
Investigations

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The Righteous Exhibited. Self-affirmative Memory in Polish Museum Culture

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The boom in museums which Poland has been experiencing since the turn of the millennium offers a significant opportunity to regard the dynamic museal landscape as an observation field for memory studies. The boom concerns historical museums in particular; multiple newly opened or reopened institutions of this kind offer spectacular exhibitions, express a variety of mnemonic agendas, and powerfully influence remembrance patterns and visions of the past. They can thus serve as touchstones of Polish memory culture and its recent developments.

Although museums' messages are not limited to the articulation of national memory politics being fostered by the "mnemonic warriors" allied with the right-wing government,¹ especially those which are state-sponsored

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1 Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, eds., *Twenty Years After Communism. The Politics of Memory and Commemoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ljiljana Radonić "'Our' vs. 'Inherited' Museums. PiS and Fidesz as Mnemonic Warriors," *Südosteuropa* 68 (1) (2020): 44–78.

institutions often, and understandably, tend towards “mnemonical security.”² In terms of exhibitions, this means offering narratives and experiences that promise to secure an already established positive self-image and self-memory of the national community and therefore aim to guarantee its stable identity. It can be said that such museums contribute to developing the nation’s infrastructure for self-affirmative remembering. Self-affirmation of this kind can be founded on multiple, intertwined narrative schemes (typically, of heroism and the utmost patriotic merits on the one hand, and of suffering and martyrdom on the other) and works to generate a sense of dignity and remove any possible doubts concerning this dignified self-image.

Polish self-affirmative memory unfolds in various contexts, concerning in particular – but of course not limited to – narratives of resistance in the times of the breakthroughs of twentieth-century history. Amongst many themes that support this kind of memory, a particular version of the discourse on the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust intensified in Polish memory culture at roughly the same time as the museum boom was developing (although its roots date back to the 1940s, as researchers have shown³). Within this discourse, the histories of the rescue overshadow, if not substitute for, the Holocaust as such, moving the focus from Jewish suffering towards the heroism of Polish rescuers. Typically, the discourse in question also moves towards a formula of “Poles saving Jews” rather than the “Righteous Among the Nations,”⁴ relaxing the criteria for inclusion in the group and stressing the rescuers’ national identity. By this means, remembrance of rescuers, indispensable as it is, is also being used to ensure precise management – or concealing – of the difficult past. In historical reality, Poles assumed various stances towards the Holocaust, including indifference, but also facilitation of the Nazi persecution of Jews; the issue of complicity of some Poles is then inseparable from the memory of the benevolence, and heroism, of others. However, the latter often serves as a national alibi.

In the most articulate cases of the discourse, commemoration of the rescue therefore comes close to historical distortion. Nevertheless, it is a vital element of the “mnemonic warriors” historical policies, and recent examples of

2 Maria Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security,” *Security Dialogue* 46 (3) (2015): 221–237.

3 See, for instance, Tomasz Żukowski *Wielki retusz. Jak zapomnieliśmy, że Polacy zabijali Żydów* [The great retouch. How we forgot that Poles killed Jews] (Warszawa: Wielka Litera, 2018).

4 Alina Molisak, “Sprawiedliwi w kaplicy” [The Righteous in the chapel], in *Pomniki pamięci. Miejsca niepamięci*, ed. Katarzyna Chmielewska and Alina Molisak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2017), 36–43.

violation of freedom of research on the Holocaust highlight the topic's importance for these mnemonic actors. It was precisely the public breach of the rules of the discourse, in which Poles are generally associated with the rescue and never with the complicity, that resulted in unprecedented attacks on Barbara Engelking.⁵

The mnemonic tendencies discussed here seem in line with the more general framework of Polish memory concerning the Polish and Jewish past, which can be seen as an example of what Michael Rothberg identifies as “competitive memory”: memory culture perceived as a battlefield, on which distinct and separate groups compete for limited resources – such as attention, justice, satisfaction, reparation, commemoration or recognition.⁶ As a result of this “competition,” Holocaust topics have been persistently obscured in the Polish memory by the suffering of the Poles; when museums are concerned, this is clearly visible in the context of appropriation of Jewish heritage.⁷ The framework hinders the possibility to move beyond self-affirmation and embrace a more complicated memory of the past (including Polish community being implicated in past violence and injustices⁸). It does not mean that this possibility is blocked as such; as the examples will show, in Polish memory culture there is a space for a more nuanced, critical approach. Yet the conditions of Polish “mnemonic security” discussed above may significantly limit the power and influence of such projects, for which it will be more difficult to get a positive public reception (not to mention funding or patronages).

I argue that, given the circumstances discussed, both museum research and study of remembrance of the rescue of Jews during the Holocaust offer particularly useful viewpoints for observing Polish memory culture. New historical museums, understood as mnemonic infrastructure in development, test possible ways of remembering, both supporting established memory

5 See “Naukowcy i naukowczynie w obronie prof. Engelking: ‘Niebezpieczne i niedopuszczalne zapędy cenzorskie’” [Scientists in defense of prof. Engelking: ‘Dangerous and unacceptable censorship tendencies’], *Oko.press*, April 27, 2023, accessed June 14, 2023, <https://oko.press/naukowcy-i-naukowczynie-w-obronie-prof-engelking-niebezpieczne-i-niedopuszczalne-zapedy-cenzorskie>.

6 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

7 Erica Lehrer, “Material Kin: ‘Communities of Implication’ in Post-colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections,” in *Across Anthropology: Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*, ed. Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 283–316.

8 On the concept of implication see Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

forms and negotiating with the default mnemonic standard. The topic of the rescue of Jews, sensitive and prone to problematic formulations, is in turn a litmus test of self-affirmative Polish memory. Overlapped, the two perspectives create a particularly sensitive research area. Along these lines, it was my goal to examine the ways in which the topic of the wartime rescue of Jews by Poles is presented in five historical museums opened in Poland within last two decades: the Warsaw Rising Museum (opened in 2004 in Warsaw), Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory (2010, Krakow, a branch of the Museum of Krakow), POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews (2014, Warsaw), the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War Two (2016, Markowa) and the Museum of the Second World War (2017, Gdańsk).⁹ Rather than making an institutional analysis of the museums, I focus closely on their permanent exhibitions. Taking into account the design and narratives and the use of media in the respective displays concerning the rescue of Jews, I analyze them in the context of their positioning and function in the whole exhibitions. These five cases, juxtaposed, allow several mnemonic strategies in question to be distinguished, and, eventually, reveal various paths that self-affirmative memory can take, but also challenge simplistic perceptions of memory culture.

From Marginalization to (Mis)use Strategy: The Warsaw Rising Museum and the Ulma Family Museum

The Warsaw Rising Museum (WRM) is widely identified as a founder and pioneer of the boom – the first institution representing the new wave of historical museums in Poland, which itself had a huge impact on developing perceptions of Second World War, and particularly the importance of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. This early instance of the discourse emerging from the landscape of new Polish museums will be discussed here briefly, as a reference point for more comprehensive strategies.

9 Zofia Wóycicka has comprehensively analyzed Polish and European museums dedicated specifically to the theme of rescue of Jews during the Holocaust: Zofia Wóycicka, "A Global Label and its Local Appropriations. Representations of the Righteous Among the Nations in Contemporary European Museums," *Memory Studies* 15 (1) (2022): 20–36. According to her research, various museums representing the Righteous Among the Nations explore similar images, forms and symbols, but these "recurring elements [...] transmit divergent worldviews and ways of looking at history" (33), to an effect of glocalization (rather than globalization) of memory. In particular, commemoration of the Righteous in museums in various European countries tends to be (mis)used "to neutralize difficult debates on the past" (22). See also Zofia Wóycicka, "Global Patterns, Local Interpretations: New Polish Museums Dedicated to the Rescue of Jews during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies* 25 (3) (2019): 248–272.

Within the museum's exhibition, the issue of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations during the wartime, if present, serves as a kind of a background for the main narrative, which concentrates on the Polish fight for independence. Persecution of Jews is framed as a special case of the overall German terror directed against all inhabitants of the occupied territories. Help for the Jews therefore found no particular place in the main narrative, except for brief mentions about the risk of the death penalty that the act of helping was subjected to. Such "mnemonically securing" comments somewhat in advance ensure that there is no suspicion of any Polish complicity and are echoed in virtually all contemporary texts concerning the topic (be it exhibitions, articles, textbooks, documentaries, speeches etc.). Together with a clichéd mention of the "record" number of Poles among the Righteous Among the Nations, they seem to be in a way obligatory in mainstream Polish war memory discourse today.

The only moment when the topic is explicitly brought to light in the WRM seems particularly meaningful. In this section of the exhibition, a story about Polish insurgents liberating Jewish inmates from the slave labor Gęsiówka camp in Warsaw is repeated over the speakers and dominates the testimony of Marek Edelman displayed on a small screen nearby. Edelman, who challenges the idealized picture of Polish-Jewish relations, becomes scarcely audible, overpowered by the uplifting story of the rescue. The topic of the rescue is thus virtually absent from the museum narrative, and if it occurs, it is used (or, rather, misused) to shape an unblemished image of the Poles.

The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in Markowa could also serve as a clear example of this, while also showing a more complex version of the strategy. The museum's particular position within the Polish museal landscape has already been described by researchers.¹⁰ The only one of the "new museums" located outside of a big city, it makes the local history only a starting point for an ambitious, yet highly controversial narrative¹¹ that adheres to the "mnemonic warriors" historical policy in an unparalleled way. All members of the Ulma family, including the children, were murdered in 1944

10 Wóycicka, "A Global Label"; for an overview of the museum: "Global Patterns," 251–252; for an analysis of the discourse on the opening of the museum: Piotr Forecki, "Muzeum zgody w Markowej" [Museum of reconciliation in Markowa], *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 12 (2016): 643–652.

11 Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, "Bezdroża polityki historycznej. Wokół Markowej, czyli o czym nie mówi Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów podczas II Wojny Światowej im. Rodziny Ulmów" [The wilderness of the politics of history. Around Markowa, or what The Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II does not talk about], *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 12 (2016): 619–642.

together with the Jews whom they were trying to hide in their house in the village of Markowa. In 1995, the Ulmas were honored as Righteous Among the Nations, and in September 2023 they were beatified by the Catholic Church. In recent years, they have been promoted as symbolic representatives of all helpers and become remembrance icons of the discourse on the rescue of Jews, governed by principles of self-affirmation and mnemonic security.¹²

The museum's exhibition is strategically organized to serve the discourse in question in several important steps.¹³ Firstly, the exhibition narrative focuses consistently on Polish rescuers and not on the persecuted Jews whom they were helping. In the Ulmas' case, this may be illustrated in a nutshell by the fact that a life-sized, walk-in mock-up of their house, featuring some furniture, family souvenirs and so on, does not include an attic, where the hiding place was located. The exhibition design encourages the visitors to assume the Ulmas' perspective and put themselves in their position, while the Jews in hiding remain almost anonymous (the names of the Goldmans, Grünfelds and Didners are barely mentioned). As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ Jewish trauma appears here somewhat for the sake of Polish heroism, as a necessary context – and not in its own right.

Secondly, the history of the Ulmas – like multiple histories of the rescue of Jews – is generalized in the museum's message, in an effort to translate the heroic actions of individuals into the characteristics of the whole Polish community. It is more or less explicitly suggested multiple times in the exhibition, but also by the way in which the area surrounding the museum is structured, with several commemorative spaces and monuments. Significantly, the name of the museum is itself persuasive. Not only does it apply the aforementioned meaningful phrase of "Poles Saving Jews" and leave no doubt about the museum's protagonists, but it also hinders any critical approach to the issue.

Thirdly, the museum develops a particular mechanism of dealing with difficult (or, so to speak, mnemonically insecure) elements of war histories, such as antisemitism among the Poles and denunciations of the rescuers by their fellows – with the purpose of maintaining mnemonic security, but at the same time creates an alibi for accusations of whitewashing the past. "Insecurities" are acknowledged within the exhibition, but underexposed due

12 See Alicja Podbielska, "Święta rodzina z Markowej: kult Ulmów i polityka historyczna" [The Holy family of Markowa: Ulma cult and politics of history], *Zagłada Żydów* 15 (2019): 575–606.

13 The Ulma Family Museum was researched within the project "New Polish historical museums" by Sara Herczyńska. The following analysis at some points draws on her observations.

14 Maria Kobielska, "The Touchstone of Polishness? Suffering Exhibited in 'New Museums' in Poland," *The Polish Review* 64 (2) (2019): 121–131.

to the exhibitivite techniques employed. The “difficult” content (be it general information on a board or, for instance, a troublesome part of a testimony) is present somewhere in the exhibition and, in theory, possible to access, but the exhibition does not direct the visitors’ attention to it and lets it blur among the other contents provided.

The Ulma Family Museum exhibition, apparently providing an extensive presentation of the wartime reality, in fact substitutes the rescue of Jews for the Holocaust. Paradoxically, the Holocaust (and Holocaust trauma) is on the margins of this narrative, dropped by the exhibition in favor of the tragic but ultimately uplifting stories of the extraordinary dedication of the Poles. As Zofia Wóycicka aptly put it, “Although the Holocaust seems to be the main theme of the exhibition, in fact its key objective is to rebut allegations of collaboration in and profiteering from the Holocaust by the local population and to reinforce a narrative of Polish heroism and solidarity.”¹⁵ The aforementioned substitution contributes to this shift in perspectives. Using a variety of techniques, the presentation of the rescue of Jews unfolds as an argument justifying Polish self-affirmation (if not self-praise) and preventing it from being compromised.

Recognition and Contextualization Strategy: Polin

At the opposite end of the spectrum of possible strategies, activities typical of critical historical museums would be located. This can be observed, for instance, in the permanent exhibition of Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews (while a narrative presenting the history of Polish Jews – or, in a way, a Jewish history of Poland – by definition forms an alternative to the mainstream Polish memory scheme) and in the original version of the Museum of the Second World War (MSWW; on which more below). Such a strategy, in its most balanced version, would comprise two equally important steps: firstly, the recognition and acknowledgement of the helpers, secondly, the contextualization of their actions by showing how rare they were and in what circumstances occurred. In this vein, the rescue of the Jews becomes part of a larger narrative and, at the same time, the specificity of the Holocaust history can be preserved.

The permanent exhibition in Polin, one of the biggest and most spectacular of the “new museums,” is huge, covering a long history dating back to the Middle Ages. As a result, my analysis here can only refer to small fragments of the whole presentation. The topic of the Polish wartime help for the Jews has its place in the vast Holocaust gallery and is mentioned, on occasion, in

¹⁵ Wóycicka, “A Global Label,” 28.

the gallery entitled “Postwar Years.” In the former, there are two such sections. The first discusses the institutional help for Jews in the agenda of the Polish Underground State. The activities of the Council to Aid Jews (Żegota) and of the Jewish National Committee are described here, with a detailed diagram visualizing how the help was organized and some excerpts of Żegota’s reports. Żegota is acknowledged here as “the only organization of this kind in occupied Europe.”

As a general rule, visitors to Polin’s permanent exhibition are led by brief quotations from historical documents, such as accounts of witnesses to history, which are prominently exposed on the walls of every exhibit space. In the analyzed section, there are two: an excerpt from Żegota’s report (“The Council’s task is to aid Jews”) and text from a diary entry by a Committee activist, longer and emotional, which meaningfully describes it as “this most clandestine of clandestine communities” – suggesting the need for double and multiple conspiracy.

Importantly, the section’s nearest context problematizes the whole subject and allows for a better understanding for the latter quote. In a previous section, Polish attitudes towards the Jews are discussed with emphasis on their diversity: while “few chose to risk their lives and the lives of their families by trying to save Jews,” most remained indifferent, and “some Poles denounced Jews to the Germans or murdered them themselves.” This is confirmed by leading quotes from diaries by Polish witnesses to the ghetto uprising of 1943: expressions of grief and solidarity are mixed with reports on the antisemitic remarks that could be heard. This is demonstrated persuasively in the “tramway carriage” installed here, in which visitors may assume the positions of passengers and listen to excerpts of such comments.

All these elements build the background for the most important section, which includes the topic of the rescue of Jews, following the Żegota part and devoted to the experience of Jews hiding “on the Aryan side.” The perspective is vital here: as Wóycicka puts it, “rather than focusing on the Polish rescuers, the exhibition tries to convey what it was like for a Polish Jew trying to survive outside of the ghetto.”¹⁶ Visitors are confronted with several briefly described stories of specific individuals, modestly illustrated with photographs, documents and a few objects. Only to some extent is the presentation systematized by curatorial text. What counts here rather is a consistent micro-perspective, which entails narrowing the view in order to make the visitors reflect deeply on very specific cases that metonymically stand for so many others. This is supported by the design of the section space: the room is dark and quiet, alluding to the conditions in hideouts, and the availability of materials is

¹⁶ Wóycicka, “Global Patterns,” 253.

purposefully limited to some degree. Placed in niches in the walls, below the line of sight, partially covered, they force visitors into uncomfortable positions when examining them. The discomfort may enhance their focus and make them think about secrets and dangers.

The chosen perspective means that the stories of rescue neighbor those concerning denunciations and betrayals – there cannot be a separate, distilled “section of the Righteous” (and only of the Righteous) within a narrative that closely follows Jewish experiences. While many rescuers are included throughout the presentation, their actions and relations with the persecuted are not idealized. Idealization and heroization would require simplification; on the contrary, the exhibition signals the entangled motivations, interpersonal tensions and difficult decisions that are inherent in convoluted rescue stories. Importantly, the relations between the hiding Jews and their helpers are shown as mutual, complicated and multi-layered.

Generally speaking, the helpers – be it in the context of the actions of the Polish Underground State or individual hiding stories – are recognized and acknowledged within Polin’s exhibition in a very factual, non-emotional, almost neutral way, and this recognition is structured in terms of historical (and micro-historical) description, rather than of a homage. The help for the Jews is accurately shown as a rather small fragment of Holocaust history. This is enhanced by the fact that the parts of the exhibition analyzed here are preceded by a comprehensive – and particularly moving – section devoted to life in ghettos (and specifically the Warsaw ghetto), with no further mentions of the topic, and followed by a section concerning the killing of the Jews, including pogroms.

To sum up, the core of Polin’s strategy is to contextualize the help by providing a detailed presentation of its circumstances. The rescue of Jews is presented as a part of history of the Holocaust and of Jewish history – contrary to the previous cases, in which it was an intrinsic part of the history of Polish heroism and resistance. Interestingly, the very term “Righteous Among the Nations” is virtually absent from the exhibition. As I mentioned in the introduction, in the self-affirmative discourse the phrase is replaced by “Poles saving Jews,” in a gesture of generalization. Here it is avoided for the opposite reasons: to build a micro-perspective focusing on the “here and now” of rescue stories, and not to look ahead to future tributes paid to the rescuers.¹⁷ Contextualization prevails here over other elements of the discourse, yet recognition and acknowledgment of the helpers is also implied.

17 It is worth noting that when the topic of Poles who saved Jews returns in the post-war gallery, it is not about celebrating them, but mentioning the decision of the Central Committee of Jews in Poland to organize financial help for former rescuers and its social context.

The general overview provided above allows us to distinguish the main variants in which the rescue is exhibited in Polish historical museums, namely, the strategies of (1) partial marginalization, (2) recognition and contextualization, (3) use and misuse – sometimes, of course, intertwined. It seems that all the strategies, within the Polish memory culture, contribute to perceiving the rescue in view of the topic of “Polish-Jewish relations” not solely as a part of the Holocaust history; the Righteous may play a role of a benchmark of the discourse of Polishness. The analysis can be refined using the further case studies by demonstrating the dynamics of mnemonic processes involved here. The case of the MSWW problematizes the possibility of a shift between the discussed strategies, whereas Oskar Schindler’s Factory is a museum in which they turn out to be destabilized and negotiable.

The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk: Shift of Strategies

The Museum of the Second World War (MSWW), once perceived as a liberal (or pluralist) answer to “national memory museum” projects, is now widely known as an example of forcible intervention by the mnemonic warriors in power in Poland in the activities of a critical historical museum. The museum was taken over in 2017, soon after the inauguration of its spectacular and huge permanent exhibition, and since this time over 20 changes have been introduced to the exhibition. As Stephan Jaeger aptly put it, the changes were made with the “intent of creating a more Polish, heroic, battle-oriented museum and a less civilian-based, transnational museum.”¹⁸

In the original form of the exhibition, the topic of the rescue of Jews was primarily present in two sections: the one devoted to the Holocaust and the one entitled “Resistance.”¹⁹ Importantly, no original content was removed from either. In the former, various attitudes of “non-Jewish Poles” towards Jews are contrasted, including indifference, facilitating the Holocaust, as well as help. A board summarizing the story quotes the number of the Polish Righteous, and is accompanied by an exhibit: a washing bowl belonging to the Jews who were hidden by Poles living in the vicinity of the Treblinka death

18 Stephan Jaeger, *The Second World War in the Twenty-First-Century Museum. From Narrative, Memory, and Experience to Experientiality* (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 183.

19 The following paragraphs present a shortened version of a more developed argument which I articulated in my forthcoming article focusing specifically on the changes in the MSWW: Maria Kobielska, “Narrative and Resilience: Museum Exhibitions under Forced Change. A Case Study of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland,” in *Museums, Narratives, and Critical Histories: Narrating the Past for the Present and Future*, ed. Kerstin Barndt and Stephan Jaeger (Berlin: De Gruyter, expected 2024).

camp. All this was designed as an element of a bigger section focusing on the extermination of Jews and leading the visitor to a moving “space of reflection,” filled with panels presenting thousands of portrait photos of the victims.

The second room in question, included in the “Resistance” section, is devoted to the Polish Underground State. To highlight the conspiracy, the whole space is designed with reference to the shape of a basement, with pipes and other equipment placed on the walls and periscopes showing official life on the ground. In the furthest corner of the cellar room, partially hidden by the bend of the wall, a display space covering the topic of help for the Jews is located, consisting of Irena Sendler’s portrait, a film about rescuing a baby girl in which she was involved, and several exhibits accompanying the story. A board states that “thousands of Poles” helped, “both individually, outside the underground organization, and within it,” mentioning the risk of being blackmailed at the same time. This once again highlights the number of Poles among the Righteous. However, the meaningful location and design of this part of the exhibition suggests – accurately – that helping the Jews must be perceived as “a conspiracy within conspiracy,” a special, if not exceptional case in the activity of the resistance movement.

It was precisely this design that was used as a pretext for intervention in the exhibition; it was interpreted as a conscious decision to conceal the topic’s importance. It was therefore decided to cut a small window in the bended wall, certainly making Irena Sendler’s portrait more visible to the public, but weakening the original meanings at the same time. The intervention may seem small and rather innocent, making it easier to recognize the information provided originally. However, it indicates a general principle of a new strategy, emphasizing heroes and heroines and not permitting them to be subjected to other principles or goals, such as showing the broader picture of people’s attitudes and actions.

The interventions made in the Holocaust section clearly support this observation, contributing remarkably to the description of the shift between strategies. A large-scale photograph of the Ulma family now covers one of the walls of the exhibition space, close to the passage from its informative part to the “space of reflection,” which uses the well-known strategy of showing the countless faces of victims. Before entering it and meeting the victims’ eyes, visitors are now confronted with yet another board on “Poles in the face of the Holocaust,” accompanied by a database of Polish rescuers.

This decision has several substantial consequences. Firstly, the “Ulma wall” has been placed in the position of concluding the whole history of the Holocaust in the exhibition. Secondly, it produces an incoherent story, with the original nuanced narrative emphasizing the victims and covering the various attitudes of non-Jewish people – Poles as well as others – overshadowed by

the image of Polish martyrs who, as the headline puts it, were “rescuing their neighbors at the cost of their life.” Thirdly, it clearly gives priority to commemorating the Righteous over producing a somber atmosphere of meditation on the tragedy of the Holocaust, which was the original purpose of the photo passage. Feelings of respect and admiration are now supposed to compete with those of horror or pity.

The changes introduced in both sections offer an exceptional opportunity to trace in detail the desired shift of narrative on the rescue of the Jews. The MSWW’s original mode was a variant of the critical strategy of “recognition and contextualization”; in comparison with Polin, more emphasis was placed on acknowledging the helpers, with the use of recurrent memory themes such as the number of those honored by Yad Vashem. The new strategy, revealed by the changes introduced after 2017, uses the Righteous as a kind of antidote for mnemonical insecurities in a story originally told by the exhibition; they thus become a tool of what can be called a “Polonization” of the museum. It is important to note, however, that it is questionable whether unsystematic, disjointed changes of this kind may significantly affect the general message of the exhibition, taking into account its size and complexity.²⁰

Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory: Negotiations

With this in mind, a further example should allow us to enhance the analysis of the power of memory patterns sketched above. To move towards the conclusion, I will briefly examine Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory in Krakow, a museum which is challenged by the schemes in a particular way. First and foremost, the museum bears the name of one of the most famous – perhaps the most renowned worldwide – of the Righteous Among the Nations, who happens to be a non-Polish rescuer. It may thus introduce a certain incoherence to the template, in which the Righteous tend to represent Polishness. Secondly, to intensify the effect, the museum is located in the space of the former Schindler’s factory, attracting particular attention of international visitors who follow the Steven Spielberg film route. Thirdly, however, the permanent exhibition aims at covering the topic of Krakow under Nazi occupation during Second World War – not focusing on the rescue, on the figure of Oskar Schindler or on the history of the space, although including the history of both Polish and Jewish inhabitants of the city confronted with the German perpetrators.²¹

20 See Kobielska, “Narrative and Resilience.”

21 Zuzanna Bogumił, “Miejsce pamięci versus symulacja przeszłości – II wojna światowa na wystawach historycznych,” *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 4 (2011): 149–167. About Schindler’s Factory as a museum which presents antagonistic memory and one-dimensionally casts

The rooms devoted to Schindler himself form an enclave in the exhibition space, differently arranged and somehow interrupting the impressive, multi-sensual story about wartime Krakow. Contrary to most of the interior museum space, they are filled with daylight and preserve, although only partially, the original arrangement of Schindler's office. The concise way in which Schindler's story is told suggests a presumption that it is already known to the visitor. It is described on information boards, supplemented by video testimonies and a special commemorative installation by Michał Urban: a cube made of enamelware containing the names of those saved thanks to Schindler's actions. After paying a visit to Schindler's office, visitors continue their tour and discover the changes of daily Krakow life under occupation, narrated chronologically.

In the context of Schindler and the topic of help for the Jews, it seems significant that the narrative is regularly interspersed with the presence of Polish rescuers; this seems to be a necessary supplement to the story about the German savior, narrated within "his" space. Not surprisingly, Tadeusz Pankiewicz, a pharmacist from the Krakow ghetto who was recognized as a Righteous Among the Nations in 1983, is one of the most important witnesses whose words are cited throughout the exhibition. In the section devoted to the Krakow structures of the Polish Underground State, help for the Jews, obviously, is mentioned, while the contribution of the Catholic Church is also highlighted. It is important to note that this is accompanied by an extensive description of the risks of hiding "on the Aryan side," including denunciations and blackmailers. Close to the end of the exhibition, visitors find an evocative reconstruction of a hiding place, arranged for the fugitives from the Krakow ghetto by a Pole, a member of the resistance movement, in his house in a village nearby. Finally, the discourse on the Righteous plays a paramount role in the concluding parts of the exhibition, where visitors are placed in an ambivalent position to judge the choices people were making during wartime. In the last exhibition room, two databases are displayed in the form of huge volumes of people's good and bad deeds; the former are gathered under the title of "Righteous" and the latter as "Informers." The "Righteous" formula therefore serves as an umbrella term for those who behaved virtuously in a liminal situation.

The museum's strategy on the topic of the rescue seems rather unstable. Firstly, it tries to contribute to the commemoration of its patron and take advantage of his fame at the same time. Secondly, it surrounds his figure with

Germans as villains and Poles as positive protagonists: Anna Cento Bull, Hans Lauge Hansen, Wulf Kansteiner and Nina Parish, "War Museums as Agonistic Spaces: Possibilities, Opportunities and Constraints," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 25 (6) (2019): 611–625.

a circle of Polish rescuers and Polish *lieux de mémoire* associated with rescue stories. Finally, it ambivalently seeks a more general exhibition frame with the use of the Righteous formula. In my opinion, this volatility is linked to the fact that this is a relatively early (2010) exhibition in the history of the museum boom and that the museum faces the challenge of negotiating with the more stable strategies of marginalization, recognition and (mis)use of the Righteous in the Polish memory culture, while examining its special situation at the same time.

The cases analyzed prove the power of the self-affirmative pattern within Polish remembrance, in line with which commemorating the rescue of Jews may serve national mnemonic security. Different approaches to the topic, however, complicate the picture by showing dynamics of remembrance and mutual interferences between the identified strategies. The strategy of marginalization reveals the self-centeredness of the Polish discourse about the past. The strategy of use and misuse redefines memory of the rescue of Jews in the service of national self-affirmation. It involves a set of mechanisms intended to secure the established self-perception of the community and its past. The strategy of recognition and contextualization, in turn, seeks to introduce critical thinking about the past, challenging the principles described above. Although this analysis identified diverse strategies of presentation of the rescue of Jews, national self-affirmation remains a “default” option that must be addressed directly or indirectly in every case. This is particularly visible in the context of critical exhibitions: to polemically refer to the mainstream pattern, they perform complicated balancing acts between acknowledgment of rescuers and contextual presentation of their actions. In terms of memory research, my argument shows that historical museum exhibitions can be interpreted as useful and sensitive indicators of remembrance tendencies, demonstrating in their operation not only established mnemonic patterns, but also their developments and negotiations.

Abstract

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The Righteous Exhibited. Self-affirmative Memory in Polish Museum Culture

The article analyzes the permanent exhibitions of five new Polish historical museums in terms of their presentation of the rescue of Jews by Poles during Second World War. It identifies strategies of marginalization, recognition and contextualization, and use and misuse of the topic, placing them in the context of the diverse mnemonic agendas present within the Polish memory field (and of national mnemonical security in particular). The comparison shows the self-affirmative core of Polish memory culture and proves that museums can be interpreted in memory research as indicators of remembrance tendencies.

Keywords

museums, Polish culture of memory, self-affirmation, rescue of Jews, Righteous Among the Nations