Platform's government had resolved the problem of two museums in Gdańsk. Yet the case, which seemed to be closed,

would later be used by Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński and his deputy Jarosław Sellin to attack the Museum of the Second World War, something which I of course did not anticipate at the time. Another piece of "shrapnel" from the prime minister's decision was that Sławomir Nowak subsequently tried to force me to employ his protégé as my deputy. I firmly refused, explaining that he did not have any qualifications to become deputy director of a historical museum. In response, Nowak's group in the city council tried to torpedo the donation of the building site to the Museum. Fortunately, Donald Tusk was alerted in time and immediately pacified the head of his political cabinet.

Nowak's project did not materialize; no one was employed in the Westerplatte Museum before it was transformed into the Museum of the Second World War. I mention this because during the attacks on me in 2016, I was accused of causing the people who were employed at the Westerplatte Museum to lose their jobs. This simply did not correspond with the truth. There was also a second allegation, that as an outcome of Tusk's decision in September 2008, the Museum was constructed at Wałowa Street, where, it was claimed, the geology and drainage were exceptionally unfavorable. The site, as Deputy Minister Sellin stubbornly repeated during his later crusade against the Museum, was supposedly a "wetland" or "port" area (two obviously contradictory designations). It was even implied for a long time that at one point, it had been the site of a "water intake for the city of Gdańsk." The latter is completely inconsistent with the facts, which I verified by consulting with experts in the history of the city. Indeed, the Museum was established in the area adjacent to the Motława River and the Radunia Canal; yet the bottom-up pressure of groundwater, not its location, presented the largest engineering challenge. The pressure had to be neutralized by creating a large reinforced concrete structure, a "dry bathtub" in the professional language of engineers, within which the main part of the Museum with its permanent exhibitions would be located. Similar conditions prevailed throughout the Main Town itself, and this had not prevented the construction of St. Mary's Basilica or other buildings, including contemporary ones, directly on the Motława River and the Radunia Canal. To build on more stable ground, one would have had to site the museum at least a few kilometers from the Main and Old Towns. And that would not make sense from the point of view of attracting as many visitors as possible, including foreign tourists. It should be noted that it would be even more challenging to build a museum at Westerplatte; issues with this location also surfaced. On this narrow promontory, surrounded on one side by the port channel and on the other by the sea, the construction of a large museum building would be incomparably more difficult, if even possible.

The meeting with Tusk that I described above was one of my few conversations with him. When I had to resolve important issues having to do with the Museum, first of all regarding the Multi-Year Government Program and its subsequent iterations to address longer-than-expected timelines and rising costs, I went to Wojciech Duda, Tomasz Arabski, and later Jacek Cichocki, who had succeeded the latter as head of the Prime Minister's Office. Duda was from the beginning emotionally invested in the project and understood its importance to Polish history. He often acted as an intermediary between me and Prime Minister Tusk when we needed Tusk's support. Minister of Culture Bogdan Zdrojewski at first approached our endeavor with some reservations, perceiving the Museum of the Second World War as a project imposed on him by the prime minister and those close to him and also as a stress on the resources of the cultural sector that could have been devoted to other projects. After a few years, though, this initial reservation transformed into good cooperation and trust, and I could always count on Zdrojewski's support in difficult situations. As a former mayor of the city of Wrocław, he understood the complexity and enormity of the endeavor to build such a large museum, and he was skeptical from the beginning when I assured him that I would strive to open the Museum in 2014, on the 75th anniversary of the beginning of war.

As an advisor to Tusk, I had one other responsibility beyond the Museum: the Institute of National Remembrance. Under the direction of Janusz Kurtyka, the Institute was causing increasing controversy by clearly associating itself with the vision of contemporary history represented by only one party, Law and Justice. This was expressed, among other ways, in the Institute's attempt to deconstruct the historical role of Lech Wałęsa by exposing an episode from his past concerning his collaboration with the Security Service in the early 1970s. Numerous publications and statements issued by the IPN suggested that the main democratic opposition movement and Solidarity had been infiltrated by spies and informers, which also influenced the negotiations of the Round Table[1] and the democratization of the country. The Institute leaked documents intended to compromise various political figures to right-leaning journalists. After the most recent round of attacks on Wałęsa, Tusk asked me in 2009 to prepare an update of the Act of the Institute of National Remembrance in such a way that would guarantee its apolitical operation and minimize the risk that re-

1 The Round Table negotiations between representatives of the democratic opposition on one side and the government and the Polish United Workers Party on the other took place in Warsaw between February and April 1989. The result was the package of political and economic reforms that led to the democratization of Poland and subsequently to the peaceful dismantling of the Communist regime.

cords of the former Communist security apparatus would be used as political instruments. I knew the Institute inside out; I had cooperated on its creation and directed its research and educational division for five years. I understood very well, then, the direction in which to take its reforms, although this was not easy to translate into an act of law. I prepared the main outline of the reform over a few months with Wojciech Duda and another historian with whom I had worked in the Polish Academy of Science and in the IPN and who had a good knowledge of law.

Our updates to the act essentially facilitated access to the archives by, among other things, making the IPN responsible for creating a complete, public inventory and finding aid and by requiring that requested documents be made available to researchers within seven days from the filing of a request. Both updates were supposed to prevent manipulation of access to contentious documents. In some cases documents had been released in an expedited manner: for example, in 2007 the Law and Justice Party had overnight received documents that were then used against judges of the Constitutional Court.[2] In other cases the documents had not been released for long months and even years.

The most important changes, though, pertained to the way in which the management of the IPN was appointed. Up to that point, the college of the Institute would put forward a candidate, who ultimately would be appointed by the parliament, essentially being elected directly by politicians: MPs, senators, and the president of the Republic of Poland. We suggested a different system in which the most important voice would belong to historians and lawyers. In my opinion the update produced some good, though temporary, effects, contributing to depoliticization of the IPN. The council of the IPN, composed of historians and lawyers, chose as the new president a researcher of contemporary history, Łukasz Kamiński, a man with conservative views who was by no means close to the Civic Platform. During his five-year tenure, he tried to maintain distance and independence from politicians, as well as to carry out rigorous historical research at the Institute. A legislative amendment, introduced by Law and Justice in 2016, eliminated the influence of historians and lawyers over the Institute of National Remembrance and their participation in the election of its president, completely giving the Institute over to the control of the ruling party and the parliamentary majority.

2 See Ewa Siedlecka, "IPN chroni posła Mularczyka," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 9, 2007; Michał Engelhardt, "TK kontra Mularczyk. Czy poseł PiS był w ogóle w IPN?," Gazeta.pl, October 23, 2008.

As I have already mentioned, the Prime Minister's Office served as our organizational foothold in Warsaw, especially in the first period before the formal creation of the Museum. Piotr M. Majewski and I were at that time meeting with people who had experience in creating historical narrative museums. I remember a conversation with Jan Ołdakowski and Dariusz Gawin of the Warsaw Rising Museum and with Jerzy Halbersztadt, then director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, at that time still under construction but initiated many years earlier. The latter persuaded us that creating a museum required breaking with the habits of academic historians and switching to a completely different way of perceiving the past, space, and objects. Soon we would be convinced that he was absolutely right.

From the very beginning, we assumed that the exhibitions should be created in a dialogue with historians and museologists. The above-mentioned discussion of the Museum's concept served that goal, as did the commissioning of expert reviews by historians and museum professionals about how to present selected problems in the main exhibition of the Museum. We asked the authors of these studies to recommend which important themes within each of their subjects our exhibitions should cover, how to present them, and what artifacts, photographs, and people were especially important and worth presenting. The studies that we received contained both very general observations, valuable for our reflections on the entire Museum and relations between its individual sections, and sometimes very specific advice on what materials to look for and how to acquire interesting artifacts. It was an important stage in conceptualizing the exhibitions at the very beginning of our work.

At this initial stage, we also conducted study tours to various historical narrative museums, especially those we had not seen before; being historians we had already visited as many of them as possible long before the Museum of the Second World War appeared on the horizon. I remember that the Flanders Fields Museum in the Belgian city of Ypres, devoted to the struggles that took place on the nearby battlefields during the First World War but at the same time undertaking a very successful attempt to show the universal experience of the war, made a great impression on us. It certainly was a source of inspiration for us. We visited the Imperial War Museum in London, which was then largely a traditional, fairly old-fashioned military museum with a lot of weapons and uniforms, but we also spent time in the recently opened Imperial War Museum North in Manchester. The latter, in a building designed by Daniel Libeskind, had modern, interactive exhibitions that did not focus on the details of battles and military equipment but tried to show the reality of war for both soldiers and civilians. The Manchester museum has led to the revitalization of a neglected postindustrial part of the city; soon after it was built, more establishments

started to appear there, including an art gallery, and the entire district became one of the city's attractions. It was an interesting point of reference for us at the time, for we were beginning to plan a museum in a part of Gdańsk that was virtually undeveloped after 1945, and now we were given the chance to revitalize it for the city.

In France, we saw a very interesting museum of the First World War, Historial de la Grande Guerre, in Péronne, near the battlefields of the Somme. It is, in a sense, a very traditional museum that speaks primarily through the objects displayed at the exhibitions, but at the same time it is tangible proof that the original artifacts can create a fascinating story. What distinguishes the Péronne museum is its balanced and equal representation of perspectives of three states deeply involved in the war: France, Great Britain, and Germany. Of course, this would not be possible in the case of a museum about the Second World War, where the responsibility for aggression and crimes was unambiguous and much more one-sided. In the case of the Great War, however, this approach was historically and morally legitimate, and the exhibition in Péronne was very inspiring and unique.

In turn, in Paris, we saw the latest creation of French museology: the Charles de Gaulle Monument (Mémorial Charles de Gaulle), in a sense the extreme opposite of the Historial de la Grande Guerre. It was a completely multimedia experience, with dozens of screens on which images were constantly changing. Some of them did not work, although the museum had opened only a few months earlier. I had the impression that I was in the newsroom of a big TV station, and I was unable to find one authentic artifact there. To us it was a warning about where excessive fascination with modern media and disregard of original objects could lead.

The trips east were also interesting. In Kiev, we visited the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, erected during the era of the Soviet Union, when it played the role of the most important museum dedicated to the war and focused on military history. After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, it was "Ukrainized." Now it was repurposed to tell the story of the Great Patriotic War in Ukraine and the story of soldiers who came from there. In practice, it was difficult to separate this story from the "omni-Soviet" history. New elements had also been added, beyond the dimensions of the main exhibition: the massacre of Jews carried out by the Germans in Babi Yar near Kiev and the fight for independence by the anti-Soviet Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. It was an interesting hybrid of old and new approaches that coexisted side by side in the museum but in fact lived as separate parts. After the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, the name was changed to the Museum of the Second World War in Ukraine, and the exhibition about contemporary battles in

the Donbass was opened in the museum's hall. When I visited it in 2015, the director proudly showed me the newest exhibit: a bullet-riddled car belonging to the legendary soldiers (nicknamed "Cyborgs") who defended the Donetsk airport. Though not a model for us in terms of its exhibitions, the Kiev museum was living proof of how commemoration of the war changes under the influence of current events and, at the same time, of the difficulty of changing long-established ideas about it.

In Moscow, we visited the monumental Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Poklonna Gora. Its construction began in the 1980s under the Soviet Union, but it was opened in 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. It celebrated the Soviet and Russian triumph over the Third Reich through a display of captured enemy military flags (the same flags that were thrown in front of Stalin during the famous parade in Red Square in 1945), gigantic dioramas depicting the most important battles of the war, and a Hall of Glory in which were engraved the names of all heroes of the Soviet Union. There was an incredible amount of military equipment, both Soviet and German, often unique. Though this was certainly not the direction in which we wanted to move in creating our Museum, we envied the Moscow museum's access to many valuable artifacts. Our hosts could feel it well.

During the reception hosted for us, the deputy director took my deputy, Piotr M. Majewski, aside. He urged him to consider including a Russian historian recommended by the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, a de facto representative of the Russian authorities, on the Academic Advisory Committee for our Museum. In turn, we could receive from their huge collections all the artifacts we wished for. He argued that it would be very difficult for us to build from scratch a collection that would enable us to create valued exhibitions. Of course, I did not agree to this proposal, but it was an interesting experience for us that showed how closely our work was being observed in Moscow. The hosts knew of the *Conceptual Brief* published on our website and did not hide their disapproval, which paradoxically brought them closer to the Polish political Right.

A little later we arrived in New Orleans, where the largest American museum dedicated to war is located: the National World War II Museum. Though its name is almost identical to that of the museum in Gdańsk, in fact, in concept and shape the two are extremely different. The New Orleans museum deals with the war only from the American point of view. Even in its official materials (for example, various commemorative objects handed out to guests and sold in a museum store), the duration of the war is clearly stamped as 1941 to 1945, from the attack on Pearl Harbor to the surrender of Japan. The exhibitions consist of two blocks: one dedicated to the struggles of American soldiers in the Pacific and the other concerning the European military theater. The experiences

of other nations and the fronts on which Americans did not fight practically are not presented at all. About the same amount of space was devoted to Poland as to the Soviet Union: both countries were mentioned only twice. One of the two places where the Soviet Union appeared was on the label for a beautiful, shiny Harley-Davidson motorcycle, with information that the United States had handed over 100,000 such machines to the Soviet Union under Lend-Lease. The civilian population is depicted only in the story of economic mobilization on the home front: for example, the factory work of women replacing men drafted by the army. In a sense, it was a mirror image of the Museum of the Great Patriotic War in Poklonna Gora, and I cannot resist the impression that both museums would meet the expectations of many of our critics, if only the Russian or American perspective could be changed to Polish. Visits to Moscow and New Orleans convinced us that our vision for the Museum was worth implementing, because its exhibitions would be unlike those of any other existent museum dedicated to war.