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Exhibiting Hope. Postwar Poland in New Historical Museums

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The aim of this article is to discuss the potential re-framing of memory of the Polish People's Republic in terms of actions taken in the hope of development and change. Contrary to the dominant Polish mnemonic narrative and its focus on martyrdom and heroism, this perspective draws on the possibility of a "positive" version of memory of the postwar times in Poland, more concerned with agency than with trauma. We are inspired by Rebecca Solnit's writing on hope as associated with memory; in her book *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit argues that "though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past."¹ She elaborates on the potential of memory to create hope: remembering the past, comparing it with present experiences, prevents the depressive conviction that a change is impossible, and also allows one to accurately grasp the change's real dynamics, which is not always evident (sometimes revolutionary, but often resulting from a slow accumulation of small activities, or discontinuous, when positive effects are due to remote causes, which makes the whole process

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1 Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark. Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), XIX.

easy to overlook). Some forms of memory, however, block its hope-creating potential:

We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation. A memory commensurate to the complexity of the past and the whole cast of participants, a memory that includes our power, produces that forward-directed energy called hope.²

According to Solnit, simplified accounts of the past hinder the production of hope, which is based on inherently plural, multifaceted memory that can grasp the complexity of the world, acknowledge convoluted dependences and relations, include all perspectives and agents, and restrain from clear-cut, one-sided axiologies. What Solnit calls for is thus not far from some most prominent theories of contemporary memory studies – primarily, the “multi-directional memory,” as coined by Michael Rothberg.³ A search for plural, alternative memory forms, allowing the status quo to be broken, is also close to “potentializing history” in the theory of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, who calls for an exploration of the archives for silenced, rejected scenarios of thinking about the past and new possibilities that result from these scenarios.⁴ Ann Rigney argues that investigating the memory of hope helps memory studies to avoid two possible traps: a fixation on trauma, and, on the other hand, an utopian, simplistically optimistic escapism. To do so, she searches for mnemonic forms of hope, which is understood potentially, as a civic and activist value, cultivated despite painful failures that are part of its history.⁵

These works discuss memory that can generate hope, but also memory which is about past (or initiated in the past) acts of hope: Solnit writes about remembering upheavals and revolutions, but also about the painstaking efforts of progressive movements, underlining that they are collective, grass-roots and emancipatory. In this perspective, the memory of hope would form an opposition to these forms of memory, reducible, politicized and excluding, which trigger fear, anger, or resentment. However, as examples resulting from

2 Ibid., XIX.

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

4 Ariella A. Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

5 Ann Rigney, “Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic,” *Memory Studies* 11 (3) 2018: 370–371.

our overview of Polish memory culture will show, hope turns out to be an element of various memory forms and narratives. In the context of the postwar times in Poland, it is important to note that hope is a central element of the communist utopia, with its progressive, future-focused worldview. In this case, it is not necessarily inscribed into a manifold vision of past and future, but quite the contrary – into simplistic standards of propaganda discourse. However, it would be equally simplistic to perceive the communist period solely through its ideology. Diverse archives from this time record people's experiences of change, mobility, agency and emancipation,⁶ opening the possibility to destabilize clichéd forms of memory about the postwar communist project of social progression.

We wish to argue that hope as a category has a potential to reframe – or at least diversify – what is perceived as the basic schemes of Polish collective and cultural memory. It has been described at length that the Polish master narrative about the past is dominated by such central themes and values as heroic fight, oppression, suffering and martyrdom, which form the basis of self-perception for the community. In line with this, the postwar history of Poland is represented in terms of oppression suffered by an imaginary “us” (the Poles, the nation, the good guys) at the hands of “them” (authorities, communists, generalized into an enemy figure). In this context, the perspective of memory of hope could reframe this narrative of sacrifice and trauma into one more focused on collective agency. At the same time, it is highly possible to integrate the “fight and resistance” variant of the master narrative with a narrative of hope, and remembrance of the postwar socialist Poland is a case in question.

In the following analysis, we draw on the results of our research on the twenty-first-century museum boom in Poland and use spaces of historical museums as a field of observation of memory processes. We assume that flourishing new historical museums can reveal prevalent tendencies in contemporary memory culture – as its touchstones – but also unveil complications and counter-trends. The material provided by Polish museum culture can be used to test the hypothesis concerning mnemonic potential of hope – and indeed, hope turns out to be one of the leitmotifs or keywords of historical exhibitions about the Polish People's Republic created in recent years. It is generally reserved for stories of resistance against authoritarian power and strongly associated with the Solidarity movement. In two of the museums, the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals in Szczecin, “hope” is referred to already in the titles of sections of

6 Magda Szcześniak, *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Moved. Promotion and emotions in socialist Poland] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2023).

permanent exhibitions devoted to the years 1980–1981: respectively, “Solidarity and Hope” and “The Birth of Hope.” The third case analyzed will be the Emigration Museum in Gdynia, where the topic of hope manifests itself on two levels – that of individual stories of migration, and that of the history of Poland, culminating in the opening of borders and the optimistic return of emigrants. This exhibition has a broader temporal scope than the previous ones, which will also allow us to look at museum representations of hope pertaining to an earlier period.

In the course of our argument, we will propose a visual, rhetorical, spatial and narrative analysis of “exhibiting hope” in the three museums mentioned, to show the potential of reframing memory about the postwar period in terms of hope that does not concern the utopia of the communist project, but resistance to communist power, and sometimes also the transition of 1989. The first two displays, so prominently and explicitly invoking hope as a kind of frame, will serve as a mnemonic mini-laboratory for the sake of our argument, to unpack messages revolving around hope, the ways in which hope may be constructed, distributed, associated with specific figures, ideologies, and discourses (and in particular, the context of Catholicism). We will investigate to what extent this established framework hinders the narrative of hope in its plural and multidirectional potential. We will show how, in the context of the Polish museum landscape, hope turns out to be simultaneously a persuasive mnemonic frame and a tool of mnemonic ideologization. The hope exhibited in historical museums is in fact often presented in terms almost opposite to those espoused by Solnit: subordinated to the agenda of historical policy, univocal, rather declared *ex post* or *ex cathedra* than embodying a collective and spontaneous effort of imagination and movement. Preliminarily, we identify it as “a hope petrified”; discussing its form, however, we will at the same time search for other possibilities, closer to the promise made by *Hope in the Dark*.

The European Solidarity Centre and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals: General Description

All three museums share basic organizational features. They are located in big cities, but not the capital and not centrally situated in the country, located on or close to the Baltic coast – a space shaped by twentieth-century migrations as well as, in the 1980s, a key scene of the anti-communist opposition movement. The permanent exhibition of the European Solidarity Centre (ESC) was inaugurated in 2014, and that of the Dialogue Centre Upheavals (DCU) in 2016. Both museums are managed jointly by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and local authorities (respectively: the city of Gdańsk and the Pomorskie voivodship in the case of the ESC,

which was also co-founded by the Solidarity trade union and the Solidarity Centre Foundation; Zachodniopomorskie voivodship in the case of the DCU as a branch of the National Museum in Szczecin). Both institutions deal with the history of the Solidarity movement, but their missions in the field are defined differently. The ESC is an institution devoted to the history of the Solidarity movement as such, albeit with a focus on the local perspective and on the historical site of the Gdańsk shipyard, where it is located. The DCU, in turn, is a museum of the city of Szczecin (pre-war German Stettin), which aims to present its complicated postwar history, to date generally disregarded and perceived as uninspiring.⁷ The focus on the history of Solidarity in the region was chosen as a key to the task of adding value to the local history. A further difference concerns each museum's position in recent national memory wars.⁸ The ESC is one of the museums contested by the "mnemonic warriors" from the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) party, which governed until 2023.⁹ Unable to fully take over the museum, the minister significantly cut its budget. The conflict primarily concerned the museum's presentation of Lech Wałęsa, who is an enemy figure in the PiS discourse, accused of collaboration with the communist secret services. The DCU has not raised significant controversies to date, and is trying to be perceived as a forum for open, inclusive debates.

According to official declarations – such as a text authored by Basil Kerski, the museum's director, in the catalogue of the permanent exhibition – the ESC is meant to respond to the shortcomings of European memory culture, such as reducing the story of the fall of communism to the fall of the Berlin wall and the absence of an international institution to document a breakthrough in all countries in question.¹⁰ Acting as such, the ESC should be "a Polish voice

7 Agnieszka Kuchcińska-Kurcz, "Centrum Dialogu Przełomy – ewolucja idei" [Przełomy Dialogue Center – evolution of ideas], in *Miasto sprzeciwu – miasto protestu*, ed. Agnieszka Kuchcińska-Kurcz (Szczecin: Muzeum Narodowe w Szczecinie, Centrum Dialogu Przełomy, 2015), 13–17. All translations from Polish are ours, unless indicated otherwise.

8 About memory wars in the Polish context see Zofia Wóycicka, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska, "Mnemonic Wars in Poland: An Introduction to New Research Directions," *Acta Poloniae Historica* 128 (2023): 5–25.

9 On Polish mnemonic warriors and their politics towards museums, see Ljiljana Radonić, "'Our' vs. 'Inherited' Museums. PiS and Fidesz as Mnemonic Warriors," *Südosteuropa* 68 (1) (2020): 44–78.

10 Basil Kerski, "Muzeum Solidarności oraz instytucja wspierająca kulturę obywatelską" [Solidarity Museum and an institution supporting civic culture], in *Wystawa stała Europejskiego Centrum Solidarności. Katalog*, ed. Basil Kerski and Konrad Knoch (Gdańsk: Europejskie Centrum Solidarności, 2019), 254.

in the European memory discourse,”¹¹ integrating the international context with a narrative focusing on the Polish experience. At the same time, pluralism of perspectives is declared, together with a consensual historical approach as a principle of its permanent exhibition. Its narrative covers the years 1980–1989 in Poland, with a retrospective look at the previous period of the Polish People’s Republic in the first part of the tour and a kind of “follow-up,” presenting the international perspective on the beginning of the 1990s. The exhibition uses a wide range of contemporary museum means; it consists of several galleries which do not resemble each other in style, but involve various design concepts.

Throughout the whole tour, the exhibition generally follows the mentioned central narrative about oppression, suffering and heroic resistance, within which the postwar history of Poland is told from a point of view of “us,” the nation, opposing “them,” the communist regime; “freedom” is a key word of the whole narrative. It is of course a somewhat natural choice for a museum of Solidarity to use a discourse of anti-communist resistance, fight, sacrifice and moral superiority to a significant degree. As a result, the exhibition has been criticized by some experts as following an easy path of affirmative memory, without acknowledging any ambiguities, to an effect of “national branding.”¹² It must be noted, however, that the museum presents the history of Solidarity as a down-to-earth story of a collective success, realistic and detailed, rather “usual” than pathetic or generalizing – in which it already departs from the prevalent mnemonic clichés, albeit only to some extent.

“Solidarity and Hope,” the third (of six) section of the exhibition, is a “mnemonic touchstone” we want to explore here. Its story stretches from August 1980 to December 1981, that is the period when the Solidarity Independent Trade Union operated legally and openly in communist Poland, after the victorious strikes of 1980 and before the violent suppression of the mass movement when Martial Law was introduced in 1981. The contents of the showcases include, for instance, material concerning official registration of the union, its efforts to commemorate previous strikes and street protests, developing forms of independent culture, the first Congress of Delegates in 1981, or discussion on Solidarity as a new form of revolution. Hopes for the future are primarily related here to the activities of the union, and this is shown in

11 *Ibid.*, 253.

12 Anna Ziębińska-Witek, “Przeszłość w muzeach – dwa modele reprezentacji. Analiza porównawcza Europejskiego Centrum Solidarności i Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku” [The past in museums – two models of representation. Comparative analysis of the European Solidarity Center and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2020): 227; see also Anna Ziębińska-Witek, *Musealisation of Communism in Poland and East Central Europe*, trans. Alex Shannon (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024), 41–62.



Photo 1. Section "Solidarity and Hope," ESC, September 2021. Photo by Maria Kobielska.

great detail (from the point of view of the economics of visiting the exhibition – even redundantly), and as a result not only impresses with its scale and diversity, but also appears to be arduous work.

Generally, this is a rather “informative” part of the exhibition, compared with other more “experiential” sections; visitors are supposed to read, listen, watch and absorb the content, rather than feel and live through a recreated situation. Contrary to the previous and following galleries, this is a bright hall,

with daylight coming through a glass wall that allows visitors to look outside. The whole room is arranged in white and red, with a mirrored ceiling. The reason for this lies in the conceptual design: the exhibitors, seen from above, form the union's famous logo. Wandering around them, visitors become a part of the inscription, and – metaphorically – of the joint work of “Solidarity.” Throughout the impressive – if not overwhelming – exhibition, this is also a moment for taking a breather and relaxing, which suggests feelings of freedom and hope. The hopes seem dashed in the next section, the grim space devoted to Martial Law, but then might come back in the closing part of the exhibition, with the story of the victorious revolutions of 1989.

As already mentioned, the aim of the DCU is to tell the story of Szczecin, beginning in wartime and revealing its unique situation and identity, and to confront the lack of interest in this period, a memory of which has “blurred and faded,” according to Agnieszka Kuchcińska-Kurcz, the museum's director.¹³ A perspicuous interpretation of this situation is suggested by the permanent exhibition headline, framing Szczecin as “a city of protest – a city of objection” (Kuchcińska-Kurcz adds further possible slogans: “a city that initiates transformations,”¹⁴ “a rebellious city”¹⁵). Szczecin's history follows the mainstream Polish narrative as a “road to freedom” and the process of shaking off communist hegemony in a series of upsurges of resistance and “upheavals” highlighted in the very name of the museum. The exhibition narrative consists of a series of close-ups of such moments, including the time of migration just after the Second World War, Stalinism, the 1970 anti-regime protests (violently suppressed), the emergence of Solidarity in 1980 and the introduction of Martial Law in 1981; finally, the exhibition story reaches the end of the 1980s. A detailed presentation of the postwar history of Szczecin clearly shows it as a heroic narrative of Polish anti-communist resistance – a highly politicized one, with everyday life, economic and social processes, or cultural events featured as a background. In the exhibition, the identity of Polish Szczecin becomes crystallized in a series of “upheavals.”¹⁶ The narrative

13 Kuchcińska-Kurcz, “Centrum Dialogu Przełomy,” 17. The DCU exhibition's strategy has already been discussed by one of us from a different angle: in terms of central-peripheral dynamics creating “mnemonic frictions.” See Maria Kobielska and Kinga Siewior, “Peripheral (Non)Polishnesses. Museums, Creeping Conflicts, and Transformative Frictions,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 128 (2023): 106–111.

14 Kuchcińska-Kurcz, “Centrum Dialogu Przełomy,” 17.

15 *Ibid.*, 15.

16 Anna Ziębińska-Witek classifies both the ESC and the DCU as identity museums, pursuing a heroic approach, in order to deliver “a coherent story as a narrative that guarantees

of “upheavals” is intended to integrate various (and disparate) twentieth-century experiences into the collective consciousness and a contemporary Szczecin, regional, and Polish identity. In terms of design, the exhibition is very consistent: the series of exhibition spaces generally follow the same concept. A large part of the space is plunged into darkness, with black walls and spotlighting; visitors are guided between the exhibition’s chapters by a clear line on the floor, along which run some meaningful keywords, like “Fear,” “Foundations,” or “The Price of Freedom.”

The “Birth of Hope” section is dominated by the August 1980 strikes; in a “cinema,” at its entrance, a video of the signing of the August Agreements is looped, and accompanying applause fills the whole section space. It is a mixture of various exhibition techniques, starting from the scenography of the cinema, through showcases, databases, audio testimonies and photographic displays, to artistic installations. The narrative is thus constructed with the use of historical documents and objects alongside artworks (the substantial role of the latter, some created specifically for the exhibition, is unique compared to other Polish historical museums). There is, for instance, the installation *Tower Blocks*, arranged by Grzegorz Hańderek and Michał Libera for the DCU, which evokes the oppressive character of socialist housing estates, especially thanks to its disturbing soundtrack.

Generally, in the presentation of the following months, the enthusiasm associated with Solidarity’s actions is juxtaposed with acknowledgment of the supply shortages, anxieties and tensions typical of the early 1980s. The whole display is not overloaded, and is balanced in acknowledging the hopeful phase of “carnival of Solidarity” together with Polish society’s problems of the time. In this way, the hope earns the status of “hope in spite of difficulties,” if not in spite of everything. The concept of the section offers a particular temporality for the hope: we are witnessing “the birth of hope” (therefore the August strikes are its source), but not necessarily its realization, which makes the whole narrative lean towards the more distant future (in which, potentially, solutions to the mentioned problems might occur). The following sections – concerning Martial Law and the transition of 1989, which is presented here in a particularly nuanced way¹⁷ – do not yet promise the fulfilment of such hopes.

the continuation of national identity” (Ziębińska-Witek, *Musealisation of Communism*, 105) by creating a positive self-perception of the group. While the ESC advertises a “national brand,” the DCU, according to the author, tries to create a patchwork identity of Szczecin and the region.

17 The title of the last part of the exhibition, concerning the elections of 4 June 1989, is the enthusiastic announcement “Poland is ours.” Far more complicated content, though, follows the headline; there is even an attempt to explain the complex mechanism of



Photo 2. "Cinema" in the section "Birth of Hope," DCU (with the inscription "Siła bezsilnych" ["The power of the powerless," here translated as "The strength of the hopeless"] visible), August 2022. Photo by Maria Kobielska.

Solidarity and Hope: Figurations of Memory

By juxtaposing the two exhibitions, in which hope plays the role of an important framework for the story of Solidarity or, more broadly, for the history of anti-communist breakthroughs, we can observe several mechanisms operating in this context.

Firstly, it is obvious that hope comes within a set of fixed images and formulas that reverberate – somewhat surprisingly – in every exhibition. Hope – as a crucial factor of anti-communist resistance – is typically linked with the famous phrase “the power of the powerless,” from the title of Václav Havel’s manifesto. This is a title of one of the exhibition’s sections in the ESC, and in the DCU – one of the “keywords” written on the floor along the guiding line. In each exhibition, these words neighbor references to the role of Pope John Paul II and the religious experiences of the Poles in creating the atmosphere of hope – to an effect of “Catholicization of hope.” Typical quotes include:

the partially free contract elections (“Due to the non-democratic character of the elections, free voting concerned only the Senate and the campaign was like a plebiscite”) and a mention that some opposition factions had called for a boycott of the vote.

The election of the Cardinal Archbishop of Cracow Karol Wojtyła as Pope John Paul II, and his subsequent visit to his homeland in June 1979, brought about a resurgence of hope.

The Pope's first visit to Poland, on 2–10 June 1979, awakened a desire for freedom among Poles so long oppressed by the authorities, giving them hope and a feeling of strength.

Both quotes come from the ESC exhibition, the former from the board opening the section “The Power of the Powerless,” retrospectively showing the history of the Polish People's Republic from before August 1980, and the latter from the section's ending; the obvious repetition is meaningful here.

Secondly, and as a consequence, Pope John Paul II and, to a lesser extent, Lech Wałęsa are typically depicted as “distributors of hope,” those who explicitly (in particular in the case of the pope) or implicitly “give” people hope. This may result in perceiving hope as a kind of individual merit, or asset, which a leader (a hero) can possess – and people who hope for a better future as rather passive, following the leader. On the other hand, hope is also associated with collective work and described as a quite paradoxical power of people who realize the call for solidarity: in this view, agency is allocated much more equally.

To illustrate this contrast: a spacious gallery on “The Birth of Solidarity” in the ESC concludes with an iconic video featuring Lech Wałęsa's triumphant announcement, delivered at the top of the shipyard gate after the successful August strike. He says, emphatically, “We finally have independent self-governing trade unions! We have the right to strike! And we will establish more rights soon.” Acknowledgement of his leadership is balanced here with an emphasis on collective agency. It is a powerful and memorable gesture that the whole ceiling of this hall is covered with the yellow helmets of shipyard workers, to highlight the number of strikers. There is also an impressive installation on “Strikes in Poland,” presenting filmic and photographic shots of enthusiastic masses from various places in the country, to a similar effect of collective empowerment. The gallery on “Solidarity and Hope,” in turn, embodies hope and makes it more concrete in a slightly different way, thanks to its hyper-detailed documentation of the union's work. Similar elements can be found in the DCU. Hope is contextualized here through acknowledging various aspects of the 1980s, including people's difficult experiences, expressively juxtaposed with the “great hopes” of August 1980 (this is the title of one of the boards in this section of the exhibition). A report by Łucja Plaugo, one of the strikers in Szczecin, is available via headphones next to the mentioned “cinema” and includes yet



Photo 3. Section "The Birth of Solidarity," ESC, September 2021. Photo by Maria Kobielska.

another powerful and thought-provoking formulation of hope. The witness recounts her sense of strength and virtual invulnerability at the time: she was convinced that “nothing could happen to her” as long as she was in the shipyard with thousands of other strikers. This would be hope stemming from collective agency, while at the same time expressed in the individual idiom of a single, theoretically “meaningless” person (in terms of history).

In our interpretation, such dispersed traces of hope undermine its clichéd formulas, embodying it in specific people, places, objects or photographs.¹⁸

This distinction also concerns our third general observation on the “content of hope,” the question of which usually remains open. It is about hope for a change of system or for a better future, and this non-specificity may be responsible for an effect of dissolution of hope when the transition of 1989 comes to life. This is also obscured by the solemn, ceremonial phrases that “Catholicize” hope and are prevalent in the official discourse – for instance concerning the commemoration of Solidarity. On the other hand, as we mentioned earlier, it is worth noting that hope may also be associated with down-to-earth, everyday actions.

Fourthly, hope is entangled in complicated temporalities and seems to join the past, present and future dimensions. Its source is sometimes clearly (although not in a very convincing way) defined and dated, but it can also be ambiguous. Hope is built upon past experiences (in line with Solnit’s concept) that seem to achieve a certain “critical mass.” This way, the August 1980 strikes are a source event for people’s hope, but also realize their hopes themselves. Even more tricky is the question of an “expiry date” for hope. The Martial Law imposed in 1981, and the oppression of the 1980s more generally, are presented as dashing the hopes of the enthusiastic first period of legal Solidarity. Hope seems to be reborn around 1989, but already in a somewhat diminished form. The “fractured” memory of the transition (without any common, uncontested form), as Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik put it, is behind this ambiguity.¹⁹

18 Here we wanted to flag the issue of the gendered representation of hope (without, however, having the space to consider more broadly the context of traditional patterns of hope for Polish culture – for example, the role of the woman-patriot as preserving and sustaining hope). The monumentalized form of hope as a resource and merit of the (male) hero-leader is part of the “masculine” type of memory, centralized, organized around a military pattern (combat, confrontation, concrete actions), focused on self-affirmation. None of the exhibitions we analyzed fulfils the postulates of writing herstories (suffice it to mention that among the important figures who had a part in shaping the events, whose biographies and portraits intersperse the narrative of the exhibition at the DCU, there is not a single woman). Nevertheless, the aforementioned forms of presentation of “dispersed” hope could be interpreted as belonging more to “female” memory, more flexible and inclusive, taking into account the plural perspectives of female participants in the events. However, such an explicit gendering of the two forms of hope of interest here proves only partially operative. The memory associated with “dispersed hope” is related to the memory of the “women’s underground” or “Solidarity according to women” (to refer to the classic works of Shana Penn and Marta Dzido), but is not contained within it.

19 Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, “Roundtable Discord. The Contested Legacy of 1989 in Poland,” in *Twenty Years after Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60–84.

As these observations show, two partially contradictory forms of hope co-exist in the exhibitions we analyzed. While hope is used as a persuasive mnemonic frame, it can also be a tool of mnemonic ideologization, when its presentation supports simplified heroic narratives about history, with religious motivation of historical actors. In this form, hope comes as a default, unsurprising element of the mnemonic discourse on Solidarity; it is presented in a solemn, pompous, dignified tone, with the use of recurrent clichés. This form of “petrified hope,” serving the mentioned master narrative, may undermine or limit the memory of hope in its pluralizing and multidirectional potential. On the other hand, there is a “hope dispersed,” non-obvious and more paradoxical, which at times flashes through the narratives. It is expressed with traces of collective agency, individual experiences, through gathering specific facts and observations, everyday and usual details, which escape conventions and generalizations, and shake off the automatic commemorative performance.

Hope at the Emigration Museum in Gdynia

The Emigration Museum in Gdynia opened in 2015, precisely between the openings of the European Solidarity Centre (2014) and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals (2016). It is located in the historic building of the Marine Station, a space strongly linked to the theme of migration. The Marine Station, built in 1933, was crucial for pre-war passenger traffic. It was from this place that Witold Gombrowicz (with whom the museum’s narrative begins²⁰) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (with whom it ends) set sail. During the war, the station was largely destroyed, both as a result of the actions of the occupying forces and during air raids by Allied forces.²¹ Between 2013 and 2015, the building underwent a major refurbishment, during which the damaged parts were rebuilt and the whole edifice was adapted for museum use.

The Marine Station building corresponds to the museum’s exhibition on a semantic level. The themes of population flows and the fluidity of societies run through the permanent exhibition. The exhibition combines two themes: the history of Poland and the history of migration. In doing so, it also combines two timelines: a broader one, that is, the history of the country, and a narrower one, that is, individual stories of emigration of specific people. The frame of the narrative is the history of Poland “from the beginning”

20 A quote from Gombrowicz’s *Diary* can be seen right above the entrance to the exhibition.

21 Maria J. Sołtysik, “Heritage Restored: From Marine Station to Emigration Museum,” in *Dimensions of Emigration. The Marine Station and Emigration Infrastructure in Gdynia*, ed. Adam Walaszek, trans. Magdalena Moran and Sean Moran (Gdynia: Emigration Museum in Gdynia, 2018), 165–192.

(understood as the early Middle Ages) through the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution, the two world wars, the socialist era, to the present day. The exhibition is divided into ten sections, each dealing with a different time span, but also a slightly different theme. For example, the third section deals with emigration at the turn of the twentieth century and is narrated by the story of the fictional Sikora family from near Chmielnik, who emigrated to Chicago. The section on the First World War is a short corridor with information boards on forced migration, the evacuation of Congress Poland, Haller's Army, Ignacy Paderewski and the impact of emigration on the national consciousness. In the section on the Second Polish Republic, on the other hand, the exhibition focuses exclusively on Gdynia – as a city to which one came and from which one emigrated.

Within specific themes, we follow the migrations of specific individuals or groups, sometimes lasting months and sometimes a few hours. The exhibition is very heterogeneous – at one time it focuses on the masses emigrating due to hunger and poverty, at another on outstanding individual emigrants, such as Poland's national poet Adam Mickiewicz or the composer Frédéric Chopin. In an article in *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture*, Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdżiel draws attention to the museum's disjointed narrative. In her view, the exhibition resembles an attempt to "complete every possible homework: the story is to be new, but nevertheless repeating what we recognize; contemporary, but nevertheless rooted in the distant past; leaning towards social history, but rendering what is due to the elite and high culture."²² It seems that the curators wanted to show the full spectrum of the expatriate experience and create a polyphonic story rather than offer a coherent narrative.

In the exhibition, the decision to emigrate is presented as an individual act of hope, based on a belief in one's own agency. Marcin Szerle, a curator at the Emigration Museum, writes about people who arrived in Gdynia "with a ticket or just with hope,"²³ in order to continue traveling the world. This hope can be seen in the story of the Sikora family mentioned above. The first chart on this subject begins with the words: "there were thousands of families like this one. They differed as to their level of wealth or education, but they all

22 Małgorzata Litwinowicz-Drożdżiel, "Poruszenia. O gdyńskim Muzeum Emigracji" [Movements. About the Emigration Museum in Gdynia], *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 20 (2018).

23 Marcin Szerle, "Konieczność a przymus. Zagadnienia migracyjne w założeniach ekspozycji stałej Muzeum Emigracji w Gdyni" [Necessity and compulsion. Migration issues in the assumptions of the permanent exhibition of the Emigration Museum in Gdynia], *Studia Historica Gedanensia* 5 (2014): 398.

shared the desire for a better life.” The museum visitor accompanies the Sikora family on their long journey – he or she is with them in their home, on the train, on the ship and in their next stops in the United States. The exhibition invites the visitor to identify with the protagonists of this story and to “experience” their fears and hopes. The prominence of the peasant story can be seen as part of a “people’s history turn” in Polish historiography, but it also allows for the display of a single, grassroots story, thus becoming close to the form of hope that we have described above as “dispersed.” This desire and the hope for its fulfilment is the driving force behind many of the migration stories presented in the museum. At this level, the main message of the museum is the belief that the individual can act effectively to improve their life. The stories on display have happy endings; it is difficult to find stories in the exhibition of people who regret their decision to leave their country. The message of the exhibition is optimistic and emphasizes the value of action taken with hope.

The museum conducted a survey on Poles’ attitudes to migration. The study reports on the emotions associated with it: “two thirds of respondents link emigration with sadness, regret or longing, while for 57% of them it brings hope for success.”²⁴ In the printed version, the study is illustrated with images of people associated with success – Tadeusz Kościuszko (“the most famous Polish emigrant”²⁵) and Roman Polański (“the most recognizable Pole living abroad today”²⁶). It seems that “success” is the key word in the narrative of the museum in Gdynia. While at the European Solidarity Centre and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals hope was most often felt collectively and was supposed to lead to victory, at the Emigration Museum it is an emotion felt more at the level of the individual, mobilizing independent agency and supposed to lead to success. Success, on the other hand, is understood as the improvement of one’s living conditions, and optimally also as making one’s own contribution to the country which one has left for (which is particularly evident in the eighth section, which is about Poles living abroad).

At the same time, hope is present at the more general level of the museum’s narrative, namely the fate of Poland. Optimism organizes the whole vision of the country’s history, which, despite the difficulties, ends with the successful overthrow of communism and joining the community of democratic countries. The last part of the exhibition is entitled “Free Poland,” and among the objects on display is a copy of *Newsweek* magazine with a photo of Lech Wałęsa

24 Łukasz Kierznikiewicz and Joanna Wojdyło, eds., *We Connect Stories: Emigration Museum in Gdynia* (Gdynia: Emigration Museum in Gdynia, 2014), 32.

25 *Ibid.*, 33.

26 *Ibid.*, 33.

on the front page, with the triumphant caption “the prize winner” (a reference to the 1983 Nobel Prize). In the museum’s narrative, the ultimate proof of success is, on the one hand, the enabling of the return of emigrants (in this vein, the stories of Radosław Sikorski, Barbara Toruńczyk and Czesław Miłosz, among others, are presented), and on the other hand, the opening of borders and the facilitation of Poles’ travel to Western countries.

Hope thus operates on two levels – that of the fate of the country (striving for success understood as democracy) and that of individuals (seeking opportunities for a better life). The former, with its emblematic images of Pope John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa, is closer to forms of petrified hope. The pope and Wałęsa are presented in the role of the aforementioned “distributors of hope,” thus inscribing the exhibition into an ideologized narrative of anti-communist resistance. In this narrative, hope is unambiguous and is a resource that is transmitted to the people by the leaders. In the multiplicity and ambiguity of the forms of the latter, one can look for traces of dispersed hope.²⁷

The last part of the exhibition at the Emigration Museum, dedicated to the postwar years, is no different. Here, hope is mainly expressed as the anti-communist resistance, in a heroic narrative.²⁸ In the section on Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the audio guide informs: “communists tried to interfere with the radio’s signal, but Poles listened to it in spite of the noise and crackling.”²⁹ This sentence points to the protagonists of the exhibition (Poles) and their enemies (communists), as if they were two independent and rival groups – the story will, of course, end with the success of the protagonists. This section also features the theme of individual hope and agency, presented on a board with information about escapes from communist Poland.

At the Emigration Museum, hope is embedded in the Catholic format, although to a lesser extent than at the European Solidarity Centre and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals. The role of the Catholic Church in the Solidarity revolution is highlighted. The way in which a duplicating machine (used for printing underground press) is displayed in the room dedicated to Solidarity is also distinctive. At the end of the rectangular space hangs a large photo of Lech Wałęsa surrounded by a cheering crowd, with many Solidarity logos above it. In the middle stands the duplicating machine. It is tightly covered

27 The example of the Emigration Museum confirms the gendered character of the two types of hope signaled above. Petrified hope is centered around the male figures of John Paul II and Lech Wałęsa. Dispersed hope has many female threads, e.g. the narrator telling the story of the Sikora family is Hanka Sikora, a young girl.

28 Ziębińska-Witek, *Musealisation of Communism*.

29 This is our translation of the Polish audio guide – at the time of writing this article, we did not have access to the English version.

by a display case, like almost no other object in the museum. Because of the setting and the solemn atmosphere of the room, the display case with the duplicating machine looks a bit like an altar. On the walls around it, the visitor will find information about censorship, the Solidarity carnival, Martial Law and the emigration of the 1980s. A photo of the priest Henryk Jankowski, a prominent figure of the Solidarity movement, later accused of being a child rapist, also appears as part of the mural on the wall. Thus, Catholicism determines the narrative about Solidarity at the level of both form and content.



Photo 4. Duplicating machine on display at the Emigration Museum. Photo by Sara Herczyńska.

Pope John Paul II is also an important figure, of course. At the European Solidarity Centre and the Dialogue Centre Upheavals, he is shown as a figure who “gives hope” and unites Poles, thanks to whom the overthrow of communism will be possible. In the Emigration Museum, he appears for the first time in the section dedicated to the Polish diaspora (presented mainly through the prism of its importance for various countries and regions). The board with a photograph of John Paul II is accompanied by the following description:

Pope. Pole. Emigré.

On 16 October 1978, the Archbishop of Krakow Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope and took the name John Paul II. By entering the Holy See, the new pope enriched the mission of the universal Church through the historical experience of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Polish diaspora enjoyed a renaissance. John Paul II was, after all, the most famous exile in the world, although he described himself as a pilgrim. He even joked with Americans in Chicago in 1979 that after the decision of the Conclave, the number of Poles in the USA had increased. In 1982, he gave hope to compatriots living in Britain: “You are for me not first and foremost emigrants, but a living part of Poland which, even torn from its native soil, does not cease to be itself.”

The pope is therefore shown as a strong individual and as an emigrant, so his success story is exposed. The narrative focuses on his relationships with the Polish diaspora, to whom he also “gave hope.” John Paul II returns in the final section of the exhibition, which highlights some of his correspondence with Zbigniew Brzezinski. The men are portrayed as two people who simultaneously achieved success in their careers: Wojtyła became pope in 1978; Brzezinski became Jimmy Carter’s security adviser in 1977. The letters on display in the last room are meant to illustrate their positions, but also to testify to their work for the betterment of Poland and the world.

Conclusion

To conclude these reflections on the different forms of hope that can be juxtaposed through the analysis of historical exhibitions, we wanted to point out that the tensions and contradictions between them do not exclude their mutual looping. Hope “petrified” in commemorative celebration coexists with “dispersed” hope, emerging from the collective experience of agency (sometimes ephemeral). The forms we have associated with the latter also merge with ideologies, as the “narrative of success” from the Emigration Museum clearly demonstrates.

Finally, the complications of mnemonic forms of hope can be illustrated by another work of art that contributes to the DCU exhibition in the “Birth of Hope” section: a photographic documentation of an action from the era, entitled *Easter 1981*, by Teresa Murak. The artist placed the titular inscription on a beach in Gdańsk in the spring of 1981, a few months after the signing of the Gdańsk Agreement, during the “Solidarity Carnival” (between August 1980 and December 1981) – creating the effect of a vague political allusion to the events of the time. Murak, associated with earth art, created a kind of living inscription by sowing the inscription with cress onto the fabric; the further fate of the object after it was left on the beach is unknown.³⁰ We propose an interpretation of this work in terms of the dispersed, under-defined hope that manifests itself in it. Easter and the resurrection of Christ is, of course, one of the strongest symbols of hope available in Polish and Western culture. The content of the inscription refers to the religious calendar and, at the same time, to the “here and now” of the action itself, suggesting that hope should be understood as a performative gesture, happening in the present and drawing from its conditions. The cress, the matter of the inscription, is first



Photo 5. Artwork by Teresa Murak at the Dialogue Centre Upheavals exhibition, August 2022. Photo by Maria Kobielska.

30 Teresa Murak and Sebastian Cichocki, “Teresa Murak. Selected Earth Works,” trans. Katarzyna Bartoszyńska, *View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture* 8 (2014), accessed September 4, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2014.8.1062>.

and foremost a rapidly sprouting plant that can be seen as a manifestation of energy and bold growth. Recognizing the allusion and enigma that the work represented requires the assumption of the existence of a community – and the artist, on her own terms, not explicitly, joins through it a community of resistance, (perhaps) pinning its hopes on the Solidarity revolution.

In 2024, it is difficult not to add the context of the climate crisis to the interpretation of the work *Easter 1981*. Murak's work portrays humankind's relationship with nature as tender and based on a gesture of care – sowing, watering and nursing. The current state of the environment and subsequent cataclysms are one of the greatest challenges to a hopeful view of the future. This theme emerged at the Emigration Museum in 2021 in a temporary exhibition entitled "Climax," the narrative of which dealt with the multi-level relationship between migration and the environment. The museum does not shy away from difficult topics, but presents them in its own language. The institution also responded adequately to the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. In a series of meetings entitled "Człowiek na granicy – zapytaj eksperta" ("Man on the border – ask an expert"), viewers could ask questions to specialists in refugee and migration law. The institution also created a webinar for teachers entitled "How to talk to students about the situation at the border." The museum's activities on climate and refugee issues can be seen as an attempt to practice hope – this time not in a mnemonic form, but in relation to current crises. The museum's various activities can also be seen through the prism of the division we have proposed. The clearly optimistic permanent exhibitions as a whole can be understood as the realization of mnemonically petrified hope, i.e. codified, accomplished hope which is part of the dominant historical narrative. Smaller activities such as temporary exhibitions, accompanying events or the educational program are close to dispersed hope – less stable, temporary, but polyphonic and open to dialogue with the viewer.

Abstract

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Exhibiting Hope. Postwar Poland in New Historical Museums

The aim of this article is to analyze the narratives about hope present in new Polish historical museums. The authors refer to Rebecca Solnit's book and make a distinction between "dispersed" and "petrified" hope. The subject of the analysis is the narratives about the People's Republic of Poland presented in three museums: the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk, the Dialogue Centre Upheavals in Szczecin and the Emigration Museum in Gdynia.

Keywords

hope, historical museums, Polish museum boom, museum narratives, Polish memory culture