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of the Government**

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Herinneringsplek

“ESTRANGED. MARCH ‘68 AND ITS AFTERMATH”

THE POLIN MUSEUM IN WARSAW AND THE DISPLEASURE OF THE GOVERNMENT

CONSENSUS IS A THING OF THE PAST

It's five years ago now since the Warsaw Polin-Museum has opened its gates to visitors. Since then, on an almost daily basis, the Square of the Ghetto Heroes is humming with activity. Because it's here that the Finnish architects Lahdelma & Mahlamäki positioned their project, an even, rectangular building in pale green, directly next to the Monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto Uprising by the sculptor Nathan Rappaport.

In the days of socialist Poland the atmosphere on the ample square, faced by new blocks of flats, was usually silent and dull. Crowds only gathered there during days of remembrance or a state visit like Willy Brandt's in December 1970. The German chancellor knelt down in front of the Monument of the Heroes of the Ghetto Uprising, as a confession of Germany's guilt for the crimes committed against Poles and Jews.

For many years of the post-war period, apart from the occasional commemoration of the Shoah, Jewish

View of the Warsaw Polin-Museum on the Square of the Ghetto Heroes. The building was designed by the Finnish architects Lahdelma & Mahlamäki.

◆ Entry hall of the Polin Museum.

history was deemed taboo in Poland. The Communist state, along with the Catholic church, saw itself as an ethnically unitary state. At the time probably nobody could imagine that one day people from all over the globe would pour into a large museum on the Square of the Ghetto Heroes, into this rectangular building where you suddenly find yourself in a passage built like a bizarre wave-like valley which reminds the visitor of Moses' crossing of the Red Sea. Out of this confinement one emerges into the permanent exhibition completed in 2014. In six galleries, arranged in chronological order and spread out over 4000 square metres, one thousand years of Jewish history in Poland are on display. But there is also a large hall for debates, concerts and films as well as space for special exhibitions.

In the 1990s, quite soon after the end of communism, historians and museum specialists began to work on the concept for the Polin museum. In the process, they suffered numerous setbacks and had to fight their corner in various political quarrels. At the same time they had to overcome public indifference and raise money. Construction was finally made possible by a broad political consensus of the post-communist era. Not only the Liberals and the post-commu-

nist Left were in favour of the museum, but also a section of the national Right. Lech Kaczyński, who as Polish president lost his life in the plane crash in 2010 at Smolensk in Russia, became personally involved.

From 2002 until 2005, as mayor of Warsaw, he had already supported the idea of the Polin museum. In 2001, together with his twin brother Jarosław, Lech Kaczyński had founded the national-conservative party "Law and Justice" (PiS). He seemed to move the national Right closer to a model of civic patriotism where the national idea didn't depend on religious confession and ethnic descent so that the anti-semitic tradition of the Polish Right could be overcome, at least a little. Jews should be able to be Poles. So in 2007, as state president, Lech Kaczyński laid the foundation stone for the Polin museum.

Over the following years, whenever the creators of the museum were put under political pressure, National-Conservatives were less prominent than representatives of the liberal-conservative Civic Platform who had more recently been installed in office. They withheld financial means or tried to interfere with the design of the permanent exhibition to cast the complicated relationship between Poles and Jews in the post-war period into a more favourable light than it had actually been according to the opinion of the curators in charge of the exhibition.

Only quite recently the National Conservatives changed their stance towards the Polin museum. After the election victory of the PiS party under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński it became clear that the political historians of PiS would have preferred to

paint a different picture of a thousand years of Jewish history in Poland, with Poland as a nation of heroes and victims which collectively distinguished itself as saviours of Jews during the Holocaust and where anti-Semitism miraculously ceased to exist after 1945.

Since 2015, quite a number of cultural institutions have already fallen victim to the rigid political approach to history by the PiS party which often contradicts historical scholarship. Because of this approach, it seems that the former consensus in respect of the Polin museum is now breaking down. For months, Poland's National Conservatives have been sounding the attack on state television and in private media connected to the party.

MARCH 1968 – AN ISSUE FOR THE PRESENT?

A special exhibition which opened at the Polin museum in March 2018 started the ball rolling. It focuses on a dramatic chapter of Polish post-war history half a century ago, the so-called March events of 1968, a year when students on both sides of the Iron Curtain famously demonstrated for more freedom and social reform. As in other places, the leadership of what was then communist Poland responded with repression and police violence.

Still, the Polish United Workers' Party distinguished itself with a special piece of propaganda by declaring that the protest by Polish students was in reality a Zionist conspiracy. Inces-

◆ Monument to the Heroes of the Ghetto Uprising.

◆ Parts of the exhibition “Estranged. March ‘68 and its Aftermath” and the gallery called “The Archive of March”: anti-Zionist state and party propaganda in 1968.

◆ People targeted by the campaign.

●●● santly, it referred to the Jewish origin of some student leaders and alleged that not only the masterminds of the protest, but also their parents, often high-ranking party officials or members of the intellectual elite, weren’t loyal citizens of Poland. That they were lacking in patriotism. That their true home was therefore not Poland, but Zionism. In turn, the Polish communists denounced the state of Israel as an imperialist ally of the USA and West Germany.

At that time, the state-controlled media adopted this approach which was directed against Jews, but under an anti-Zionist cover. At factory meetings, the respective slogans were hammered home to working people. In the end, this campaign of an otherwise not very popular party and national leadership proved effective. 13,000 people with Jewish roots who generally saw themselves as Poles gave in to the pressure and left the country. Many among the older members of the Jewish community had survived the German policy of extermination. In spite of this traumatic experience and in spite of the persecu-

tion and hostility during the post-war period they had not left the country as they only felt at home in Poland.

The circumstances of their emigration in 1968 were humiliating in every respect. The authorities issued one-way passports without permission to return. Those driven out were only permitted to take a small part of their possessions with them, if any. On occasion, neighbours reacted with open malice.

“MARCH CHATTER” THEN AND NOW

“Estranged. March ‘68 and its Aftermath” was the title of the Polin exhibition on the events. Newspaper cuttings, film material, official and private documents of the time are on display, also memories recorded later which included some until then unknown details.

At times the censored comments of the Polish public recall the semi-fascist reaction to student protest in former West Germany, for example the suggestion that, as children of the privileged, the protesters were work-shy parasites, letting off steam at the expense

of the working-class. In an allusion to the undisputed shortage of tropical fruits in the planned economy, Polish propaganda stigmatised critical school and university students as “banana youth”, in other words as the pampered offspring of a false elite which enjoyed an inappropriate access to privileges.

The opening of the exhibition “Estranged” in March 2018 took place in a heated political climate. On the surface, the chapter “Poland in 1968” seemed to have been reappraised and digested, in theatre and films, in literature and historical research. But suddenly the anti-Jewish campaign of half a century earlier turned into a hot issue, because on 1 March 2018 a law came into force according to which any person who accuses Poland of having participated in the German extermination of Jews can be sentenced to up to three years in jail. In early July 2018, the law was slightly modified by the Polish parliament. Offenders can no longer be sentenced to prison but merely be prosecuted under civil law.

As the so-called Holocaust law – the original one, initially – generated protest at home and abroad, especially in Israel and the United States, the Warsaw Government and their nationalist supporters increased their rhetoric. According to them, Poland was subjected to slander by foreign countries. And Israel was accused of being the key figure in slandering Poland. Poland had only passed the Holocaust law to enforce historical justice. Poland was the main victim of the policies of German occupation and a country with an excellent tradition of anti-totalitarian resistance. Poland, so they claimed, was being defamed by its internal and external enemies, not least by Jews whom Poland had tried to

rescue from the Holocaust like no other country. In the course of this campaign language stereotypes were being resurrected which the linguist and historian of literature Michał Głowiński had, in view of the experience of 1968, described as “March chatter”, in a book of the same title (Głowiński 1991).

On its last wall chart about the immediate present in Poland under the PiS party, the Polin exhibition “Estranged” provides a new, recent example of “March chatter”. “Puppets of Soros¹: Get out of Poland. We’ll repeat the year 1968”, reads a poster of the ONR (National Radical Camp), an organisation which, while not belonging to the governing coalition, enjoys the status of benign toleration. The whole national right regards George Soros as an adversary, too. The government also generates mistrust of all NGOs who rely on finance from abroad, at least to some degree, such as international NGOs.

In principle, the ONR and the PiS government are cultivating the same stereotypes and scapegoats. Not long ago the PiS president of the Polish parliament and close confidante of Jarosław Kaczyński, Marek Kuchciński, spoke about the difficulty of freeing the “common Polish home” of rats, in other words of liberating it from vermin. On the propaganda poster against George Soros on show in the Polin-exhibition, the ONR-authors don’t explicitly mention his Jewish background. To evoke the corresponding prejudice, they content themselves with a reference to “1968”, in other words to the anti-Jewish campaign of the Communist Party.

The snapshot of a tweet of the politician and television journalist Magdalena Ogórek, born in 1979, about Marek ●●●

(1) Soros is the American-Hungarian investor who set up the “Open Society Foundations”.

●●● Borowski, a politician of the Left born in 1946, provided a further example of how Polish politicians of the national Right make use of ideological components of the anti-semitic campaign in 1968 for their own ends today: “Is it really a sign of backbone when you change your name from Berman to Borowski?” A seemingly harmless question with which Ogórek countered Borowski’s claim that the present Polish minister of education Jarosław Gowin was lacking in backbone because of some inconsistent policies. In 2015, it should be added, Ogórek ran as a candidate of the Left for the office of state president and failed. She is now an enthusiastic supporter of Jarosław Kaczyński. Ogórek reacted by imputing that Borowski had a false, only presumptuous Polish identity, reverting to the well-known classic pattern of “March chatter”.

In the Polish discourse from ‘68 Poles of Jewish origin were cast out by bringing a Jewish-sounding name of their ancestors into play, usually by including the link “alias”. Marek Borowski is the son of Viktor Borowski, a Polish communist, who was born in 1905 as Aron Berman. Viktor’s son Marek was born with the name Borowski and took part in the student protest of 1968 for which he was kicked out of the United Workers’ Party. Later he rejoined the party, committed to economic reform. Today he represents the post-communist Leftist alliance in the Senate.

The exhibition “Estranged” doesn’t mention Magdalena Ogórek, the author of the tweet, by name. She outed herself because she felt defamed even without her name being mentioned. She said she would go to court for having been associated with the anti-Jewish campaign of 1968. Magdalena Ogórek is at

present working for state television on programmes in which during the debate about the “Holocaust law” anti-semitic remarks became quite frequent and Polish citizens of Jewish descent were even called “lice”.²

WARSAW AND GDANSK: MUSEUMS AS BATTLEFIELDS

The argument around the Polin-Museum has opened up a new arena in the war over Polish historical museums. In 2015 a fight erupted in Gdansk over the concept for a “Museum of World War II” whose origins reach back more than a decade. Should World War II be presented in a European context and in comparison with the struggles of other nations, with the perspective of the civilian population in mind, which was basically the concept of the founding team and their international advisors? Or should the heroism and the martyrdom of the armed heroes of Poland take centre stage as the National-Conservatives expect?

The state and party leadership under Jarosław Kaczyński allowed the construction of the large new museum on the banks of the river Motława to be completed in spring 2017, by the original team led by the historian Paweł Machcewicz. But then the team was fired and replaced by a politically more convenient one. This was made possible through certain legal manoeuvres. First of all a small museum was called into being as a competing institute and housed in a two-bedroom flat. The reafter a merger of the two unequal museums was ordered. In this way, the change of management of the museum became legally possible (Machcewicz 2018; for a detailed discussion about the Gdansk museum, see Sander 2018).

The dispute over the “Museum of World War II” begs the question whether a similar fate could await the Polin-Museum, finalised in 2013 on the Square of the Ghetto Heroes. In Gdansk, the Ministry of Culture tested the procedure for a hostile take-over.

In Warsaw, until quite recently, the old consensus was adhered to: the Polin-Museum demonstrates to the world how well the country has reappraised Polish-Jewish history. But this consensus seems more and more fragile. As the very place for topical historical and political debates the Polin-Museum displeases those in power. An exhibition like “Estranged. March ‘68 and Its Aftermath” is something they find hard to take. They like to present themselves as dyed-in-the-wool anti-communists but in this exhibition they are shown up as ideologues who are taking elements of Poland’s national communism of the Sixties as their role model. In the meantime, the national-conservative government has begun to mobilise its electorate with anti-Semitic prejudices. That, too, is a message of the exhibition.

WHAT A MUSEUM OF THE GHETTO MIGHT SHOW

On 7 March 2018 Poland’s Minister of Culture, Piotr Gliński, accompanied by the Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, stepped in front of TV cameras and announced the foundation of a new museum in Warsaw. Its aim would be to exhibit 800 years of Polish-Jewish love, solidarity and brotherhood. It was going to become a museum of the Warsaw Ghetto.³

The Warsaw Ghetto was set up by the German occupation forces in autumn 1940. Herded together into

◆ Scenes from the exhibition “Estranged. March ‘68 and its Aftermath”, featuring examples of contemporary “March chatter”: recent anti-Soros poster.

◆ Slogans of the Polish right, denouncing attacks on Poland and all kinds of “Communists”.

◆ Tweet by Magdalena Ogórek.

(2) <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/magdalena-ogorek-zlozyla-pozew-przeciwko-dyrektorowi-muzeum-polin/wkm902w>

(3) <http://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/>

... a very small area, up to 400,000 Jews lived there. In 1942, the Germans began to deport its inhabitants to Treblinka and other extermination camps. In the gallery with the heading *zagłada* (“extermination”) the permanent exhibition of the Polin-Museum shows the reality of life in ghetto compounds in Warsaw and other towns of German-occupied Poland.

Without doubt one could imagine an in-depth presentation of the reality of life in the ghetto in a museum dedicated to it. According to the plans of the present Ministry of Culture the empty building of the former Behrson and Bauman children’s hospital is available for such a museum. The Jewish community of Warsaw had the hospital built in 1876.

The world-renowned children’s doctor Janusz Korczak worked there, as well as Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the armed uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in spring 1943.

For a time, under German occupation, the Behrson and Bauman children’s hospital found itself within the boundaries of the Warsaw ghetto, about three kilometres south of the Square of the Ghetto Heroes.

In March 2018 the Ministry of Culture announced that the ghetto-museum should be opened in time for the 80th anniversary of the ghetto uprising, i.e. in April 2023. There was however no mention of specific preparatory activities. So many people are asking themselves: What might be the rela-

tionship of this museum to 800 years of Polish-Jewish love, harmony and solidarity? The suspicion was that the project of the government might be a cover for an attempt to also deprive the Polin Museum of power.

SUSPICION AND OPTIMISM

The Polish government managed the hostile take-over of the Museum of World War II by founding the small “Westerplatte-Museum” to create a pretext for a merger. In Warsaw, however, the preconditions for following a similar procedure are different. The Museum of World War II was a showcase project of Donald Tusk’s liberal-conservative government. After the change of government in 2015, in financial and administrative terms, it utterly depended on the PiS-government. The Polin Museum in Warsaw, on the other hand, is the result of an initiative by civil society. An association in support of Polin co-operates with sponsors at home and abroad. The City of Warsaw, at the moment controlled by the opposition, and the Ministry of Culture are merely partners. The museum enjoys the legal structure of a public-private partnership. It should be fairly difficult to break it up, at least not without protest or the withdrawal of significant international sponsors. Apart from that, the Polin Museum has succeeded in gaining global recognition during the five years since its opening. In 2016 it won the prestigious European Museum of the Year Award.

There are good reasons why this museum in Warsaw on the Square of the Ghetto Heroes with its permanent exhibition of a thousand years of Polish history will continue to function as it

has done up to now, providing the necessary political debate as well as clear criticism of the present rulers and their ideology.

At the same time, the ghetto museum in the Warsaw Behrson and Bauman hospital has a chance to turn into an exciting and controversial project, even if or actually because its contents aren’t certain yet and because nobody is able to predict under what kind of political conditions it will open its gates in 2023. ■

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Translation from the German:

Christoph Assheuer

Grand opening day of the Polin Museum.

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Learn more

- ◆ The exhibition “Estranged. March '68 and Its Aftermath” opened on 9 March 2018 and ran until 24 October 2018 at the Polin Museum in Warsaw.