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## The Holocaust in Polish and American culture and politics: Museums and memory places

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### Abstract

This article addresses issues related to Holocaust education in two emblematic sites: the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (A-BSM) and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, DC. Every year, these institutions are visited by millions of people, which contributes to their enormous impact on the memories of future generations. Their method of education, however, cannot be understood outside its historical, cultural and political context. Auschwitz contains the history of a former concentration and extermination camp, and the institution itself is also linked to the history of another totalitarian regime. In the United States, the National Holocaust Museum underwent years of deliberation over why the country should nationally commemorate Jewish victims, and why a memorial should stand on the National Mall in Washington, a place associated with American democracy. A broad view of the subject, as outlined in the article, not only allows for an awareness of what these centres are and how they educate, but it allows for an understanding of their perspective, excluding numerous criticisms that would seek to invalidate their discourse, while favouring criticism based on historical facts.

**Keywords:** Auschwitz, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust education, museums, memory policy, cultural policy

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## Introduction

Films are made about the Holocaust; artistic works and academic papers are written. However, every time the annihilation of the Jews is mentioned, the eyes of the world turn to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (A-BSM), Yad Vashem, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington. These sites, however, are disparate memorials and museums. They differ in architectural meaning (Auschwitz is also a relic), their concepts of exhibitions, their educational programs, and thus, in their manner of commemorating the Holocaust. They are the result of different apparatuses of state power, state policies, and cultural systems.

One of the first scholars of Holocaust commemoration was Peter Novik,<sup>1</sup> who proved that the memory of the Holocaust differs between countries occupied by the Nazis, countries neutral during the war, countries whose citizens were victims of the Nazis, and finally, the country of Israel, which has a special relationship with the victims of the Holocaust because they were Jewish. It is even different within a country whose citizens were the executors of the Holocaust – Germany. After the war, the divided halves of Germany accused each other of totalitarianism. The East accused the West of being the heirs of fascist imperialism, using the memory of World War II as a weapon of war against the Western Bloc, while the West accused the East of being followers of Soviet totalitarianism. Meanwhile, exhibitions began to be organized at Auschwitz as part of the museum that was being created. The commemoration of Nazi victims may have occurred here after the nationalization of discourse at the time. A state museum was established at the site of the former Auschwitz camp, and the commemoration was carried out in the spirit of the memory policy of the USSR, under whose domination Poland fell after the war. The USSR used the former Nazi camp at Auschwitz to denigrate Western imperialism, comparing Western capitalism to Nazi policies. Only after the fall of the USSR did Auschwitz cease to be an accusatory project.<sup>2</sup>

The United States represents an unprecedented case in Holocaust commemoration. It was the first country, after Israel, to erect a national memorial and museum dedicated to the Holocaust within its borders, even though its citizens were not victims of the Holocaust. American memory of the Holocaust, while bound by American Jews in the intellectual elite, led to the erection of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., under the partial patronage of the U.S. government, similar to monuments such as the Jefferson Memorial.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Novick, *The Holocaust is Not and Is Not – and Is Not Likely to Become – a Global Memory*, [in:] *Marking Evil. Holocaust Memory in the Global Age*, ed. Goldberg A., Hazan H., Berghahn Books, New York 2015, pp. 48–53.

<sup>2</sup> A. Wolff-Powęska, *Zwycięzcy i Zwyciężeni II Wojna Światowa W Pamięci Zbiorowej Narodów*, „Przegląd Zachodni,” 2, 2005, pp. 3–40.

<sup>3</sup> H. Kaplan, *Conscience and Memory. Mediations in a Museum of the Holocaust*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, pp. sx.

This paper aims to show how the Holocaust has been commemorated in Polish and American culture from the end of the war to the present day. It also touches on landmark moments related to Holocaust remembrance: in Poland, the events associated with the collapse of the Soviet system up to the overthrow of communism in 1989; in the United States, the 1970s and 1990s and the cultural phenomena of those years.

## Auschwitz as a memory place – what it was and what it is: The past and present role of Auschwitz in popularising World War II history

World War II left its most traumatic mark in the form of the remains of former concentration and extermination camps. These sites were primarily located in Soviet-dominated countries. Survivors of the camps demanded that museums be organized on their premises to tell their story and the story of their comrades in distress who died there.<sup>4</sup> So it happened. The authors of the exhibitions were Polish political prisoners, as well as historians who based on accounts of former prisoners – mainly Polish. The latter created a narrative that contributed to the consolidation of Auschwitz and other former Nazi camps as the martyrdom of Poles in the social consciousness. Although the Holocaust was not denied in the Polish People's Republic, the emphasis, especially during the Stalinist period, was on class struggle. The extermination of Jews in the permanent exhibition at Auschwitz was categorized as the extermination of millions. The Soviets' falsified figure of "four million people from all occupied countries" was used for this purpose<sup>5</sup> and the international exhibitions that opened, even after the so-called "thaw," only accentuated this Soviet-imposed terminology. They treated Jewish victims deported from various countries in terms of their nationality, not their ethnicity.<sup>6</sup> During the Cold War, the USSR appropriated the Holocaust to combat West Germany and the U.S., which were equated to Nazi imperialists; attempts were made to vulgarly warn "the world" that their policies could lead to history repeating itself.<sup>7</sup> Redefinition of Auschwitz was possible after the U.S. won the Cold War and communism collapsed. This change is best exemplified by the exhibition in Block 4 at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, dedicated to the Holocaust; and by the historical area of Birkenau,

<sup>4</sup> *Report by Kazimierz Smoleń*, Zespół Refearty, tom, 4, Archive of the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau (A-BSM Archives).

<sup>5</sup> *Tymczasowy mały przewodnik po byłym obozie koncentracyjnym Oświęcim-Brzezinka i po salach wystawowych Państw*, Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, Zespół Materiały, tom 56, A-BSM Archives, Oświęcim 1947; K. Smoleń, *Oświęcim 1940–45, Przewodnik po muzeum*, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> J. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and the politics of commemoration, 1945–1979*, Ohio University Press, Ohio 2003; J.C. Alexander, *On the Social Construction of Moral Universals, The 'Holocaust' from War Crime to Trauma Drama*, "European Journal of Social Theory," 5(1), 2002, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> *Wstęp, Wprowadzenie i Opracowanie*, [in:] *Auschwitz w okowach polityki. Międzynarodowy Komitet Oświęcimski. Wybór Dokumentów*, ed. P. Trojański, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego w Krakowie, Kraków 2019, p. 39.

called Auschwitz II during the Nazi occupation, which was primarily a camp for the extermination of Jews.

In Communist Poland, visitors to Auschwitz “carried” at least a vague idea of the Holocaust. In guidebooks from Polish People’s Republic on exhibitions in Block 4, we can read, first, about the extermination of Soviet prisoners of war. This is followed by information about the extermination of Gypsies, clergy, and people of different faiths; the healthy and the sick, the elderly and children. It is only in the context of the course of the extermination, starting with an exhibition in Room 4 within Block 4, that the guidebook speaks of Jews.<sup>8</sup> Recreating the exhibitions in the People’s Republic of Poland, Jonathan Huener arrives at a similar conclusion.<sup>9</sup> He states that at that time, it was not indicated that the deportations were primarily of Jews, that this was because of their race, or that their deportation was the final stage after the political machinery of identifying them, discriminating against them and placing them in ghettos.

The memory of the Holocaust in Poland was regained with the fall of communism. Poland no longer depended on policies imposed by the Soviet regime, and the Polish memory of Auschwitz could finally be confronted with the Jewish memory. This did not take place without conflict, fueled by the media writing about the clash of two nationalisms, without analyzing the thread that Polish memory remained isolated behind the Iron Curtain. Today, in Block 4 at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, there is a map marking the ghettos and transit camps from which, according to the Museum, Jews and prisoners of other nationalities were deported to K.L. Auschwitz (*Konzentrationslager Auschwitz*). From this message, visitors immediately learn who the majority of the victims of Auschwitz were and what the Holocaust was about.<sup>10</sup> The number of deportees to Auschwitz, stated in accordance with historical research to be 1,300,000 people, is given by the Museum at the very beginning of the opening exhibition in Block 4. The inscription also stresses that 90% of the victims were Jews.<sup>11</sup> Reclaiming the memory of the Holocaust does not diminish the suffering of the remaining victims of this former camp. In its main exhibition, the museum also highlights the fate of prisoners within the concentration camp who faced terror, starvation, mass executions, pseudo-medical experiments, or death by exhaustion from slave labour. The contemporary exhibitions in blocks 6, 7, 11, and 20 focus on these issues. Other blocks hold exhibitions on countries under Nazi occupation, where the victims were largely or predominantly Jews living in those countries. The martyrdom of the Poles is highlighted in Block 11 and 15, and an inscription in Block 4 states that Poles were the first prisoners of Auschwitz. The fates of the victims of the Holocaust, prisoners of various nationalities and ethnicities, and the Poles who were exterminated for their resistance, and who were the first prisoners of the camp, have also been revealed through a series

<sup>8</sup> K. Smoleń, *Oświęcim 1940–45, Przewodnik po muzeum*, Wydawnictwo Państwowego Muzeum w Oświęcimiu, 1974.

<sup>9</sup> J. Huener, *Auschwitz, Poland, and...*, Ohio 2003, pp. 123–128.

<sup>10</sup> Based on the author’s visit to the A-BSM.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

of symposia, seminars, and ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> This has had a tremendous impact on Poles' historical awareness about Auschwitz, which under the Iron Curtain had been small. As sociologist Marek Kucia has shown, the repercussions of the USSR's historical policy continued long after the overthrow of communism. As recently as 2000, in a survey, half of the young people who took part failed to answer correctly as to what the Holocaust was.<sup>13</sup>

Auschwitz as a memorial operates as a state museum, which the Act of November 21, 1996, defines as a museum established by central government administration bodies or provincial governors; in accordance with the Act, the entity that created the museum continues to supervise it.<sup>14</sup> However, the Polish democratic authorities do not dictate the elaboration of this historical issue; the state only outlines the framework of discourse through statutes on how the museum operates.<sup>15</sup> That is still enough to include the discourse in politics. Yet, it has nothing to do with imposed official history as it was in past politics. Under Soviet auspices, the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland (there was an official document subordinating Poland to the supremacy of the USSR<sup>16</sup>) obliterated, censored, and even falsified knowledge about Auschwitz and other camps (along with Treblinka, Bełżec, Sobibór, and other memorials). These sites were used for propaganda purposes, sometimes to such an extent that they could no longer be used as part of a democracy.<sup>17</sup> For example, the camp of Sobibór, a centre for the extermination of Jews as part of "Aktion Reinhardt," was not allowed to be officially commemorated until the 1960s. Even when a monument was erected, a commemorative plaque stated that some 250,000 Soviet prisoners of war had died there. Nowadays, from the memorial plaque at Sobibór Memorial Museum, one can learn about the extermination of 250,000 Jews. The same happened to Birkenau: at first, silence reigned there,<sup>18</sup> then a monument was erected that said nothing about the extermination of the Jews. Plaques with inscriptions were placed at its base: "The place of martyrdom and death of four million victims murdered by the Nazi genocidaires from 1940–45."<sup>19</sup> Yet Birkenau was the site where the Nazi resolutions of the Wannsee Conference were fulfilled, when the final settlement of the Jewish question was decided in January 1942. Death camps located in concentration camps were to serve this purpose.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> M. Kucia, *Auschwitz jako fakt społeczny*, Universitas, Kraków 2005, pp. 113–114.

<sup>14</sup> Dz.U. 1997 No. 5 item 24.

<sup>15</sup> *Ordinance of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of February 19, 2013 on granting statute to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim.*

<sup>16</sup> Dz.U. 1945 No. 47 item 268.

<sup>17</sup> A. Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey, and London 2018, p. 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Death of Birkenau.*

<sup>19</sup> M. Kucia, *Auschwitz jako...*, Kraków 2005, p. 30.

<sup>20</sup> E. Ayer, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. America Keeps the Memory Alive*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York 1994, p. 36.

## American politics and culture on the Holocaust, the popularising of Holocaust education by the U.S., and the role of sovereign Poland in popularising World War II history

While in the Eastern Bloc territories, including Poland, the history of the Holocaust was forgotten for good due to unlearned and active denial, obfuscation, and censorship,<sup>21</sup> the U.S. was gripped by a cultural trend called the memory boom, addressing issues of narrativization, especially of the difficult past.<sup>22</sup> It was then that the publications of Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, an American Jew, gained popularity,<sup>23</sup> and he was recognized as the moral authority of our time.<sup>24</sup> In 1972, he stated in the pages of the *New York Times* that the situation regarding the understanding of the Holocaust outside of survivors was beginning to change. In the 1970s, American universities began offering the first courses on the subject.<sup>25</sup> The Holocaust also became a media issue during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. NGOs, an important determinant of American democracy, pushed for the demand to confront past political violence to stand at the centre of national and international politics. Jeffrey Olick talks about the politics of grief.<sup>26</sup> On this tide, the problem of dealing with the Holocaust hit the public affairs agenda in 1978. Collaboration between the White House, Congress, and intellectual and survivor communities resulted in the creation of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., in 1993; an institution that would educate about the Holocaust nationwide. Deliberations over the creation of this federal institution, a centre of American culture, took 15 years. The purpose of these debates was to inscribe the Holocaust into American culture.<sup>27</sup>

The exhibition in this museum affects all the observer's senses, including stimuli that had not been previously captured in museology. The museum's aim is to intensify the recipient's reaction to the message that one cannot be indifferent to human rights violations. The museum teaches a lesson about how to act when you see victims of acts of discrimination and violence. To achieve this, visitors must take on the role of the victim, a feat achieved through the architecture of the building. The uneven corners of the rooms and the cramped corridors make the viewer realize what the Jews felt under the Nazis: the chaos that came with being deprived of a normal life, the fear that there was no escape, and the feeling of cramped, ghetto-like conditions.<sup>28</sup> This is why the museum has been accused of making a spectacle of suffering and being another American

<sup>21</sup> M. Kubiszyn, *Niepamięć – Postpamięć – Współpamięć*, UMCS, Lublin 2019, pp. 41–42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> T.D. Fallace, *The emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, pp. 25–28.

<sup>24</sup> M. Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory: The Rhetoric of Displacement at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, SUNY Press, Albany 2016, p. 105.

<sup>25</sup> T.D. Fallace, *The emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools...*, New York 2008, pp. 25–28.

<sup>26</sup> A. Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity...*, New Brunswick et al. 2018, pp. 12–15.

<sup>27</sup> Based on the author's visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.



theme park lacking authenticity.<sup>29</sup> Despite this criticism, the museum has gained widespread trust, which is fundamental in building any authority:<sup>30</sup> “when the museum opened to the public in 1993, it was also widely recognized by architects, human rights activists, historians, Jews and ethicists.”<sup>31</sup> In terms of authenticity, the museum has collected some 32,000 authentic objects from Holocaust memorials.<sup>32</sup> However, after years of deliberation by historians and planners who worked as a body institutionalized by statute (The Holocaust Memorial Council),<sup>33</sup> it was determined that more important than the authenticity of the objects was the authentic response of the audience. The museum was to address advocacy on behalf of victims of discrimination and violence; the authenticity of the response could just as well be evoked by inauthentic objects.<sup>34</sup>

While the museum draws inspiration from an amusement park, it does not simplify the Holocaust; on the contrary, it is a serious institution – a federal institution. It proves that politics can be moral. The museum also provides a perspective on American Holocaust education. It teaches the Holocaust in an analogous way to other events that have their own causes and repercussions. In this way, an incomprehensible crime in the history of mankind has become an educational subject, not just an object of silent commemoration in a sacred place. Visitors first get a lesson in the authoritarianism of the Third Reich, which, according to the museum’s narrative, went from burning books incompatible with Nazi ideology to committing acts of terror on people who did not conform to the Nazis’ vision of the world. Homosexuals were discriminated against, as were conquered peoples who resisted, but especially the Jewish people, because of their race. This discrimination, which no one effectively stopped, took the form of depriving Jews of more and more of the civil and human rights they had in democratic countries, leading up to their isolation, which was the final stage before their extermination.<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneously with the opening of the museum, one of the largest Holocaust museums in the world, the film *Schindler’s List* (1993 premiere date) was released to the American audience. It was the second Hollywood production, after the NBC *Holocaust* mini-series (1978), which inscribed the Holocaust into American culture,<sup>36</sup> even though Americans were not among its victims. The mini-series, which depicted how a Jewish family functioned in the face of the Holocaust, finally made it possible for every American to identify with the victims of the Holocaust, who were no longer described in numbers and

<sup>29</sup> M. Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory...*, Albany 2016, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Z. Bauman, *Socjologia*, Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 1996, p. 126.

<sup>31</sup> M. Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory...*, Albany 2016, p. 47.

<sup>32</sup> E. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory. The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001; *Object List for Consideration*, The USHMM Institutional Archives, Accession No. 2002.052.

<sup>33</sup> Public Law 96–388, 1980.

<sup>34</sup> M. Bernard-Donals, *Figures of Memory...*, Albany 2016, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Based on the author’s visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

<sup>36</sup> E. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory. The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum*, Columbia University Press, New York 2001, p. 12.

presented as a dead mass, but as individuals with their own names and families, trying to lead normal lives in the face of the growing violence against them.<sup>37</sup> *Schindler's List*, through the story of Oskar Schindler saving the Jews of Kraków during World War II, combated the stereotype that all Germans were genocidal. While popularising the Holocaust and fighting stereotypes, both films were not without stereotypes themselves: simplifying the Holocaust, stripping it of its cruelty (the *Holocaust* series), and giving a happy ending to a crime that did not have one (*Schindler's List*). Both films fit the definition of Adam Schaff, who described stereotyping as the law of least effort.<sup>38</sup> In many circles, thanks to the media, a term has stuck to Spielberg's film: "Spielberg's Holocaust Park," seeing it as "the fantasies of a young boy from California who had never taken an interest in the Holocaust or the Jews before."<sup>39</sup>

*Schindler's List* is not a documentary but a feature film, so showing the director's own perspective is justified by the genre. In the case of feature films dealing with historical themes, the fight against defective memory codes<sup>40</sup> may be arduous, as cultural expert Kinga Krzemińska points out with concern: "It is worth remembering, however, that a feature film has never been, is not and will not be a historical testimony."<sup>41</sup> Krzemińska concludes as follows:

Of course, I am not saying that these misrepresentations should be forgotten or ignored altogether. Not at all. They are a very important part of the consideration of kitsch in Holocaust cinematography, or cinematography that touches on the subject in any way ... Thus, a connoisseur of the subject must accept that historical fact will always be subordinate to dramatic history in popular film. (K. Krzemińska, 2010, p. 55)

Spielberg's film contributed significantly to promoting Oskar Schindler's former enamelware factory in Kraków. In 2010, a public museum was opened at this historic site under the name of *Fabryka Emalia Oskara Schindlera* (Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory). Tourists who go there certainly hope to find in this museum what they would find in a Hollywood director's film. However, this museum has found its own perspective on storytelling. The Minister of Culture has testified to the message of the museum:

It was with satisfaction and interest that I received information about the preparation of an exhibition devoted to the life of the inhabitants of Kraków during the

<sup>37</sup> P. Novick, *The Holocaust and collective memory*, Bloomsbury, London 2001, p. 209.

<sup>38</sup> A. Schaff, *Stereotypy a działanie ludzkie*, Wydawnictwo Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1981, pp. 45–46.

<sup>39</sup> O. Waxman, *He Was Sent by God to Take Care of Us: Inside the Real Story Behind Schindler's List*, "Time," 07.12.2018.

<sup>40</sup> A. Nowak-Far, Nowak-Far, A., *Introduction: Defective codes of memory in the present world*, [in:] *Defective codes of memory. How the memory of international crimes is distorted in public discourse*, eds. A. Nowak-Far, Ł. Zamęcki, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warszawa 2015, pp. 3–12.

<sup>41</sup> K. Krzemińska, *Kicz w kinie holokaustowym*, "Zagłada Żydów: studia i materiały," 6, 2010, p. 33.



German occupation. From now on, thanks to the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków, interested people, and I am sure there will be many of them, will be able to delve into the past, a cruel time, but also – a time of everyday life which, despite everything, was going on in occupied Kraków. Particularly important was the part of the exhibition devoted to Oskar Schindler, the owner of Emailwarenfabrik, whose memorable deeds saved so many Jews. (A letter from Bogdan Zdrojewski, Minister of Culture and National Heritage, to Michał Niezabitowski, Director of the Museum)

Based on the content of the letter, one might wonder whether this framing of the topic constitutes an appropriation of the discourse. Schindler's film, even if it oversimplified the history of the Holocaust, dealt entirely with that very issue. In Schindler's museum, although the history of the Holocaust is discussed in great detail – from the terror in which Jews lived under the Nazis in Kraków and their lives in the Kraków ghetto to its dissolution, which ended with the deportation of most of Kraków's Jews to their places of execution – a third character appears alongside the history of the Holocaust and the story of a German rescuing Jews: Kraków during the occupation.

The functioning of the Kraków museum and its discourse must be summed up by reference to the cultural and remembrance policy of the Polish state, for the Schindler Museum is not a private institution. In Poland, public museums function under the Polish cultural system, and places related to martyrology or the history of the Polish nation – that is, places of remembrance – reflect the politics of remembrance. The Schindler Museum is not a memorial like Auschwitz or Treblinka; however, nor is it a commercial museum. It is supervised by the state through the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and directly by the organizer, the Department of Culture and National Heritage of the City of Kraków. As a public museum it exists under a number of laws<sup>42</sup> (Dz.U. 1997 No. 5 item 24; Dz. U. of 1996, No. 90, item 406). These reflect the Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 1996, which makes cultural heritage a duty of the state acting through its authorities, and public museums a form of administrative service provision. At this point, another question immediately arises for both the researcher and the reader: Does this mean that public museums in Poland are not independent? Here, again, it is necessary to recreate the historical context, which has been well sketched by the example of the use of the Auschwitz Museum by the People's Republic. After World War II, the political system of the prewar Polish state could not be reactivated; this affected cultural policy. The Communist authorities began to build a socialist system; this was called the cultural revolution. The goal of cultural policy was to saturate culture and education with the ideas of Stalinism, Marxism, and Leninism. However, in the first governmental document on cultural policy in the Third Republic of Poland (term 1992–1993), it was emphasized that Polish cultural policy would never again be based on centralized management and ideological control over cultural life and the activities of cultural institutions, as it was

<sup>42</sup> Dz.U. 1997 No. 5 item 24; Dz. U. of 1996, No. 90, item 406.

in the People's Republic.<sup>43</sup> The remembrance of Poland's tangible and intangible heritage is a Polish *raison d'être*, and the Minister of Culture and National Heritage is responsible for maintaining and disseminating national and state traditions. The pursuit of this goal requires the "promotion of patriotism... and other values important to the Polish national tradition."<sup>44</sup>

The creators of the exhibition of The Schindler Museum consciously aimed to promote another local hero, apart from Schindler; that is, Kraków during the occupation. So that the discourse of the museum would not be a subject of a discussion about the Polish appropriation of the subject, the history of this place was used for this purpose. The site, while associated with the forced labour of Jews and their rescue by Schindler, is a place whose history has a broad context. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett takes a similar view:

The creators of the museum had a choice: either to dedicate it to the Righteous Among the Nations – Aryans like Schindler, who saved Jews during the Holocaust – or to focus on the fate of Kraków's Jews during the war. They did neither. Instead, they found a way to tell a story that is one whole. This is neither a story of the occupation in which Jews received little attention, nor a story of the Jews in which the occupation was marginalized. The story of how Oskar Schindler rescued Jewish workers employed in his factory fits into such a broader picture. (Based on a reprint by the museum of a part of the article by Ruth Ellen Gruber, as translated by Katarzyna Kasińska)

Although the museum deals with the martyrdom of two nations, it is not at all devoid of spectacular effects native to Hollywood. It is a multimedia spectacle, and very attractive to the visitor: "We're standing on a floor of spilled white gravel ... A symbolic mine cart obscured by glass stands in the middle of the room. There is a photograph on the ceiling – sort of like a mirror image of the floor – showing the famous road made of matzevot."<sup>45</sup> The question that comes to mind, however, is whether the Holocaust and the horrors of war should be used to build attractive messages, and in the context of a museum, exhibitions as if from an amusement park. Help in answering this question comes Suzan Hazan and her article "A Crisis of Authority. New Lamps for Old," in which she raises the topic of multimedia in museums. Hazan argues that such exhibitions have an undeniable impact on our experience of interacting with museums. Moreover, new media prompts us to move beyond the physical object, thereby enhancing our experience and engaging us. She concludes that with new media, visitors are no longer passive learners;<sup>46</sup> therefore, such learning can be more effective.

<sup>43</sup> *Polityka kulturalna państwa – założenia. Wersja wstępna*, „Przegląd Powszechny. Miesięcznik poświęcony sprawom religijnym, kulturalnym i społecznym,” 11/855/1992.

<sup>44</sup> K.M. Ujazdowski, *10 punktów. Program działania*, [in:] *Kultura racją stanu. Program Działania Ministerstwa Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego*, MKiDN, Warszawa 2000, p. 12–17.

<sup>45</sup> Based on a reprint by the museum of part of an article by B. Piłat.

<sup>46</sup> S. Hazan, *A Crisis of Authority: Old Lamps for New*, [in:] *Theorizing Digital Cultural Heritage*, eds. F. Cameron, S. Kenderdine, MIT Press 2006.

## A lesson on the Holocaust from Poland's Auschwitz and Washington's Holocaust Museum

In contrast to museums in Poland, which are either directly or indirectly (when the organizer is a local government) subordinate to the state, in the U.S., there is no Ministry of Culture deciding how cultural institutions function. In a consolidated democracy like the U.S., there is no need for a Ministry of Culture or a top-down discourse-forming framework to protect national cultural heritage: the U.S. is the cradle of NGOs and civic society, so Americans defend their culture themselves. The U.S. cultural system is a combination of market principles, including but not limited to cultural industries, NGOs, and wealthy and influential individuals who subsidize the elite; and a non-profit culture from which cultural industries draw inspiration and distribute American culture to the world. Returning to the American perspective on commemorating the Holocaust as part of American culture, the aim was to repudiate the greatest of all crimes in order to restore dignity to the victims: "We cannot grant the killers a posthumous victory. Not only did they humiliate and assassinate their victims, they also wanted to destroy their memory" (Report to the President). The intention was also to protect American democracy: "As we analyze the American record, we can study our triumphs as well as our failures so as to defeat radical evil and strengthen our democracy" (Report to the President).<sup>47</sup>

Comparing to Auschwitz the museum in Washington is not an authentic memory place, that is why it tells its own story. The story is based not on the place but on the history of the Holocaust. The story serves American democracy. The American perspective of the museum can be criticized for simplifying the Holocaust and creating an inauthentic spectacle of suffering. However, as long as the museum does not contradict the facts, it has an indisputable right to exist and educate. While the charge of simplification may be valid for the film *Schindler's List*, in the case of the museum, it is only the result of a lack of proper knowledge of American society which, based in a secure democracy, could not, for the most part, understand the events of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. The final design of the museum was due to Michel Barenbaum, who stated that the challenge was to transfer the European experience to American soil so that the Americans could comprehend the crime.<sup>48</sup>

The American Museum educates Americans not only through a permanent exhibition, but also through temporary exhibitions and a series of educational activities. By statute,<sup>49</sup> the museum has the sole legitimacy to develop Holocaust education programs for all of America. Holocaust education is overseen by the Holocaust Memorial Council, which is guided by bottom-up guidance from NGOs and wealthy and influential elites, as detailed in its 1979 Report to the

<sup>47</sup> *Report to the President. President's Commission on the Holocaust*, September 1979.

<sup>48</sup> *Remarks by Dr. Michael Berenbaum. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Presentation to a Joint Meeting of the Museum Development Committee and the Content Committee, January 20, 1988, The National Gallery, The USHMM Institutional Archives, Accession No. 1997-016.1.*

<sup>49</sup> Public Law 96-388.

President. The manner of commemorating the Holocaust was institutionalized by statute according to these guidelines.<sup>50</sup> This does not mean that the government has no influence on the shape of this education; it appoints the members of the Council. After the Museum opened in 1993, the Council became the Museum's board of trustees, acting in the interests of the independent U.S. government and the Museum as a public-private partnership that receives federal funds to support the Museum's building operations.<sup>51</sup>

Most of those with basic knowledge of the U.S. system are well aware that compulsory education on a given topic is the responsibility of individual states, but as a result of the museum's efforts, the subject of the Holocaust is included in education in states that have not required it to be.<sup>52</sup> Of particular importance in teacher education at the national level is a separate unit within the centre: the William Levine Family National Institute for Holocaust Education. Both nationally and internationally, the Jack, Joseph, and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies have trained scores of educators, students, and organizations interested in the subject. It hosts a number of investigators<sup>53</sup> each year as part of a fellowship. Others go there on their own initiative or on grants obtained in their home countries (e.g., the author's visit to the Holocaust Museum Archives in Washington, D.C., which was made possible by a research grant obtained through training at the Department of International and Political Studies).

The Polish Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum also has great merit in educating about the Holocaust. Although the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum is not responsible for creating core curricula for teaching about the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes in Polish schools, it runs a number of educational programs to help teachers teach about the Holocaust and Nazi crimes. Since 1998, the centre and the Pedagogical Academy have co-organized the first postgraduate studies devoted to the Holocaust and totalitarianism, thus contributing to the education of a multitude of educators who struggled with a lack of textbooks and interpretations on how to teach about the Holocaust. A year later, the Holocaust was included in the core curriculum for general secondary education as a compulsory subject.<sup>54</sup> The Polish authorities attach importance to Holocaust education. The democratic government of Poland also contributed to the promotion of education by participating in a conference in Stockholm in 2000, declaring its support for the spread of education in Poland.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> *Report to the President. President's Commission on the Holocaust*, September 1979.

<sup>51</sup> Public Law 96-388.

<sup>52</sup> *Report on The Status of Holocaust Education in The United States and Resources Available To The Elementary and Secondary School Teacher*, The USHMM Institutional Archives, 1980-89, Accession No.2001.165.

<sup>53</sup> *Fellowships*, USHMM.

<sup>54</sup> P. Trojański, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Auschwitz i Holokaust. Dylematy i wyzwania polskiej edukacji*, ed. Piotr Trojański, Państwowe Muzeum Auschwitz-Birkenau, Oświęcim 2008, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> R. Szucha, P. Trojański, Szucha R., Trojański P., *Jak uczyć o Holokauście. Poradnik metodyczny do nauczania o Holokauście w ramach przedmiotów humanistycznych w zreformowanej szkole*, Ośrodek Rozwoju Edukacji, Warszawa 2012, pp. 5-6.

In 2005, in place of the Education Department in Auschwitz, the government established a new entity that has since been tasked with educating about Auschwitz and the history of the camp: The International Center for Education about Auschwitz and the Holocaust (ICEAH). On this basis, it can be clearly stated that using the example of the Auschwitz memorial, the aim of democratic Poland's policy of remembrance is to support the history of Auschwitz as both a site of the Holocaust and a concentration camp. This policy allows for a variety of memories in the public space, as evident in the goals set for the ICEAH, which was intended from the beginning to ensure a dialogue of cultures.<sup>56</sup> Thus censorship of the authorities on what should be remembered and forgotten is over in democracy. Still, it shows that Polish state is the most important creator of the discourse on the past within public institutions.

It is impossible to enumerate all the contributions of the Auschwitz centre to education about the Holocaust and other criminal Nazi activities at this site; nor would this be possible without the policy of the Polish state, as it is a state museum. This is the case in the permanent exhibition, which devotes the whole of Block 4 in the former Nazi base camp to discussing the history of the Holocaust; through the perfectly marked sightseeing route in Birkenau, which is no longer just a cemetery of ashes but a documented relic, to exhibitions on life in the camp and other crimes committed there by the Nazis against prisoners. These included mass executions by shooting and hanging, killing by lethal injection, death by starvation and physical exhaustion due to slave labour. The museum also has international exhibitions that discuss Nazi aggression, which involved not only terror against civilian populations but, above all, the Holocaust of the Jewish communities living in those countries, along with a range of activities for educators and cultural exchange.<sup>57</sup> In this last area, the museum cooperates with Yad Vashem, the Council of Europe, and educational centres from Poland and abroad. All this is in accordance with the statute given by the Ministry of Culture, which defines in detail the functioning and scope of the discourse of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. Within the latter, the museum is responsible for commemorating and documenting the extermination and martyrdom of the victims of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau (K.L. Auschwitz), conducting research and educational activities, conservation, and exhibition.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

Both the Polish Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum are memorials and museums – yet they are very different. The Polish Auschwitz is a historical site locating its historical narratives. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., is organized outside the place where history

<sup>56</sup> Oświęcim Strategic Government Program, Phase II 2002–2006.

<sup>57</sup> Based on a visit to the A-BSM and A-BSM Annual Reports (available online).

<sup>58</sup> *Ordinance of the Minister of Culture and National Heritage of February 19, 2013, on Granting Statute to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim.*

unfolds; but as it turns out, it too can carry a powerful message, so the impact on the senses of visitors is strong in both places. Additionally, as described above, the U.S. Museum impacts civic attitudes through a combination of its artefacts and the discursive elements of the architectural space. This is not to say that Auschwitz does not do the same. The so-called aura of the place, connected with the cemetery of human ashes, also, maybe even more, influences our imagination. All this, along with the factography of Auschwitz, contributes to increasing visitors' sensitivity and tolerance for people of different races, religions, or sexual orientations; and, therefore, to civic education in a democratic state.

Both centres are associated with the operation of the state power apparatus. In Poland, the framework for discourse and education on Auschwitz is set by the Ministry of Culture. Although the activities of the centre are not subject to the Ministry of Education like other public institutions in Poland, such as schools, they must be compliant with it. The policy of remembrance pursued by the democratic government of Poland manifests itself in the maintenance of the top-down institutionalization of the discourse of Nazi crimes, a legacy of the previous system (it is still a state museum under a law passed decades ago). Nowadays, however, this discourse has nothing to do with official history imposed by another state or by one ruling party. The Holocaust Museum in Washington is also a nationalized institution. It is a federal centre, but the discourse within it was not outlined by the U.S. government, but developed from the bottom up, and then accepted by the government. The result has been the institutionalization of Holocaust discourse in the U.S. under the 1980s law. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., is a national institution dedicated to documenting, researching, and interpreting the history of the Holocaust and creating educational programs on the subject for the entire United States. It also serves as a national memorial, not unlike the monuments to American democracy. The museum prompts visitors to reflect on the Holocaust and their own responsibility as citizens of a democratic society for this event and the future fate of the world. It is not under a Ministry of Culture, as no such thing exists in the United States. The U.S. is the cradle of civic society and the motherland of non-profit, non-governmental organizations, which carry out democratic missions and thus are engaged in promoting the democratic culture of the U.S.<sup>59</sup> What still largely distinguishes the American museum from other history museums is the provision of a new kind of interactive engagement with the past, constituting an entirely new category of museum – the “experiential.”<sup>60</sup> Experimental museums are increasingly focused on science and on creating visitor experiences. A similar exhibition can be seen in the Schindler Museum, but the inspiration came from the U.S. The same is true of Holocaust education in the context of human rights: it started in the U.S., and thanks to the American cultural system, it was promoted around the world. In a museum such

<sup>59</sup> L.M. Salomon, *Sektor non profit na rozstajach. Przypadek Stanów Zjednoczonych*, [in:] *Trzeci Sektor dla zaawansowanych. Nowoczesne państwo i organizacje pozarządowe – Wybór tekstów*, Stowarzyszenie Klon/Jawor, Warszawa 2001, pp. 57–70.

<sup>60</sup> A. Sodaro, *Exhibiting Atrocity:...*, New Brunswick et al. 2018, 23–24.



as Auschwitz, more important than the multimedia nature of the exhibitions is the site of the camp, which itself is a testimony; the museum only explains its history through exhibitions. Since 1989, the story no longer serves only the authorities – for example, in fighting a political opponent – but also the public. Moreover, it can be told on the basis of facts rather than censorship.

The cultural centres in question fulfil a very important function: they educate multitudes of people about the difficult past. Education is undoubtedly one of the most democratic methods of influencing historical awareness and changing attitudes toward a better future. The centres have each found their own way to do this. The search for a way is the result not only of the work of historians but also of the sociocultural and political system. Although the museums are different, what they have in common is that they do not simplify events, and their education has been based on historical findings: from the beginning in the case of the Schindler Museum and the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and since 1989 in the case of the Auschwitz Museum.

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