

The Finale

It was not easy to keep going, and not only because of the uncertainty of our situation and the open hostility of the Ministry of Culture, which had been going on for so many months. The lack of money and staff needed to open and run a large museum posed a serious problem. The ministry awarded us an operating budget for 2017 of approximately PLN 11 million (€2.55 million), similar to the funding that we had received in 2016. I had applied, however, for an amount almost twice as high; this was a considerable difference. Up to this point we had rented a dozen or so rooms in a temporary office, but after the opening of the Museum, we would incur a new set of expenses related to its operation and maintenance: energy, water, cleaning, and security. That would add up, according to our estimates, to almost PLN 10 million (€2.317 million), and it was unclear how we would pay salaries.

At the end of 2016, the Museum employed about sixty people, including ten engineers whose salaries were paid not from our annual budget but from the funds of the Multi-Year Government Program, which would expire on the completion of construction. We assumed that in order to function normally after opening, we would need about 120 employees, and this number was accepted at the outset of the Ministry of Culture's investment. For comparison, in 2016 the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw employed about 150 people and had an annual budget of PLN 35 million (€8.109 million). We estimated that we would need to hire a large group of visitor services employees at least two months before the planned opening. They needed to be trained and prepared for their duties before thousands of people started visiting the Museum. In our financial circumstances, this was completely impossible.

In letter after letter addressed to Minister Gliński, I raised alarms that the budget granted to us essentially hindered the opening of the Museum and certainly prevented its normal functioning. I argued that the Polish taxpayer had allocated a great deal of money to its construction, so if the Museum did not open, the investment would be thrown out the window. I argued that the Museum should carry out extensive educational activities, since that was its mission, and that the new building would offer excellent conditions for such activities. However, new employees were needed; an understaffed education department would not be able to support the increased requirements. My appeals had no effect; they were almost counterproductive. The minister of culture made further cuts in our budget: he cut PLN 120,000 (almost €30,000) first, at the end of 2016, and then another PLN 420,000 (approximately €100,000) the following January. There was no explanation for the cuts. It was clear to me that this

was another means of fighting us and a way to prevent the opening of the Museum. This, however, only amplified our determination.

We made a decision at the end of 2016 that if we could survive even a few months, we would open the Museum at any cost, knowing that the money might later run out. Starting in January 2017, we suspended all educational, research, and publishing activities to maximize our funds. All funding was devoted only to those activities that led to the opening of the Museum and its operation at the most elementary level for several months. We also decided to employ a few additional people to staff the cash registers, without whom we could not welcome visitors. All other tasks were to be conducted by the current team, even though, staff-wise, it was completely inadequate to meet the needs of the Museum after its opening. We had to give up hiring our own guides; instead we trained external guides already operating in Gdańsk. By the time of my departure from the Museum, the external guide team already counted about sixty people, who were prepared to show visitors around the exhibitions in many languages, including Chinese. We estimated that total revenues would give us a chance to survive until the fall of 2017. This was as far ahead as we could see. I did not think I had a chance of surviving that long as director. It was obvious that the new director, appointed by Minister Gliński, would receive additional funds. The fight was only about the possibility of opening the Museum and presenting our work to the public. It would be a huge victory, which just a few months earlier had seemed to me completely beyond our reach.

The situation was made even more complicated by the statements of Gliński and Sellin that the museums would definitely be merged on February 1, 2017, and that they were not bound by the court's decision. This would be pure lawlessness, and after consultation with Jacek Taylor (who had a long record of confronting the authoritarian practices of the Communist authorities), we felt that we could not agree to it. Of course, I was going to respect all court decisions, but I expected the same from the minister of culture. If the minister's people wanted to enter the Museum on February 1 and remove me from the office, they would have to involve the police. It would happen in public, in front of television crews, and it would create an unimaginable scandal, but I could not rule out that it might actually happen.

In December, we learned that the Supreme Administrative Court would consider the minister's complaint on January 24, although generally the waiting period was much longer. On the one hand, this would provide a final judgment before February 1, thereby avoiding the most dramatic scenario. I was certain that, in any event, I would be removed from office under the pretext of alleged irregularities "disclosed" during the ministerial audit, but I was hoping that this would not happen immediately. On the other hand, such a fast mode of opera-

tion by the court meant that we really had little time left. If the court ruled against us, February 1 would be a definite end. Therefore, we decided to show audiences a preview of the still unfinished exhibitions. We were only few weeks shy of completion, but we were not sure that we, in fact, had these few weeks. On January 23, the day before the court ruling, we invited to the Museum historians, museum professionals, journalists, veterans, and donors—a total of several hundred people. We announced that on Saturday, January 28, and Sunday, January 29, we would hold an open house for all interested parties. The entrance tickets were available online, and in just a few hours had all been distributed.

The last days were complete madness for both the exhibition fabricators, who carried out the assembly work at an unimaginable pace, and the Museum employees. During the night of January 22–23, we installed artifacts in display cases. We estimated that the first guests saw about 70 percent of the exhibitions, and those who came a few days later, during the open house, saw even more.

The *Gazeta Wyborcza* began its report about the Museum, “*Good morning, my name is Paweł Machcewicz; I am the director of the Museum of the Second World War.*” After these words, several hundred people gave him a standing ovation. It was an expression of support for Machcewicz’s efforts to maintain the independence of the institution.¹ For me it was a moment of great satisfaction and personal triumph, one of the most important moments in my life. I had not thought it possible to survive until the exhibitions, even unfinished, could be shown to the public.

The visitors’ reactions were largely enthusiastic, as were those of the general public, veterans, and donors, as well as the world’s greatest historians and museum professionals. Their debate, after seeing the exhibition, was the first attempt to evaluate it. Timothy Snyder said,

There are many Second World War museums in the world, but the narrative of the exhibition in Gdańsk completely changes the perception of the war; such a museum is a civilizational achievement. The exhibition is very versatile because it talks about the fate of civilians around the world, but at the same time it is also very Polish; it does not lack any major events related to the wartime history of Poland. Polish politicians and researchers often complain that the world does not understand them. If this is the case, then an exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War is an opportunity for them to finally be understood. Every change in it will result in the destruction of a coherent narrative. The Museum of the Second World War cannot be more military or talk more about the war in 1939 or focus more on the fate of Poles. Due to the fact that the exhibition captures the war in a

¹ Krzysztof Katka and Emilia Stawikowska, “Bitwa o drugą wojnę. Muzeum w Gdańsku pokazało wystawę, nikt z PiS nie przyszedł,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 24, 2017.

global way, it puts Poland and Gdańsk at the center of the debate on the history of the Second World War.

For me, the assessment of Sara Bloomfield, director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC—the first narrative historical museum in the world, which created a pattern for many other institutions in this area—was especially important.

There are many museums in Poland devoted to particular aspects of the Second World War, but there is no one that talks about it comprehensively. The architectural shape itself and the location of the museum appeal to visitors. People do not know much about the history of the Second World War. For example, Americans think that they alone won the war, and their knowledge about the theater of war is limited to the fighting in the Pacific. That is why a place such as the Museum of the Second World War, which will tell them about the history of the war very comprehensively, was needed.²

The reactions of foreigners, including journalists, proved that the idea of creating a comprehensive story about the war that incorporated Polish history worked. That it was being realized in a museum that the Polish government had fought with all its force, while constantly declaring that we were a nation misunderstood, disregarded, and accused of complicity in the Holocaust and other evil deeds, was a bitter paradox.

It was a day of great joy for the whole team that had worked on creating the Museum for so many years under increasingly dramatic circumstances. The next day, however, the situation changed completely. During the lunch for members of the Academic Advisory Committee, I received a phone call saying that the Supreme Administrative Court had sent the Museum case back for reconsideration to the Provincial Administrative Court, perceiving its earlier decisions as flawed. At the same time, it overturned the suspension of the museums' merger. This meant that on February 1, just a few days after the exhibition was presented to the public, the current Museum of the Second World War would be formally closed down. We did not believe that the lower court could reexamine the case in the next few days.

Two days later, another blow clearly showed the surgical precision with which the ruling camp was destroying people and institutions that it regarded as enemies. It started on the morning of January 26 with a question that a Law and Justice MP, Barbara Dziuk, asked the deputy minister of culture in

² Emilia Stawikowska, “Wrażenia gości po wizycie w Muzeum II Wojny. Timothy Snyder: *To osiągnięcie cywilizacyjne*,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 24, 2017.

the Sejm: “Two questions for the minister: Is it true that the director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk built a hotel complex with luxury apartments? And the second question: Is it true that the director purchased illegal household appliances contrary to the provisions on public procurement? If so, what was the cost?”³

Minister Sellin immediately came to the podium. The model state official, he did not let himself be surprised by this detailed question and gave an exhaustive answer.

The museum, which the MP was particularly interested in—and specifically in the matter related to the construction of this museum—the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk was established in 2008 and was to open in 2014. It is still not open today. Initially, 360 million PLN was planned for the construction of this museum in a Multi-Year Government Program. This amount was changed to 450 million PLN. It is, for the time being, the most expensive museum in the history of Poland, although not yet finished, unopened, and unfinished. And responding specifically to the lady’s question about, as you put it, building during the construction of this museum a hotel complex with luxurious apartments, I would like to inform you: indeed, on the occasion of construction of this museum, eight residential units were built along with access routes located on the first floor and in parts of the second floor of the second museum building... . These rooms are equipped with completely furnished bathrooms, bedrooms, seating sets, radio and television equipment. Each of the apartments consists of a kitchen, a dining room, a living room, two bathrooms, two bedrooms, a dressing room, and they are also equipped with household appliances, as well as radio and television equipment.⁴

Sellin also read extensive passages from the postaudit ministry protocol, which by happy fate he had with him. A moment later, we received a phone call from the Gdańsk branch of the state television network, which wanted to film the hotel complex. They were not interested in the exhibitions. State television, unlike commercial and many foreign media, had not reported on the preview of the Museum. A twenty-something journalist asked me questions from a page of handwritten notes. His questions insinuated that the apartments were built for me and my colleagues and that their equipment cost a dozen or so million zlotys. I denied both allegations, saying that such an amount had been spent on finish-

³ “Wypowiedzi na posiedzeniach Sejmu. Posiedzenie nr 34 w dniu 26–01–2017. 14 punkt porządku dziennego: Pytania w sprawach bieżących. Posel Barbara Dziuk,” www.sejm.gov.pl.

⁴ Wypowiedzi na posiedzeniach Sejmu. Posiedzenie nr 34 w dniu 26–01–2017, 14 punkt porządku dziennego: Pytania w sprawach bieżących. Sekretarz Stanu w Ministerstwie Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego Jarosław Sellin, [Sejm.gov.pl](http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=34&dzien=4&wyp=31&symbol=WYPOWIEDZ_PY-TANIE&nr=324&pytID=C04EF92C7D6CD6C8C12580B4004CD24C), January 26, 2017, http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/wypowiedz.xsp?posiedzenie=34&dzien=4&wyp=31&symbol=WYPOWIEDZ_PY-TANIE&nr=324&pytID=C04EF92C7D6CD6C8C12580B4004CD24C.

ing and furnishing the entire building, with an area of several tens of thousands of square meters. This information was not broadcast. I asked the reporter what was on the piece of paper from which he read the questions. He admitted with astonishing honesty that these were “issues” to be addressed in the broadcast that he had received from the Ministry of Culture.

The cameraman was taking close-up shots of door handles, shower stalls, and showers. It reminded me of materials from the 1980s, documenting the detention of activists of the Solidarity underground by the Communist Security Service. The camera cruelly showed the dollars found in their apartments, as well as foreign alcohol and cigarettes, supposedly thereby revealing the true face of the opposition activists. That evening, the state news showed a report of over four minutes under the shocking title “Hotel in the Museum of the Second World War.”

Gliński and Sellin apparently could not stand the enthusiastic reactions after the preview of the exhibition and wanted to spoil the atmosphere as much as possible before the upcoming open house. They hoped that public attention would focus on the “luxury director’s apartments” rather than the exhibitions. In reality, the apartments were not luxurious, merely of a standard that would allow them to be rented for the benefit of the Museum. From the beginning they were part of the building’s design, which had such an attractive location that rentals could bring in several hundred thousand zlotys a year. In addition, members of the board of trustees and the Academic Advisory Committee could use them, as could all other guests of the Museum, which in turn would save a lot of money on hotel rentals. Many other institutions in Poland have similar guest rooms, and they stir up no emotion or interest.

The already-mentioned reduction of our budget by several hundred thousand zlotys was an additional “gift” from the ministers a few days before the open house—a small token of revenge for showing the exhibitions to visitors. As soon as the matter was made public, the money was restored to us, also without explanation. This proved that our tactic of going to the media had been effective.

During its two open days, over 3,000 people visited the Museum. There were long queues of people who had not managed to book tickets online. We tried to let everyone in, realizing that this could be the last opportunity to show the exhibitions as we had created them. I spent many hours on Saturday and Sunday trying to remember everything about the exhibitions. In a sense, it was a good-bye for me; there were only three days left until February 1. Once again, sure that I was doing it for the last time, I packed and emptied my office. Zbigniew Wawer’s “liquidators” ended their activities, and the ministry instructed the chief accountant to guarantee funds for the salaries of the new director and two other

people, the “initiative group,” which would take over the Museum the next day. So it was the real end, which I faced with sadness, of course, but also to some extent with a sense of relief that the war of nerves would end and my life would return to normal. The most important thing was that at least several thousand people had managed to see the exhibitions.

I took time to thank the museum team for the years of work; I argued that it was worth the sacrifice, to create a museum and bring the audiences to the show, despite everything that had happened over the last year. I even got a farewell present, a tennis racket. On Tuesday, January 31, we agreed to take the last photo with the whole team in front of the Museum building on Bartoszewski Square. I arrived in a rather awful mood a few minutes before noon and joined dozens of people who were already there, getting ready for the photo. At that very moment a journalist from an independent private TV channel who was preparing a program about the Museum called. The information he gave me was so amazing that I took a long while to believe it. On the previous day, in the late afternoon, the Provincial Administrative Court in Warsaw had reexamined the Museum’s case and upheld its earlier decision, stopping the merger of museums. Information about the decision appeared on the court’s website only the next day. We took the planned photo, but in completely different moods: instead of a funeral, there was an explosion of euphoria as we threw our hats into the air. Yet the emotional roller coaster was becoming harder and harder to endure.

In justifying its decision the court referred to the issue raised earlier by the Supreme Administrative Court, which would ultimately prove decisive for the fate of the Museum. The Provincial Administrative Court took the position that the decision of the minister of culture about the merger of museums was subject to judicial control and was not merely an “act of internal management.” “In the opinion of the Court,” Judge Izabela Ostrowska argued, “cultural institutions such as museums are not organizationally subordinate to the minister of culture and national heritage, because the minister exercises only foundational supervision over them, strictly defined as to the competences and resources in the Museum Act... . It should also be emphasized that any doubts, emerging in practice, to the admissibility of the court-administrative proceedings, should always be interpreted in favor of the right to the court.”⁵

Along with the new decision of the court, I again had an opportunity to open the Museum to the public with completed exhibitions. In January, only a few thousand people had been able see it, and the fabrication was still underway.

⁵ “Postanowienie Wojewódzkiego Sądu Administracyjnego w Warszawie,” January 30, 2017, bip.warszawa.was.gov.pl.

The minister of culture again appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, but we assumed that it would take at least a few weeks to resolve, and that was all we needed. We finished the exhibitions at a feverish pace; we installed the missing artifacts in the cases and tested the operation of multimedia stations. Under normal circumstances, this would have taken three months. We did not have so much time. At the same time, technical approval of the building took place, without which it was impossible to take over the building from the general contractor. Tests of the monitoring system were also a challenge; without them we could not make the museum building accessible to the public, since it housed thousands of priceless artifacts. Every day the exhibitions were visited by dozens of people: groups of historians and museologists from various cities and television crews from around the world. Everyone was aware that this state of suspension would not last long.

“Even if Minister Gliński carries out the liquidation of the Museum of the Second World War, the question of collision between different models of Polishness will remain open,” wrote Piotr Kosiewski in *Tygodnik Powszechny*. It was one of the most insightful reviews of the exhibitions, written before the Museum was opened to the public on a regular basis. Kosiewski understood that the exhibitions offered a reading of the war and Polish experience that went far beyond the military-insurrection model so present in Polish tradition and reinforced with such determination by the Polish political Right. This model rejected both a confrontation with less obvious themes and a vision of Polishness interconnected with the experiences of other nations.

The Law and Justice model of Polishness is not the only one possible, and as the example of the Gdańsk Museum shows, we are dealing with the collision of different models. Polishness, conscious and strong, which is able to confront its past and talk about it. Polishness that can realistically and even critically look at itself, because it has the ability to realistically assess threats and draw conclusions from them. With another Polishness, constantly assuring itself and others of its greatness, “rising up from her knees,” but in fact uncertain, still scared, afraid that in a moment Poles will cease to exist. Polishness afraid of intellectual courage and critical thinking, although this attitude is a betrayal of one’s own national culture, in which the reflection on faults, errors or offenses has always occupied a very important place.⁶

One day before the public opening of the Museum, one of the guides we were training wrote about his impressions on Facebook. I quote a fragment of this very long entry because it is one of the most moving reviews of the exhibitions, which also reflects the emotions of that moment. Łukasz Darski wrote,

⁶ Piotr Kosiewski, “Wystawa zbójcka,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, February 27, 2017.

I have not started working there yet, and already I do not like this museum. Because I will have to cry over every visit in this place. Just like after every visit to Stutthof [concentration camp], I experience a two-day down and a feeling of enormous pain. Nevertheless, I will go there as often as possible. I consider it my duty to my children, grandchildren, and all the inhabitants of the world who come in contact or encounter the nightmare of what people can do to other people. A nightmare systematically devised and carried out in a calculated manner. Enforced, in a more or less organized manner, but always with an iron consistency. As a result of the actions of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, over twelve years, 14 million civilians were murdered. Civilians. Not soldiers. Murdered, not killed. Some were starved to death; others were shot with a bullet to the base of the skull; yet others were gassed or cut down by machine-gun fire from soldiers, planes, tanks; more were burnt in their own barns; still others were forced to work so hard that they died.

This is the first museum talking about the Second World War in such a devastating way. Orderly and systematized. Presenting mainly the perspective of civilians: victims, torturers, and bystanders. In the pictures, the executioner is often in a uniform of some military formation. But it is always a civilian under a uniform who decides to rape, plunder, murder. Or sometimes he evades the decision to oppose the order. Bystanders often accompany him. With mouths open. With a smile plastered on the face. The story of a total war. War of annihilation. THIS IS TERRIBLE . . .

Why the hell am I inviting you there? Why treat yourself to such a terrible experience? For three reasons. First: to see a small section of the museum, called Resistance. The only section that gives unambiguous hope. It talks about the beautiful and painful efforts of millions of people, who resisted the horrors brought on by the Russians and Germans. You can spend over two hours there. Among the chaos of feelings bursting in me like grenades, I found peace. I had to force my mind and my will to stay there. Hold on to it tightly, like to a tree trunk tossed by floods. This section gives me hope. It restores faith in a human being.

Reason two: to encourage you to think and talk about this damn hard subject. We must talk, to be able to oppose it. To react in time, to harden the will, to soften the heart. To respond to evil in an adequate and fast manner. To save as many helpless victims as possible; it is best to save them before they become so.

Reason three: to defend the museum against the temptations of politicians who, blinded by their littleness, want to destroy this work. A work of human genius. A complicated structure of the idea, the architecture, the design, the knowledge, and the emotions. Many people have labored over the years to create this Museum.

We have the right to speak out loud about the wrongs we, Poles, have suffered for decades, of the nightmare of war and communism. However, one can do it in a variety of ways. The museum team has created a platform that allows everyone to participate in a dialogue about evil. Executioners and victims. Those who have suffered the hardest and those who have suffered the least. We all have wounds and burdens that open when we touch difficult subjects. Only respect for the other party enables agreement. The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk opens its doors to everyone. Come to this Museum as soon as possible. Its existence in its present form is seriously endangered. We have just over a month left. Then the grinders of a political mill can wipe it away. If, after visiting the museum, you feel and think as I do, be ready to go out on the streets in defense of the Museum.

Finally, on March 23, 2017, came the crowning achievement of many years of work by me and hundreds of other people. I invited veterans, prisoners of concentration camps, and donors to the opening. I also invited the minister of culture, but I knew well that he would not appear in the Museum as long as I was there. Therefore, I did not invite any other politicians, because I realized that only those connected with the opposition would come, and thus the Museum opening would take on a political character, which I wanted to avoid. I opened the Museum by leading in, as the first visitor, the ninety-six-year-old Professor Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, a courier of the underground Union of Armed Struggle, a prisoner of Pawiak prison and Ravensbrück concentration camp, a Solidarity activist, and a doctor who assisted opposition activists during martial law in the 1980s. She gave the Museum her letters from the concentration camp. In recent years, she had become a guardian angel and a symbol of the Museum, being with us in the most difficult moments.

The opening had an intimate character, quite different from the opening of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews or the European Solidarity Center. There were no state officials or official speeches. Everyone was perfectly aware that this reflected our situation: a museum opened against the will of its own country's authorities, who tried every means to prevent this moment and thwart our efforts to bring the work to an end and show the exhibitions to the public. Veterans, ex-prisoners of the war, and donors—the main heroes of the day—were part of the social movement that defended the Museum. The donors were also its cocreators, since the family souvenirs that they provided now became part of our story of war. Journalists talked to our guests, mostly very old people who did not hide their satisfaction and emotions. For them, the exhibitions reflected their lives.

In the evening on the opening day, the minister of culture was a guest on a TV news program broadcast by the independent Polsat News. Asked by the host why he was not in Gdańsk that day and for his comments on the fact that the veterans and donors were delighted with the exhibition, Gliński answered with a dismissive question: “Do you think that donors and veterans have any basis for comparison with other museums?” Then he attacked the Museum: “The problem is that it is a 100 percent state museum. I am responsible for cultural policy, and this is a museum that is a subject to the supervision of my ministry. Unfortunately, I have been unable to implement this supervision for over a year. For several reasons, among other things, due to the very strong and aggressive media campaign.” He then went on to attack the courts, claiming, “The Provincial Administrative Court has not considered this complaint for many months, which prevents me from performing my constitutional obligations, i.e. the merger of two cultural institutions.” And then, in one phrase, he summarized the work

of courts: “courts on call.” This was probably a reference to the quick response to the merger that the Provincial Administrative Court had issued at the end of January, which unexpectedly postponed the liquidation and gave us invaluable time to open the Museum. There was also a suggestion in this that I was manipulating the court, which I can only consider as another manifestation of the conspiracy theories of the deputy prime minister and indirectly also a recognition of my supposed influence.⁷

From the first hours of the opening, there were crowds in the Museum, even though it was not yet tourist season. On the first weekend, we had a real siege. A lot of people, including those who had come that day from other cities, could not get in because we ran out of tickets (for safety reasons, we could have no more than seven hundred people in the Museum at the same time). During the first two weeks the exhibitions were visited by about 20,000 people. The cashiers barely managed. We did not have the opportunity to hire additional people and extend the opening hours of the Museum, which would have been a natural and even necessary step in the face of such a multitude of visitors. During those two weeks, between the opening of the Museum and my removal from it, I spent several hours every day in the exhibitions, guiding historians, museum professionals, journalists, and sometimes great individuals such as Lech Wałęsa. Donald Tusk visited the Museum in April, when I was no longer there. Along the way, I had the opportunity to observe the reactions of other visitors; some of them approached me, thanking me for the Museum and for opening it despite all adversity. At such moments I had the feeling that it was all worth it.

At the same time, it was obvious to me that this situation was temporary. It was also clear to the public. As Mikołaj Chrzan wrote, “We have an impressive red pyramid over the Radunia Canal, a new symbol of Gdańsk. The exhibition is already open, reminding us of the apocalypse of the Second World War. Soon we will find out: Will this facility fall, despite the heroic defense—just like the nearby Westerplatte? Or will it, perhaps, be able to defend itself?”⁸ The title of this text, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, was also symbolic: “Museum of the Second World War: Westerplatte or the Battle of Britain.”

On April 5, 2017, the Supreme Administrative Court overruled the January decision of the Provincial Administrative Court suspending the merger of the museums. The court decided that the minister’s decision to combine museums was an act of internal management and not subject to the purview of administrative

⁷ Piotr Gliński, Gość Wydarzeń, *Polsat News*, March 23, 2017, www.polsatnews.pl.

⁸ Mikołaj Chrzan, “Muzeum II Wojny Światowej. To Westerplatte czy Bitwa o Anglię,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, March 29, 2017.

courts.⁹ The court thus excused itself from judging whether the minister had acted in accordance with the law or had breached numerous provisions, as per the complaints of the Museum, the ombudsman, and the city of Gdańsk. This ruling contradicted the interpretation previously issued by the Provincial Administrative Court, and many commentators saw it as an instance of “procrastination” as the courts were under increasing pressure from the government of the Law and Justice Party.¹⁰

In view of the Supreme Administrative Court’s decision, Adam Bodnar, the ombudsman for the rights of citizens, lodged a cassation complaint. It reflected the essence of the dispute over the Museum, the meaning of which went far beyond the mere fate of our institution and concerned the very understanding of civil liberties, the autonomy of culture, and the essence of a democratic state of law. Bodnar argued that museums and other cultural institutions are autonomous from their state funder, in this case the minister of culture.

If it were assumed that the merger or liquidation of a cultural institution is only an internal matter of its organizer, then public authorities, guided by the tastes and views of the people representing them, could unrestrictedly interfere with freedom of artistic creation, freedom of expression or freedom of scientific research, transforming or liquidating cultural institutions that did not match their views, preferences, and tastes. This manner of implementing the law leads to the deprivation of liberty specified in art. 54 par. 1 and art. 73 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland... . When adopting the concept that the act of transforming or liquidating cultural institutions is an act of internal leadership, public authorities (state or local government) will be able to close any theater exposing politically incorrect art or close to the public any museum exhibition that does not correspond to current historical policy, and its decisions in this respect will not be subject to any external control.

The ombudsman for the rights of citizens also recognized that the court’s evasion of the ruling on the issue of the museums’ merger violated the “constitutional right to due process.”¹¹

After the Supreme Administrative Court’s decision, things moved very fast. We had no information from the Ministry of Culture on what would happen, which was already the norm. However, the next day at noon, the director of the Department of Cultural Heritage, Paulina Florjanowicz, appeared in the Museum in the company of the new director, thirty-four-year-old Dr. Karol Nawrocki. He was a historian working at the Gdańsk Institute of National Remembrance, dealing mainly with the Solidarity movement in the city of Elbląg and with

⁹ Postanowienie NSA, April 5, 2017, www.nsa.gov.pl.

¹⁰ See Ewa Siedlecka, “Prawo i sprawiedliwość dla PiS,” *Polityka* 20 (May 17–23, 2017).

¹¹ Skarga Kasacyjna Rzecznika Praw Obywatelskich, June 7, 2017.

the history of football. He had no museum experience. He was mostly known for promoting the cult of “cursed soldiers” and the operations of the Lechia Gdańsk football fan club. That he was close to the Law and Justice government and, above all, to Minister Sellin was no secret in Gdańsk, and his name had been listed on the stock exchange of my “successors” for some time.

Director Florjanowicz, who in previous months had eagerly participated in the war against the Museum, informed me that the Museum had already been formally liquidated, deleted by the minister of culture from the register of museums, and I was no longer the director because the facility I was managing had ceased to exist. This turned out not to be true; it took a few more days to remove the Museum from the register and to enter the new Museum of the Second World War into it, days during which I could still have exercised my function. However, I did not want to resist anymore, to give them an excuse to attack me for not wanting to leave my position.

The seizure of power took place in a great hurry and in chaos. The new institution did not have a tax identification number for a few days, so the sale of tickets had to stop. Downstairs, in the vicinity of the exhibitions, there were crowds of disoriented and increasingly furious people. All this resembled the atmosphere of an inept coup. Contacts with the media were taken over by a new press spokesman who entered the Museum together with Nawrocki. Little was known about him, except that he was an IT specialist and, as he presented himself on right-wing portals, a “homoskeptic” (also a “Catholic, conservative, proud of being a Pole”). In his online posts he unmasked homosexual threats in contemporary mass culture. He saw the propaganda of homosexuality in the *Sherlock* TV series and *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies, where he was concerned with the “effeminate and makeup-wearing Johnny Depp.”¹² This was not only a change of personnel but also a deep cultural shift taking place both in the Museum and in Poland as a whole.

Under the labor code the new director was obliged to offer me a new position in the newly created Museum of the Second World War, but both sides knew that I would not accept it. By doing so I would legitimize the disregard (and, in my opinion, obvious violation) of the law by the minister of culture. Needless to say I also did not see myself working as a subordinate of Dr. Nawrocki. He informed me up front that he intended to introduce changes to the exhibitions suggested by historians with “conservative leanings,” mentioning the name of Jan

¹² Krzysztof Katka, “Homosceptyk rzecznikiem Muzeum II Wojny Światowej,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 10, 2017.

Żaryn. He admitted that he had to get acquainted with the exhibitions, because he had only had a quick look at them during the presentation on January 23.

On April 7, 2017, I left the Museum and Gdańsk, returning to my home in Warsaw. A day later, Michał Łuczewski, a sociologist at the University of Warsaw and at the same time a well-known intellectual associated with conservative Catholic circles, visited the Museum. Immediately, he wrote to me to convey his impressions. I will quote this letter not only because it is a record of those moments but also because it is a testimony to how an exhibition can be received by a person very far away from me ideologically but also unprejudiced about the Museum:

Yesterday, it was impossible to get to the Museum—tickets were sold out already in the morning. People stood in long queues. Asking the management for tickets did not work either, because people at higher levels of your management were afraid to give me a ticket to the “old” exhibition because (I felt) it could have been badly received by the new team. You probably know all this, anyway. But I got in! This is the most beautiful museum I’ve ever seen. I was repeatedly moved to tears, the enormity of this event was splendidly shown. From the Polish perspective. Beautifully (although this is a bad word) and truthfully, the participation of Poland in the annexation of Zaolzie was shown. I was proud that we did not try to tone it down. I understood Jedwabne better than ever—although for years I have read Wassersztajn’s testimony with my students. I do not know just how reliable it is, but only one small fragment of it was on the exhibition. The guide whom I joined was spirited and placed the Polish perspective even stronger in the foreground. He said, referring to the paralyzing sentence of von Stauffenberg in a letter to his wife, “At this point you may think that Germans are bad people. Do not think so. Think that each of us can become such a person through various whispers.” I could write a lot, but everything comes down to this: you can say *exegi monumentum* [I have made a monument]—for us.

A few days later, Joanna Muszkowska-Penson sent a dramatic appeal to Minister Gliński not to change the exhibitions. “I am appealing to you, Sir, as one of the last survivors of the Second World War,” the former prisoner of Ravensbrück wrote.

I want you to respect the experience of my generation and stop the destructive activities against the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk and thus the common good. I’ve been to the Museum three times, and I can say without hesitation that this is a place that teaches humility and, despite its horrifying messaging, gives hope that good wins over evil. That is why one has to see it! Meanwhile, you, Sir, did not see the exhibitions, but you judge and criticize it... . You assured us, veterans, of your concerns for the shape of Polish memory. Since we are talking about the same issues, I am asking you to let the Museum function in the shape created by Professor Paweł Machcewicz, Dr. Janusz Marszałek, Professor Piotr M. Majewski, Professor Rafał Wnuk, and other people who for years struggled to commemorate the victims of the most terrible of wars... . I also have a very personal reason for that. My friends, inmates from the minors’ cell (aged 15–17)

who died in Ravensbrück, executed or after bestial experimental operations, do not have graves today. For me, the Museum was the only place to restore their memory. You have taken this place away from me.¹³

A few days later, Rafał Wnuk was removed from the Museum (he did not accept a new position as an entry-level researcher in the research department that he had created), and Piotr M. Majewski, whom the new director did not even offer further employment, also left. Out of the four people who had made the largest contribution to the creation of the Museum, only Janusz Marszalec accepted a new position. He did this so that, at that crucial moment, he could monitor closely what the new management was doing and in order to stay with the younger employees, for whom the situation was also difficult. New people, including local Law and Justice activists and an assistant to Deputy Minister Sellin, were appointed in the place of the those who had been dismissed.

Piotr Semka published a triumphal article, expressing satisfaction that I had been removed and calling for a quick change to what we had created. “Paweł Machcewicz, the former head of the Museum, treated the outpost as his private farm.” Semka also emphasized his merits and dedication in the fight against the Museum. “I know what price is paid for my own opinion,” complained the columnist, “because for a year now Paweł Machcewicz has wiped his lips with my name, sometimes offending me in a particularly severe manner. If that was the price to move away from the most shocking plans for the exhibition, it was worth it.”¹⁴ Another right-wing publicist, Andrzej Potocki, called on me to publicly apologize to Piotr Semka.

The blessing of the building by the metropolitan archbishop of Gdańsk, Sławoj Leszek Głódź, was a symbolic takeover of the enemy’s space and the exorcism of their ghosts. A choir named after the Pope John Paul II performed the popular, joyful songs “War, O My War,” “Heart in a Backpack,” and “Lancers Came By.” It was indeed a completely different understanding of the war than the one that could be read in the exhibitions next door. I followed with interest the comments on the Museum’s Facebook page. One read, “Did the archbishop give absolution for stealing the museum from its real creators, for firing them from their jobs, and for this shameful takeover? To hell you will all go, you will.”

Archbishop Głódź did not stop at blessing the building, but he referred to the Museum in his homily during the feast of Corpus Christi. He spoke of a “demon of progress and modernity that is wreaking havoc, for example in Western Eu-

¹³ Joanna Muszkowska-Penson, “Odebrał mi Pan miejsce pamięci,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 12, 2017.

¹⁴ Piotr Semka, “Nowy początek w muzeum,” *Do Rzeczy*, April 18, 2017.

rope.” He also mentioned crosses disappearing from public institutions, Christophobia, and allergies to Christians and their faith, ethos, culture, and customs. This led him to the issue of our Museum, which “grows out of this trend of progress and modernity.” He expressed outrage that it did not take into account the martyrdom of the Catholic Church—which was actually completely wrong.¹⁵

The speech of the president of the Institute of National Remembrance, which referred to concentration camp prisoners forced to provide sexual services in camp brothels as “prostitutes,” was also symbolic of the new sensitivity prevailing at the Museum. *Polityka* quoted extensively from this speech. “Here [in the Museum of the Second World War] there are thousands of tons of concrete, millions of the Polish taxpayer’s money, 33 thousand square meters of space, and from these 33 thousand square meters, 15 cm are devoted to Captain Pilecki. And in what context—near the prostitutes from concentration camps. This is how the story of the Second World War is told here. We cannot afford such a story. People from all over the world come here,” Jarosław Szarek warned, noting “the scandalous situation, which the previous leadership led by Prof. Paweł Machcewicz allowed to happen.”¹⁶

Changes at the exhibition were announced personally by Piotr Gliński, the deputy prime minister and the minister of culture: “The display will be changed gradually, because in my opinion the way that stories are manipulated there is inadmissible. There is nothing about father Kolbe. Irena Sendler is hidden somewhere behind a hydrant. Captain Pilecki is shown modestly; there is no phrase “cursed soldiers.” It is true, as Prof. Żaryn wrote, that there is almost no Polish church there. Poland was and is a Catholic state.”¹⁷

Shortly thereafter, the minister of culture tossed some familiar ideological objections into a letter to the authors of the exhibitions: “It was you, Gentlemen, who created the museum as an ideological project: the so-called ‘European version of history.’ ... We do not want a second House of European History in Poland.”¹⁸ These assessments were completely opposite to the opinion of the vast majority of several hundred thousand visitors who had seen the Museum

15 Jarosław Makowski, “Katolicyzm tak, Bóg nie,” *Newsweek.pl*, June 16, 2017.

16 “Skandal w MIIWS! Szarek: Tylko 15 cm dla rotmistrza Pileckiego! ‘I to w jakim kontekście—nieopodal prostytutek w obozach koncentracyjnych,’” *wPolityce.pl*, May 28, 2017, <https://wpolityce.pl/historia/341744-skandal-w-miiws-szarek-tylko-15-cm-dla-rotmistrza-pileckiego-i-to-w-jakim-kontekscie-nieopodal-prostytutek-w-obozach-koncentracyjnych>.

17 “Wałęsa to Myszka Miki wykorzystywana w walce politycznej. Rozmowa Jacka Nizinkiewicza z wicepremierem i ministrem kultury Piotrem Glińskim,” *Rzeczpospolita*, September 6, 2017.

18 List ministra kultury i dziedzictwa narodowego Piotra Glińskiego do Pawła Machcewicza, Piotra M. Majewskiego, Janusza Marszałka, Rafała Wnuka, September 19, 2017.

before the minister of culture. Apparently, these were mostly “snitches and common haters,” serving not Poland but foreign interests—that was how the Minister of Culture characterized people with views different from his own in an interview.

The first change introduced by the new management was the removal of a display called *There Once Was Wiadrownia*. It talked about the history of the district in which the Museum was created and about the Museum itself. Director Nawrocki removed the multimedia presentation about the circumstances of the Museum’s creation, measures taken by the minister of culture against it, and the defense of the autonomy of the institution. To protest this act of censorship, Janusz Marszałek, the last of four people who created the institution from the very beginning, resigned from his position at the Museum.

Even before the “coup” on April 6, I repeatedly declared, with the support of my closest coworkers and cocreators of the exhibitions, that we would defend the integrity of exhibitions on the basis of copyright law. We had authorship of the contents, just like book authors. Minister Gliński could order the removal of all the exhibitions that we created and install completely new ones in their place (for example, displays created by the “reviewers” and the new director). However, to remove some of the elements or even to add new parts without the consent of the authors was a violation of copyright, as well as the historical, intellectual, and artistic coherence of the exhibitions. In the future, of course, new historical facts or technical solutions might justify changes. That, however, would not happen overnight, immediately after the opening of a museum created over eight years; rather it would result from processes that take time. The arbitrary will of the minister and his political party is not a justification. These are not the circumstances in which museums and historical exhibitions exist, being subject rather to completely different laws and rhythms. Their perspectives should be as far away as possible from party politics. The permanent exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, which opened in 1993, has so far been visited by over 40 million people, and discussions about its updating, including wider portrayal of the perpetrators of the crimes, only began recently.

In April, we made public the legal opinion prepared by an attorney at law, Maciej Ślusarek, one of the most outstanding experts on copyright in Poland, who had agreed to represent the creators of the Museum’s exhibitions if there were ever a trial to defend their integrity. Below is a fragment of the legal opinion. Despite all the statements of President Jarosław Kaczyński and other politicians of the ruling party (not to mention Archbishop Główczewski), copyright may turn out to be the last barrier against arbitrary, politically motivated changes to the exhibitions.

Ślusarek argued, “Any manifestation of creative activity of an individual nature, determined in any form, regardless of the value, purpose, and manner of expression, is the subject of copyright.” In conclusion, he wrote,

Based on the analysis of regulations and jurisprudence, and then referring to the specifics of the subject of this analysis, which is a permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, taking into account the manner in which it was implemented and the complexity of the concept of its creation, developed by its authors, it undoubtedly constitutes a work within the meaning of the Act on Copyright and Related Rights. It should be pointed out that in the present situation, the work is not only the final version of the exhibition in the form of an installed exhibition implemented in cooperation with Tempora but also the script of the exhibition itself, authored by Professor Paweł Machcewicz, PhD, Dr. Piotr M. Majewski, Dr. Janusz Marszalec, and Dr. Rafał Wnuk. These people, as the creators of the exhibition, are entitled to nontransferable copyrights, and any changes to the work can be made only with the consent of all creators.

This means that any interference with the current form of the exhibition ... is a violation of the nontransferable, personal authorship rights of the creators of the exhibition ... and may also be subject to criminal law. The creators have the right to demand the cessation of violations (interference in the exhibition), and if these are made ... they have the right to demand that the exhibition be restored to its original state.¹⁹

Of course, we do not know how long independent courts will exist in Poland, but there is always a possibility of appealing to European courts. I also believe that sooner or later, the rule of law will be restored in Poland, and those responsible for its violation will be liable, including for arbitrary interference in the shape of the exhibitions. Even if the exhibitions are changed, it will be possible in the future to restore them to their original shape.

The Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński, who from time to time gave strategic guidance to his camp on how to proceed with actions against the Museum, referred to it again in July 2017. This time he spoke after a very dramatic wave of mass demonstrations on streets of Poland in defense of the independence of the courts. Kaczyński began by stating that the Germans never repaid their obligations to Poland and that they imposed their historical policy on us. “For example, the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, such a special gift of Donald Tusk to Angela Merkel, is nothing else but an inscription into the German historical policy. This is a museum that fits in with the German historical policy. When we want to change this, and when the minister of culture does change it, the ombudsman complains about this to the courts, and the courts

¹⁹ Opinia prawa mecenasza Macieja Ślusarka, Kancelaria Leśnodorski, Ślusarek i Wspólnicy, April 24, 2017.

order that these changes be withdrawn,” the leader of Law and Justice recalled. “This is the situation in Poland today and hence this reform [of the judiciary] to which we keep coming back. Because it is a very important matter, and it is so absolutely necessary.”²⁰

And so all the threads were finally connected: museums, phobias of other nations, historical politics, and courts. If the latter had already been subordinated to the ruling party, we would have had no chance to open the Museum and present the exhibitions to the public. As long as the Museum remains open and the exhibitions continue essentially as they were originally created, despite those politically motivated changes that were introduced afterward, no lie can harm it. The crowds still keep coming to the Museum, and the waiting list to buy tickets still keeps growing. In less than two months from the opening, 100,000 people came to see the exhibitions; in the first year, more than 600,000 visited. And by the time this book is published, there will have been even more. It is for all these people that the Museum of the Second World War was created, and they are the ones who have the final say in judging it.

²⁰ “Kaczyński: Muzeum II WŚ w Gdańsku wpisuje się w niemiecką politykę historyczną,” Polska Agencja Prasowa, July 28, 2017, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C1027686%2Ckaczynski-muzeum-ii-ws-w-gdansku-wpisuje-sie-w-niemiecka-polityke-historyczna.html>.