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WORLD WAR II IN POLISH MUSEUMS: HISTORIOGRAPHY DISCOURSE ON THE CULTURE OF REMEMBRANCE

Summary. *The purpose of this study is to present the results of a historiographical study of the works of Poland scholars, primarily historians, regarding the Poland museums' remembrance commemoration of the victims of World War II (WWII). **Research methodology.** Discourse analysis represents studies on the Polish museumization of WWII in the context of collective memory. It made it possible to highlight several important “points of tension” in the memory of the past and specific examples of their different (de)contextualization in contemporary discourse. The general scientific principles of objectivity, the unity of the historical and the logical, and the method of analysis and synthesis played a prominent role in this historiographical review. **The scientific novelty** is to highlight the specifics of research on the Polish experience of museumization and memorialization of the events of WWII in the context of the European culture of memory; the main trends in the interpretation of ways of memorializing the civilian victims in Polish museums are identified. **Conclusions.** Scholarly explorations of how Polish museums memorialize the victims of WWII are varied in scope and perspective (transnational, national, existential, regional). In Polish historiography, memorial museums established on the sites of former Nazi camps receive special attention, as well as conceptual changes in the landscape culture of commemorating victims of violence (the so-called “forensic turn”, ecological memory). It highlights how Polish museums respond to Holocaust studies by constructing discourses about WWII from the perspective of a survivor. It is argued that although museums demonstrate attempts to reconcile Polish national memory with broader European narratives, tensions between national and more inclusive approaches to exhibiting different forms of suffering and sacrifice persist. The representational capacities of Polish museums in finding a balance between historical specificity and anthropological universalization require further in-depth analysis.*

Key words: *World War II, Poland, museum, commemoration, memorization, culture of memory, Holocaust.*

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ДРУГА СВІТОВА ВІЙНА В ПОЛЬСЬКИХ МУЗЕЯХ: ІСТОРИОГРАФІЧНИЙ ДИСКУРС ПРО КУЛЬТУРУ ПАМ'ЯТІ

Анотація. *Мета дослідження* – представити результати історіографічного дослідження праць польських науковців, насамперед істориків, щодо меморіального вшанування польськими музеями жертв Другої світової війни. *Методологія дослідження.* Застосовано дискурсний аналіз для репрезентації досліджень про польську музеєлізацію Другої світової війни в контексті колективної пам'яті. Це дозволило висвітлити кілька важливих «точок напруги» у пам'ятанні минулого, а також конкретні приклади їх різної (де)контекстуалізації у сучасному дискурсі. Важливу роль у цьому історіографічному огляді відіграли загальнонаукові принципи об'єктивності, єдності історичного та логічного, а також метод аналізу та синтезу. *Наукова новизна* полягає у висвітленні специфіки досліджень про польський досвід музеєлізації та меморіалізації подій Другої світової війни в контексті європейської культури пам'яті; визначено основні тенденції в інтерпретації способів меморіалізації цивільних жертв у музеях Польщі. *Висновки.* Наукові розвідки про способи польських музеїв вшанувати пам'ять жертв Другої світової війни є різними як за масштабом, так і за перспективою (транснаціональною, національно-екзистенційною, регіональною). У польській історіографії окрема увага приділяється меморіальним музеям, створеним на місці колишніх нацистських таборів, та концептуальним змінам у ландшафтній культурі вшанування жертв насильства («криміналістичний поворот», екологічна пам'ять). Висвітлюється, як польські музеї реагують на дослідження Голокосту, конструюючи дискурси про Другу світову війну з позиції свідка. Стверджується, що, хоча музеї демонструють спроби узгодити польську національну пам'ять із ширшими європейськими нарративами, напруга між національними та більш інклюзивними підходами до експонування різних форм страждань та жертв зберігається. Репрезентативні можливості польських музеїв щодо пошуку балансу між історичною специфікою та антропологічною універсалізацією потребують подальшого поглибленого аналізу.

Ключові слова: Друга світова війна, Польща, музей, комеморація, меморизація, культура пам'яті, Голокост.

Problem statement. World War II (WWII) was exceptional both in terms of the scale and geography of hostilities and in the context of the disproportionate loss of civilian and military lives. In many countries, institutions were established to deal with memory policies and practices, to develop and maintain a culture of remembrance of the terrible events of WWII, and to preserve, disseminate, and pass on knowledge about them to future generations. Museums became an important institution of memory. It was not only about knowing and remembering but also about explaining the significance of this war and why it is important to preserve knowledge about it. In Western and Eastern Europe, the culture of remembrance of WWII differed somewhat. However, in general, there was a gradual shift from military history to social history in line with the need to honor the memory of the victims.

Commemorating the victims of National Socialism, in particular Jewish victims of the Holocaust, became the basis for European memory (since 2004) and an informal condition for gaining EU membership. Poland, along with other Eastern European countries, by joining the EU, changed the “dominant memory regime” to include Holocaust remembrance and created new standards for the musealization of the victims of WWII (Kucia, 2016, p. 101). It has created many challenges for professional historians, as museum discourses are part of national narratives around the history of the Polish state. For Ukraine, which gained the official status of an EU candidate in June 2022, the “Europeanization of memory” of the museum discourse on WWII and the Holocaust has become especially important.

Research analysis. Over the past 20 years, the current museum situation in Poland in terms of commemorating WWII has been characterized by a so-called “museum boom” (Andrzejczyk, Mazurczak & Pietrzy, 2019; Heinemann, 2017), with new national museum complexes opening and existing ones undergoing significant reconstruction in terms of “working with memory” (Fontana, 2020, p. 45). Museum institutions have turned from “monolithic” or “universal” exhibitions to more reflective, narrative ways of display that go beyond the presentation of collected objects. Concurrently, new national narratives have developed and become part of the transformation of the museum landscape in Poland. Narratives and their interpretations have been important in highlighting traumatic historical events; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington

is considered the world's first historical narrative museum (Krasuska, 2018). New narrative museums (the Warsaw Rising Museum (WRM), Museum of the Second World War (MWII) in Gdańsk, and others) were created in Poland as a way to respond to often contradictory individual and collective memories (Jagielska-Burduk & Jakubowski, 2020, p. 154–155). Museums engage historians in the creation of new historical narratives, such as the permanent exhibition of the MWII in Gdańsk, created by a team of authors led by Paweł Machcewicz (Machcewicz, 2019).

Examining the content and focus of the new and renovated museums, it became clear that museums are critical spaces in which discussions on how the events of WWII are interpreted unfold (Lachedro, 2007; Turoń-Kowalska, Nawrocki, & Pyszkowska, 2024; Wnuk, 2018; Ziębińska-Witek, 2013). The contributions of Polish historians are crucial to preserving historical memory and countering simplistic narratives. Well-known Polish historians cooperate with museums, such as Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, Piotr Madajczyk (on the scientific board of a foundation in Berlin responsible for the construction of a museum dedicated to refugees and displaced persons), Andrzej Nowak (a board member of the Museum of Polish History), Dariusz Gawin (intellectual creator of the Warsaw Uprising Museum), and others. The changing attitude towards history, which can be seen in the context of present-day Polish museums, makes it evident how history is used to contextualize and explain WWII.

The controversies over the interpretation of historical events and the influence of historico-social stereotypes make it important for scholars to explore new methodological approaches to museumizing the history of WWII. In characterizing the latest historiographical contributions, it is reasonable to note that the reflections of both Polish and international researchers on the practices of creating and publicly representing the history of WWII in Polish museums are very important in the context of the Europeanization of the commemoration culture and deserve special consideration.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the publications of Polish historians and international researchers on Polish practices of museumization of the history of WWII, focusing on how researchers cover the issue of the politics of memory and the contradictions between national and transnational trends of commemoration.

Main material. In Poland, museums presenting the history of WWII were created posthumously, with the first ones opening immediately after the war on the territory of former Nazi camps: Auschwitz and Majdanek in 1947, later in Stuttgart (1962), Treblinka (1964), Kulmhof in Chełmno nad Nerem (1990), Bełżec (2004), and Sobibor (2020). In the early 2000s, when the concept of a narrative museum became relevant, the following museums were founded: the Warsaw Uprising Museum (2004), the Oskar Schindler Factory in Krakow (2007), the MWII in Gdansk (2008), the Ulma Family Museum (2016), the Warsaw Ghetto Museum (2018), and others.

In the museums located on the territory of former Nazi camps, the main object is the site itself, and the main principle of museumization is to preserve everything that survived and should serve as a visual reminder of the horror. The visitors have access to authentic camp facilities, as well as to the ruins of blown-up gas chambers, crematoria, and pits where the bodies of those gassed were burned. The sites of the former Nazi extermination camps in Bełżec and Sobibór were long neglected, and only recently museums and memorial complexes were opened there (as branches of the State Museum at Majdanek). The history of the founding of the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau in the light of Polish perception of Auschwitz was studied by Jacek Lachedro. The author showed both the bright and dark sides of postwar Auschwitz: on the one hand, attempts to save the post-camp territory by former prisoners who would later become employees of the museum, and on the other hand, acts of vandalism and desecration of the remains of the dead. All of this is presented against the backdrop of a changing political situation, particularly at the beginning of the Cold War (Lachedro, 2007). Beata Siwek-Ciupak explained the history of the Majdanek Nazi camp and the memorialization of the site (Siwek-Ciupak, 2013). Sarah Kunte described the most important aspects of the functioning of the Majdanek Nazi camp, such as living conditions, work, destruction, and transportation. She also drew attention to the three design concepts for the memorial complex (1949, 1961, and 2008), which reflected differently on the handling of structural remains (such as the reconstruction of part of the former "Prisoners Field III"), on the replication of elements or the significance of preserving the

“material evidence” of National Socialist crimes and exhibiting of human remains at the memorial site (Kunte, 2016). Robert Kuwálek has researched the history of the Nazi death camp in Bełżec, as well as the post-war history of the site, highlighting the facts of the excavation of graves by local people and unsuccessful attempts to memorialize it (Kuwálek, 2010). He was among the initiators of the project of the Memorial complex in Bełżec (and became its first director), which primarily envisaged the protection of the area with mass graves.

In the current memorial culture honoring victims of violence, there is a conceptual shift toward a “cultural sensitivity” to human remains and material traces of violence. The memorial landscapes of former Nazi camps in Poland are also rethinking. Zuzana Dziuban examined the dealings of post-war memory politics in Poland, ways of framing the graves of Holocaust victims, and practices of grave looting (Dziuban, 2014, p. 34). The post-war difference in the practices of commemoration of Bełżec and Sobibór (extermination camps built and operated by Nazi Germany as part of Operation Reinhard, the plan to murder all Polish Jews), where Jews were exterminated, has been explained by the Polish culture of mourning, in which Majdanek and Auschwitz became symbols of “the martyrdom of the Polish nation and other peoples”. In the paper (Dzuban, 2023, p. 184), Polish memorial sites and museums established at former Nazi extermination camps are investigated through a conceptual prism of “museum-cemetery”, and the politics of dead bodies and structural violence (necroviolence) are ethically debated.

The Polish researchers take into account the discourse of ecological memory introduced into Holocaust studies in a situation where the era of the (human) witness ends, when witnesses and participants in events pass away, and living direct memory fades away. With the beginning of the era of the “material witness”, whatever entity whose physical properties testify to past events can be a memory agent. The natural landscapes become objects of the memorial landscape of WWII, according to the non-anthropocentric concept of the witness (Małczyński, Domańska, Smykowski & Kłós, 2020, p. 184). Jacek Małczyński attempted to reconstruct the natural landscape of the former Nazi death camp in Bełżec from its establishment in 1941 until the opening of the museum-memorial in 2004. The researcher focuses on the trees growing on the sites of the Shoah as an example of a different type of witness. The author critically assesses the new museum project of commemoration (Museum and Memorial in Bełżec. Nazi German extermination camp, 1942–1943), for which most of the trees were cut down, and the role of witnesses was assigned to only a few older oaks (Małczyński, 2009, p. 209). The Berlin-Birkenau project by Polish artist Łukasz Surowiec, aimed at fighting against forgetting, is also covered in the context of ecological memory. As part of the Berlin-Birkenau project, several hundred birch trees were brought to Berlin from the outskirts of the former Nazi camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau to be planted throughout the city. Thus, trees that grew on land marked by the deaths of many people became a kind of “living archive” that brought life and breath to Berlin. The birch saplings create a personal, proactive memorial; instead of a steel or stone monument, something alive embodies a part of the traumatic past (Małczyński, 2018, p. 374). Poland’s history of WWII, from the perspective of forests and their importance in the defensive war, hiding places for victims, strongholds of partisan resistance, and crime scenes are highlighted in the temporary exhibition “Forest. A shelter for victims, a crime hiding place” of the WWII in Gdańsk (August 30, 2024 – February 28, 2025). The curators of the exhibition have updated the environmental history of WWII, aiming to honor the memory of all victims of war. At the same time, it is a reminder that forests, both as material objects and as memorial landscapes, as spaces of life and memorial spaces for war victims, remain largely unexplored (Baławska-Kornacka & Krzencessa, 2024, p. 5).

In Polish museum activities have shifted from large numbers of impersonal mass memories to detail and personalization, emphasizing the importance of listening to the voices of survivors. Piotr Cywiński, director of the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, analyzed the memories of survivors, and on this background, deep reflections on the human condition of a person who was subjected to the process of Nazi concentration camps are presented: “Primary Shock”, “Loneliness”, “Death”, “Hunger”, “Society”, “Empathy”, “Decency”, “Struggle and Resistance”, “Culture and Science”, “Fear”, and “Hope” (Cywiński, 2021). This research perspective, which emphasizes the polyphony of

survivor voices, is valuable in the context of a new approach to the historiography of the Nazi camps and the commemoration of the extermination sites.

The authenticity of the museum exhibitions at the sites of the former Nazi camps is important, focusing on things and certain elements that witness the tragedy. However, there are discussions about museum ways of honoring the victims. The most shocking impression on visitors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum is made by the glass display cases of “piles of things” with shoes, prosthetics, glasses, toothbrushes, suitcases, and women’s hair (Ziębińska-Witek, 2017, p. 137). According to James Young, this way of commemorating the victims seems contradictory. The windows force visitors to see the victims as the Nazis intended them to be, that is, “the ruins of a destroyed civilization” (Young, 1993, p. 113). When the memory of victims is reduced to fragments of their belongings, the memories of their lives are irretrievably lost.

Polish museums are applying the newest exhibition strategies that can foster empathy in visitors. Exhibitions create new forms of storytelling, combine multiple discourses, and explore new ways of communicating with visitors, including through artistic expression. Anna Ziębińska-Witek described two exhibition examples: the so-called Central Sauna in Auschwitz-Birkenau and The Primer installation in Majdanek. The creators of a new exhibition in the building of the so-called Central Sauna on the premises of Birkenau recognized its concrete floor as the most significant relic. In almost all accounts of prisoners it stuck most in their memories (it was where their clothes were thrown during the humiliating undressing, where they were chased barefoot on its cold surface, where they sat for hours waiting for what was to happen). The creators of a new exhibition in the building of the so-called Central Sauna on the premises of Birkenau recognized its concrete floor as the most significant relic. In almost all accounts of prisoners it stuck most in their memories (it was where their clothes were thrown during the humiliating undressing, where they were chased barefoot on its cold surface, where they sat for hours waiting for what was to happen). For this reason, the concrete floor in the exhibition is preserved authentically, and a podium has been installed above it, throughout the rooms, which visitors can walk on. Other elements of the exhibition include photographs taken before the Holocaust, confiscated from people deported to Nazi camps, placed on the walls. These photos show people in situations from their private, professional, and public lives. Some of the people in the photographs have been identified and their biographies reconstructed; each identified photograph strips the murdered of their anonymity, restores their identity, and allows visitors to identify with individual victims. Anna Ziębińska-Witek noted that this expositional approach allows visitors to feel the atmosphere of the place and puts aside the need to provide extensive detailed information. She raised a methodological question about the limits of realistic depictions of what happened in Nazi camps; perhaps the attempt to create an atmosphere of threat and hopelessness means more than the naturalistic language of museums, even in authentic sites (Ziębińska-Witek 2017, p. 150–151). The author argues for the constructive role of art in understanding tragic history, as a complement to the cognitive understanding of the past, triggering the imagination of visitors, which allows them to develop reflective perception and sense-making skills. The example of the art installation the Primer in the State Museum in Majdanek, which expositionally divides Barrack 53 into two parts and at the same time symbolically connects two different worlds: ordinary childhood and the world of children imprisoned in Nazi camps, is discussed.

The debate over the exhibitions at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum also focused on national policies of memory, as it is here that the memories of different nations, religious confessions, and people of different ideological and political views are centered. It is particularly reflected in the Polish exhibition “The Struggle and Martyrdom of the Polish Nation 1939–1945” (opened in 1985). Theresa McMackin’s article analyzed the narrative of this exhibition. Theresa McMackin analyzed the narrative of this exhibition: it contains information about the experience of Jews during the Nazi occupation, although the section that presents much of the information is under the heading: “Terror, executions, expulsions, deportations to concentration camps, and forced labor affected all segments of the Polish people” (McMackin, 2018). The author also noticed three large photographs made by Einsatzgruppen in Ukraine after Operation Barbarossa that do not contain a quote but have captions:

“Mass shootings similar to this one in Ukraine were also carried out in occupied Poland” (McMackin, 2018, p. 41). The section of the exhibition also informs the visitor about how, despite the risk of death, 75 000 Jews were rescued in Poland, the vast majority of them by ethnic Poles. In general, the exhibition distinguished between ethnic Poles and other prisoners deported from all over Europe. Over the decades following WWII, the themes of Polish suffering and heroism dominated Poland’s historical memory. Marek Kucia argues that in Poland, there is a significant contradiction between claiming the Holocaust as a Jewish catastrophe (Shoah) and using it as a universal model by which to understand the suffering of others (Kucia, 2016, p. 97). The Polish exhibition at the State Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau is closed, and it has been announced that a new exhibition is already being planned. In addition, a new main exhibition, which has existed with adjustments since 1955 and emphasized the massive nature of Nazi crimes, is being created. The new narrative will expand the history to include the crime’s human fate and individual dimensions.

The discussion of the historical relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Poles is ongoing (Polonsky & Michlic, 2004), and some of the controversies in dealing with the Polish-Jewish past have been overcome by creating a Museum of the History of Polish Jews, POLIN (opened in Warsaw in 2014). The debate about Polish-Jewish relations during WWII largely revolves around an installation about the involvement of ethnic Poles in the murder of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland. The museum installation uses a collage of Jedwabne Jewish private photographs to commemorate the pogrom and massacre of an estimated 300 Jews in Jedwabne in 1941 that, in Polish memory, came to denote around two dozen pogroms after the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. Karolina Krasuska interpreted the aesthetic experience of Holocaust memorialization by the POLIN installation on the 1941 pogroms, comparing it with the emblematic segment of the USHMM exhibition, *The Tower of Faces*. The author points to the global circulation of a universalized Holocaust memory through museums. Whereas the *Tower of Faces* cuts through the exhibition, breaking its governing temporality, the installation in the POLIN using family pictures occupies a space that uses a different visual logic (Krasuska, 2018).

The revelation in 2000 of the truth about the Jedwabne crime came as a shock to public opinion, as it undermined the image of Poles as exclusively victims of WWII. The response was a series of “righteous initiatives” and attempts to identify people and groups who helped Jewish families in danger. Maria Kobielska analyzed the permanent exhibitions of five new Polish historical museums (the WRM, the Ulma Family Museum, POLIN, the WWII in Gdańsk, and the Oskar Schindlers Enamel Factory in Krakow) in terms of their representation of the rescue of Jews by Poles during WWII. The strategies of marginalization, recognition, and contextualization, as well as the use and abuse of the topic, were identified, placing them in the context of the various mnemonic plans present in the Polish memory field (Kobielska, 2023, p. 142). The WRM, in particular, marginalizes the Jewish experience and emphasizes Polish heroism, focusing on Polish rescuers rather than Jewish victims. POLIN Museum has a more balanced approach (recognition and contextualization): it acknowledges Polish collaborators, contextualizing their actions within the broader Holocaust narrative; presents rescue stories as part of Jewish history rather than Polish heroism; and avoids generalizations, focusing on specific rescue stories and their circumstances.

The WRM’s permanent exhibition on the history of the Warsaw uprising (1944) is central to historical scholarly debate and has generated a wide media and political resonance. A group of historians working at the WRM has prepared a book (Zawistowski, 2022) with the most important information about the battles, the participants of the uprising, post-insurrection Warsaw, and the witnesses’ memories. This collective book also highlights the political aspects of the uprising and its long-term consequences, which were undoubtedly catastrophic. However, the central idea is “we wanted to be free and grateful for our freedom”. These words fit into Polish history’s romantic and emotional part and are important to Polish memory policy. The WRM emphasizes the Polish national perspective regarding the desire for freedom, which corresponds to the understanding of 19th-century patriotism in the context of the struggle for national liberation. Lan Ołdakowski, director of the museum, and Dariusz Gawin, deputy director for scientific work, noted that observing the struggle of Ukrainians

today, Polish society is increasingly understanding the values for which the Warsaw rebels fought (Kędryna, 2022). In their opinion, the struggle for national freedom is interpreted from a transnational perspective compared to the current wars.

The visual emphasis in the WRM exhibition is entirely on the martyrdom of the heroes. As Anna Ziębińska-Witek has noted, the exhibition gives a positive assessment of death in the name of higher values (Ziębińska-Witek, 2013, p. 90). The biographies of the deceased participants are presented on stands resembling tombstones, and their photographs are arranged in the form of funeral portraits, culminating in the appearance of a tombstone with the inscription “City of Graves” (Dostlieva, 2020). This specific museum pedagogy of suffering does not correlate with the contemporary view of memory culture, which tries to show historical events from different (sometimes contradictory) perspectives and emphasize the multiplicity of possible interpretations. The museum’s exposition is criticized for the “isolation” of the history of the uprising and the almost complete absence of other victims of Nazi persecution. Ljiljana Radonić’s article points out that the WRM’s permanent exhibition uses terms related to Judaism and the Shoah to depict the suffering of non-Jewish Poles, that “our” victims suffered “like Jews” (Radonić, 2022, p. 129).

Stephan Jaeger argues that the WRM’s permanent exhibition blurs the distinction between combatants and civilians and thus shows the total totality of war, focusing on ruins, rubble, and emptiness. Human victims disappear into material losses or, as in this case, become just numbers. The significance of the concept of total war is also emphasized in a separate section of the exhibition, which features the 3D film “City of Ruins: A 3D Flight over the Ruins of Warsaw in 1945”. The film has almost no text, except for three sentences at the end of the film: “on 1 September 1939, Warsaw had 1 million 300 thousand inhabitants”, “on 1 August 1944, there were 900 000”, “after the fall of the Warsaw Uprising, no more than 1 000 people remained in the ruins”. However, after viewing the main exhibition, it becomes clear that the third statement is an emotional encapsulation of the complete destruction of life caused directly by the Germans and indirectly by the lack of Soviet activity. There is no space for gaps or interpretations, and the visitor can leave the museum with the impression that all Warsaw residents were sacrificed. Thus, Stephan Jaeger examines “City of Ruins” as an example of how an audience can be manipulated into an emotional, universalizing understanding of the cost of total war and how the visitor’s potential experientiality can be restricted (Jaeger, 2020, p. 272).

The history of the WWII in Gdańsk’s creation, from the earliest stages of conceptual planning to the final installations, was outlined in his book by Paweł Machcewicz, historian and first museum director (Machcewicz, 2019). The exhibition of the WWII in Gdańsk was an attempt to redefinition and find a difficult balance between the changing demands and expectations formed within the national framework on the one hand and the integration of transnational perspectives on the other. However, the permanent exhibition of WWII in Gdańsk has caused much discussion in Poland and among international museum experts and historians due to the contradictory perspectives presented, both national and transnational. In particular, the international perspective on the universalization of the Holocaust is “completed” by emphasizing the Polish national memory of the rescue of Jews. In the section “The Road to Auschwitz”, which tells about the deaths of prisoners in the Nazi extermination camps, the original exhibition was amended to include a large-format photograph of the Ulma family (they were executed by German gendarmes in their native village of Markowa after it was discovered that they had been hiding Jews in their home). This exposition addition violated the anthropological nature of the narrative, and the honoring of those who rescued and helped Jews during the Holocaust became a key element of the exhibition section. Ljiljana Radonić noted that the “turn to the rescuers” occurred in such a way that all empathy was directed exclusively to them. It is confirmed by the fact that the Ulmas, the Polish rescuers, are treated as individuals, while the known names and stories of the Jewish women and men they hid and who were murdered as soon as the Germans discovered their hiding places are omitted and their photographs are not available. Presenting one’s suffering in terms of genocide and mentioning the Holocaust in one’s own country only to emphasize the role of “our compatriots” in saving them is considered by Ljiljana Radonić to be the use of the “Holocaust template” in the presentation of the past (Radonić, 2020, p. 131).

MWII in Gdańsk presents a Central and Eastern European perspective on the history of WWII, which differs from the Western perspective in that not only Germany but also the Soviet Union is represented as an aggressor (which occupied the eastern lands of Poland, i.e., the Western part of Belarus and Ukraine, parts of Lithuania and Romania). The Polish victim is at the center of the representation of German and Soviet crimes. The experts point out that the narrative structure of MWII in Gdańsk does not leave room for consideration of a broader historical context, apart from the Polish experience and, in this case, the experience of other groups. For example, Emma Mikuska-Tinman has studied how museums interact with and intervene in discourses of national and transnational memory around flight and expulsion and notes that MWII in Gdańsk nationalizes memory and leaves little space for competitive notions of sacrifice, and does not mention the expulsion of Germans and Ukrainians as a result of post-war border movements (Mikuska-Tinman, 2018, p. 71).

Stefan Jaeger noted that MWII in Gdańsk does not retain its transnational approach when depicting the air war. The exhibition surpasses documentary factual presentation and directs visitors to a specific interpretation of historical events. Visitors to the museum in Gdansk may get the impression that without Hitler and Stalin there would have been no total war. In contrast, visitors to Dresden, Brussels, or Caen clearly get the feeling that the conditions of total war and the effects of aerial warfare would have materialized even in different historical conditions. A clear cause-and-effect model stands against an anthropological explanation of war and violence (Jaeger, 2020, p. 271–272). The MWII in Gdańsk manipulates the viewer into accepting its narrative framework, with no sign of a discussion about whether and how air warfare shortened the war and whether it was a necessary means to victory. The selection of images in the exhibition supports the idea that totalitarian regimes caused unlimited destruction, in contrast to the Allied forces, which are depicted as responding in self-defense or justified revenge (Jaeger, 2020, p. 275). The composition of the images makes it impossible to simply empathize with the suffering of civilians from the air war, but rather to indicate that this suffering is different from that caused by the German and Japanese bombing campaigns. The historical main narrative dominates the universal form of suffering in MWII in Gdańsk.

Rafał Wnyk, co-author of the MWII in Gdańsk's first exhibition, examines the Polish debate over the museum's exhibition. He argues that it results from different perceptions of Polish identity and patriotism. It is a conflict between the nation's perception as an ethno-emotional community and the definition of the nation as a civil society. The debate is between those who support a positive attitude to history, which makes them proud of their nation, and those who argue that the essence of history is a critical attitude to the past. It is a dispute between Polishness, understood as an ethnic and emotional national community, and state civic Polishness. It also reflects the tension between understanding history as a heroic and martyrological narrative that evokes a sense of national honor and interpreting it in terms of reflections on the glorious and evil past (Wnyk, 2018, p. 348).

Conclusions. There is a sufficient number of works describing and analyzing the exhibition activities of Polish museums on the history of WWII. The Polish historiography outlines various museum strategies for 'penetrating' the past. The authors focus on memorial museums established on the sites of former Nazi camps and conceptual changes in the landscape culture of commemorating victims of violence ('forensic turn', ecological memory). They also describe how Polish museums respond to Holocaust studies by constructing discourses about WWII from the perspective of a survivor.

The explorations of how Polish museums commemorate WWII victims vary in scale and perspective (transnational, national, existential, and regional). The authors analyze the permanent exhibitions of the new narrative museums from different perspectives, particularly from the point of view of the use of artistic modes of expression that can foster empathy in visitors. Historians highlight how Polish museums respond to the "Europeanisation of remembrance culture" requirements. They provide exhibition examples that focus on the civilian experience, which is assessed as a positive contribution of Polish museums to the Europeanisation of memory. However, the analysis of the exhibition sections on the Holocaust shows the contradictory presentation of Polish and Jewish narratives.

The researches cover museum exhibitions that are part of intense memory battles. It is argued that although museums demonstrate attempts to reconcile Polish national memory with broader European

narratives, tensions between national and more inclusive approaches to different forms of suffering and victimhood persist. Interpretation of the representational capacities of Polish museums in finding a balance between historical specificity and anthropological universalization requires further in-depth analysis, including at the regional level, including the history of Eastern Galicia, Upper Silesia, etc.

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