

“NOTHING IS UNIVERSAL WHEN IT COMES TO HUMAN PAIN”

INTERVIEW

WITH DR. PIOTR M.A. CYWIŃSKI

Director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum

Anna Karolina Piekarska [AKP]:

At the beginning of our conversation, let's think about what distinguishes Auschwitz from other memorial institutions.

Franciszek Dąbrowski [FD]: Let's define the difference between museums as places of memory and classical historical museums.

Dr. Piotr M.A. Cywiński [PC]: First, while we're defining the concepts, we need to clearly point out that the very elegant, even quite placid-sounding term “place of memory” (*Gedenkstätte*, memorial) is actually a synonym for “place of murder”. However, “place of murder” sounds terrible, and people are instinctively reluctant to use such a term. So names like “places of memory” are in fact an attempt to avoid calling a spade a spade. And inevitably, the activity to which a classic historical museum is named doesn't necessarily coincide with what is fitting for a place of murder.

Any historical museum presents a particular history, from a certain angle, for a selected audience. So out of necessity, there is some interference: they want to enhance some elements of the story, or highlight something special when conveying it... And that doesn't mean that it's appropriate to make any narrative pirouettes in a place of murder. In the case of Auschwitz, we are dealing with a place of a special kind of murder—mass murder, abundant and refined, the murder of countless people who were innocent, because they were not tried by a court which sentenced them to such a martyr's death. Among the multitude of the innocents at Auschwitz were Polish Army

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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD




Spójrz, stoją wszyscy, gdzie tylko ziemia się wokół rozściela.
I wszyscy patrzą. I ciało dreszcz mi przenika szalony -
Patrzą pełnymi żalu oczyma Bencjonka, Jomela,
Niespokojnymi oczyma mojej zabitej żony.

Look! Look! They all stand around me, endless throngs.
A shudder goes through me
All of them look with Ben Zion's and Yomke's sorrowful eyes.
All of them look with the sad eyes of my murdered wife,

Fragment of
Yitzhak Katzenelson's
poem *Song of the
Murdered Jewish People*.
Part of the exhibition
in the Auschwitz II-Birkenau
admission block (“Sauna”).
July 2018.
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ראה, ראה העם סביבי, הרחק, לא ייספר ולא יימד,
ראה כולם - בשרי יסמור וחיל בעצמות -
עיני בניציון/קה יביטו, בעיניו של יומק הנחרד,
הם מביטים כולם בעיני אשתי העגומות.





Auschwitz is not a World War II Museum, nor a museum on the collapse of Europe, nor a Holocaust Museum, because the Holocaust was something broader than just Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is a broader concept than the Holocaust.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

soldiers from 1939, and victims of street raids, and Jews from the ghettos, and Bandera's followers [Ukrainian nationalist movement], and people who had failed to qualify as ethnic Germans, and factions from the underground who were not fully accepted by [the Polish Government in Exile in] London, and unambiguous murderers, bandits, thieves, prostitutes and so on. So it is a place of murder for everyone, and everyone is equally innocent, because they were not found guilty by an independent court, and because they were sentenced to this kind of death, and not any other kind.

So this is a situation in which it is impossible—for these or other reasons—to create our own kind of narrative in a worthy and morally justified manner, because making any assumptions could be very difficult to reconcile with paying homage to these victims of crimes that have never lapsed—to reconcile them with their identity, beliefs, values and life goals. Creating this type of narrative would be a kind of “playing at idealism”, which would simply involve smoothing over certain marks and specific historical elements—a distortion of history. And such an action would be absolutely vile.

AKP: Exactly: we're talking about testing the impossibility of creating a narrative that can't comprehend—even in the best-elaborated form—the phenomenon of this mass murder. However, while visiting the camp barracks and looking at the buildings & items, the question arises of the need to make visitors aware of the context of events. True, the place and its exhibits start to make a full impression when they are surrounded by facts and figures, and so by the knowledge that the visitors do not need to have, as they come from different cultures. It's a different matter for the visitor from Poland, who brings their specific historical education in this field; and someone who comes from outside the circle of our experience also thinks differently...

Entrance to the Auschwitz I camp.
November 2017. © Maciej Foks

PC: That also sometimes happens in the case of Poland, and in not a very good way. In history lessons in school it works out similarly: there are always five swots sitting in the front row, and three boys who are interested in militaria, and then there's the rest of the class. And it's with this rest of the class that things can go very, very poorly.

On the other hand, the question of contextualisation is difficult. Auschwitz is not a World War II Museum, nor a museum on the collapse of Europe, nor a Holocaust Museum, because the Holocaust was something broader than just Auschwitz. And Auschwitz is a broader concept than the Holocaust. And this is what the post-war creators of all the museums of martyrdom [in Poland] managed to avoid—and they had been prisoners, Polish prisoners. They created these museum-memorial sites—at Majdanek, Auschwitz, etc. (basically only Gross-Rosen was created without much input from prisoner groups). And all of them — independently of each other, I have the impression—chose this minimalism, which makes these places only speak about what happened there—without starting on the story of the Battle of Grunwald, referring to earlier events and so on.

FD: Maybe they assumed that actually this context is known to everyone.

PC: Perhaps. Those were the immediate post-war years. But when we are talking about contextualisation, we are also very strongly entering into a certain level of ideology. You have to accept certain assumptions. Context is not self-generated, it is not neutrally definable. Every attempt to define the context will itself be a contextualisation; that's what the adoption of a specific option will really be like. For example, one could show Auschwitz in the context of Germany's power, in the context of the dehumanisation which was present in what's called "both totalitarianisms", with reference to detention camp Bereza Kartuska (just because some inmates were Communists and were imprisoned there), or in terms of failing to deal with the acceptance of homosexuality in Europe—and all of these visions are contextualisations, generally speaking—aimed at eliminating potential opponents. And let's agree: each of these contexts is a part of the truth. There's no lie in them. But showing Auschwitz from one single viewpoint would be the creation of a new, false order.

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Finally, upon the occasion of preparing the new main exhibition, I look at the range of exhibits in the current exhibition (which was prepared in 1953–1954), and at the exhibitions in other places of memory which offer this restrictive, very minimalist interpretation which we were talking about, and I respect and understand them more and more. And generally in other memorial sites across Europe—in Germany, Belgium, Italy, Austria—this same kind of minimalism also applies. Assuming that the context is supplemented—usually by a guide—I think that in a place of murder, where families with many children were killed, it wouldn't necessarily be helpful to create an exhibition or allow a narrative which would generally describe the problems associated with having many children.

So it's very difficult to compare a historical museum to a place of memory—although both institutions are often established in the same perspective, from the phenomenological point of view, it's a completely different reality.

FD: The way of communicating, whether it's situated in a given context, or whether the context is left “in brackets” to be completed, poses the question of whether any universalisation of communication is possible...

PC: I'm drawing upon my own experiences here. Firstly, I feel that in Auschwitz everything is pretty much screaming out against universalisation—because this is a particular crime, committed at a particular place and against particular people. And in no way is there space to stretch this phenomenon in any more universal direction. On the other hand, I see that the values associated with memory are phenomenally universal. The visitors to the Auschwitz museum are Japanese, Koreans, citizens of Rwanda, who come with the baggage of their experiences, and recognise elements of their own cultural baggage in the problem which they confront here on the site of the former death camp: not so much the same symbols, but the same symbolic meaning, certain reservoirs of concepts or phenomena associated with specific essences and experiences. And there are two very important elements in this contradiction. The first is the story of a place and its victims. There's nothing universal in the fact that Anne Frank was imprisoned in Auschwitz and died in Bergen-Belsen. It's just the story of

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**In the case of Auschwitz,
we are dealing with a place of
a special kind of murder—mass
murder, abundant and refined.**

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

The main exhibition: part "The Physical Evidence of
Crime" – personal belongings of the deportees. July 2018.
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**Nothing is universal
when it comes
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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

one girl and her family. To universalise this would be—to say the least—something outrageous, simply absurd.

FD: ... the Holocaust is not universal.

PC: Nothing is universal when it comes to human pain. On the other hand, though, some sufferings, some problems, some issues are recognisable by people from all over the universe. And that is how these two realities operate, which—although they seem to be contradictory—function well, as long as they only speak about specific instances of suffering, about specific people and specific victims—without imposing any interpretation of their own. The universality of these places comes from the fact that they are not trying to be universal, and that they focus—minimally—on the substance of the problem.

FD: ...by trying to universalise the message by force, at the same time we remove the dignity, the identity of the victims' fate.

PC: I'd put it differently—by trying to instrumentalise the victims' dignity by force, we would contradict the universalist value which is undoubtedly somewhere to be found here.

Paradoxically, we are not the owners of this story. This is something that public discourse has generally forgotten. It's not the case that the Polish authorities, under the influence of and the enormous pressure from former prisoners, established this Place of Memory in 1947 because this happened on Polish soil. And it would be some sort of violence, something unjustifiable, if we were to feel some kind of ownership of this.

FD: Let's say that someone feels like they are the host of a particular space, but they don't take into account that they feel that they should also take responsibility for how this place was created.

PC: That's the first thing. Second—they would have to reject the idea that the vast majority of victims were not connected to Poland in any way. And some of those who were Polish citizens during those years could have had some doubt as to what this citizenship meant, and what were the consequences, guarantees, and elements of solidarity it brought with it.

So we have a place that has a universalist significance, although in itself it is not quite essentially universal, but is



part of a particular story. However, it is not the case that we have full ownership of it, in the sense that we can do what we want with it, as if it was an open-air museum in Ciechanowiec or the old town in Zamość.

FD: We are dealing with the accumulation of atrocities that can be seen in the public narrative from the World War I, when a succession of things that happened in public affected masses of people in a monstrous way: the horrors of war, the Bolshevik revolution, then all sorts of regimes that violated the barriers which even the most illiberal regimes of the nineteenth century did not violate. All of this at some point comes to a halt in a terror which really cannot be described. We can also see this barrier, a legal barrier, which was erected against this terror, in the form of the definition of genocide, and in attempts to stop the implementation of mass destruction, and so on.

PC: This is a horror which arose as a result of the application of the full apparatus of modernity. Whereas the mass genocidal killings in Africa in the early twentieth century could still be described in terms of geopolitics—the desire to conquer new territories—the situation of the Holocaust involved the absolutely total application of modernity, from

Visitors in the Auschwitz I camp. July 2018.

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The visitors to the Auschwitz museum [...] come with the baggage of their experiences, and recognise elements of their own cultural baggage.

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A vast area of the
Auschwitz II-Birkenau
camp. July 2018.
© Katarzyna Adamów

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of murders; all of them disappear
after some time. So if we want to
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[...] it's endurance, existence,
that is absolutely the top priority.

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The use of the word “depository”... it’s strange, it shows that we have a problem with naming the phenomenon... [...] I like to feel such spaces where language starts to disappear, because this is the moment when we’re really touching the root of things.

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transportation to logistics, the manner of the killings, at every step...

FD: The camp was well organised!

PC: And that was only the final stage! It started with the shootings in the East, and finished with the gas chambers. And they were still seeking other solutions—cheaper, better, more efficient and so on. And this was a political priority. Back in 1944, just after Stalingrad, when the German army had already withdrawn from many fronts (they had lost the north of France, the south of Italy, the East), they were still using the railcars, and the tracks, and the locomotives for the transport of Hungarian Jews, or the Jews from Łódź, or the Warsaw residents from the Warsaw Rising, all to Auschwitz.

And yet, the Germans’ military effectiveness was weakened by this, because the same locomotives could have transported the wounded, or brought food and ammunition to the front, and the same tracks were out of use at particular times, because when one train is running, the other one can not.

FD: The Allies couldn’t have threatened to destroy the centres, like the Soviets could, as they were literally just next door.

PC: And the locomotives were used here anyway, which is absurd! And it seems to me that the totality of this destruction, which we often think of in terms of the victims, is also a totality in terms of ideological and political assumptions, and this totality is worth remembering—that at some point there was a country which adopted this as a priority. It sounds crazy when you look at it.

AKP: “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, [by] Hannah Arendt... During our conversation we’ve raised an interesting thread about what challenges are arising from running the Auschwitz Museum, a place of which we are—I do not know if it’s the right word—the depositories?

PC: The use of the word “depository”... it’s strange, it shows that we have a problem with naming the phenomenon... And that’s right, that’s good! I like to feel such spaces where language starts to disappear, because this is the moment when we’re really touching the root of things.

AKP: Could you describe what challenges you’re facing, as the director of such a museum-memorial?

PC: So I would start from the deepest essence, the most important issue: this place **exists**. If the institution of the museum was founded, that was done so in order for this place to exist. And this ontology is something quite essential, although it defies the logic of time, because some places have been smoothed away into nothing. There are not many historical sites of murders; all of them disappear after some time. So if we want to be in any way responsible for this repository, then above all we have to fight its tendency to disappear. After all, this is a process that begins with the disappearance of the historical substance itself, for example, by the contamination of the landscape. Although these are very complex issues, they are somehow justified, that is, they are natural and normal.

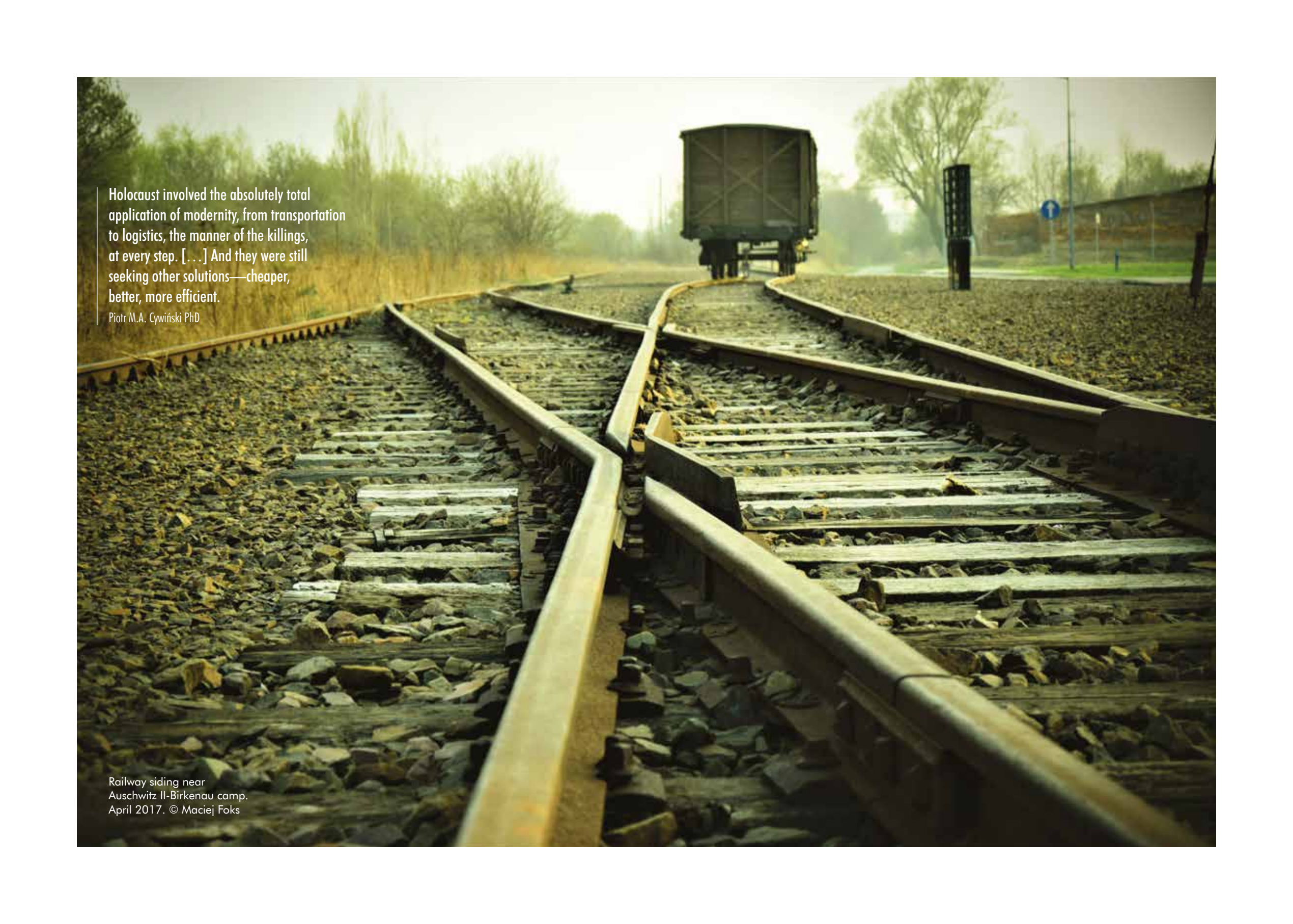
And its endurance, existence, that is absolutely the top priority. Everything else can be up for discussion. Monuments created just to exist are something else — cathedrals, castles, pyramids; or natural monuments—forests, national parks, even Białowieża. And military stables are something else, they're not something which should last up until the present day. That was a huge problem, which the Polish authorities were completely unable to cope with. The last comprehensive work—that covered the whole camp—was more maintenance than restoration and carried out in Birkenau, in the late 1950s.

AKP: And nothing has been done since then?

PC: Only some one-off jobs were carried out; for example, if the roof of a barracks collapsed, it was repaired. But I'm only talking about this type of work. Whereas after the fall of Communism in Poland, the greatest achievement in Auschwitz was carried out by my predecessor, Director Jerzy Wróblewski—weeding out the plants and the other saplings in Birkenau and restoring these areas to the public, because there—it's difficult to imagine today—you can see the pictures from the 1980s, there are swaths of grass, and such puny trees growing here and there like weeds...

AKP: Covering such a huge area!

PC: 170 hectares. Only the ramp was open to visitors, and only the walk to the monument and back. Director Wróblewski cleaned it up, and that was the biggest operation since the early 1960s.



Holocaust involved the absolutely total application of modernity, from transportation to logistics, the manner of the killings, at every step. [...] And they were still seeking other solutions—cheaper, better, more efficient.

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Railway siding near
Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp.
April 2017. © Maciej Foks

So the first task was to slow down the natural ageing processes.

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FD: But just mowing the grass is a huge job.

PC: At the same time we must remember, on these 170 hectares there is twice as much forest as there was in 1945, because the wood around Crematorium No. 5 has grown to be twice the size. If I wanted now to restore it to the state it was during the war, there would be protests that I am destroying something, I'm changing something.

So the first task was to slow down the natural ageing processes, that is, to activate powerful instruments for conservation. This has been achieved in two ways.

Firstly, putting together a really great on-site maintenance crew. Twelve years ago or so and there were just five or six people; right now there are more than thirty qualified conservation workers whose skills cover almost all of the areas that are most critical for us. Then there are the archaeologists, chemists, biochemists, etc., Secondly, finding a way to finance the work. The scale of the necessary funds exceeds the capacity of the Ministry of Culture (it would force at least a doubling or tripling of subsidies, which would result in the closure of several other museums).

FD: The Act of 1947 by the Sejm Legislature, which to date has only been amended in some cosmetic parts, but which is still in force, says that "the camp will be preserved for all time". I understand that there is a certain emphasis resulting from the style of the era, but it's also an act of law.

PC: That's interesting because not even the Polish Constitution is "forever." It is the only act known to me that defines eternity. I don't know of any other.

FD: Any other specific site?

PC: "For all time".

FD: In the Auschwitz museum the buildings are extremely fragile. The barracks in Birkenau have walls of the thickness of a half-brick, so actually if somebody leaned hard against a wall, it could collapse.

PC: Yes. Auschwitz I used to be a barracks, and it was a permanent building, built according to the construction code, and so on. Birkenau was a short-term project, although documents have been preserved that contain plans for further expansion of the camp. But today it's hard to assume that the plans for its operation in 1944 covered any more than a period of five to seven years.

FD: That's still quite a lot, considering the quality of these facilities. And what's really impressive about them is the quality of maintenance and conservation. The area reserved for restoration in the two blocks that have been maintained without interference (numbers 2 and 3) indicates that [the conservation team] had to develop methods that were not used anywhere else, just to keep the buildings in a state close to the original.

PC: We started with the creation of jobs, that is, for the conservation workshops. These types of workshops are essentially laboratories equipped with the best equipment, the markets for which are not so large. That's evident in their prices. Secondly, it was necessary to build up a conservation team. That was an extremely difficult task. The average conservator, after six years of studies, is someone who has the clear intention to deal with works of art—something beautiful and noble. His ideal is to combine a knowledge of chemistry with beauty. When you put this man in front of 110,000 shoes, that poses a completely different challenge to him. To find himself in this new line of work, he must revise his entire system of professional values, and think about the meaning of his life choices. This was the second difficult part of organising the conservation workshop.

FD: There's also the question of developing the tools for the task. Buildings which have seen a lot of use are usually demolished.

PC: Yes. There are very few conservators. In Poland we have three conservation training centres (of the highest level), in Toruń, Warsaw and Cracow. These centres put 20–30 people on the market every year. What's interesting is that no other places of memory in Europe have such conservation teams (the museum at Majdanek is beginning to create its own workshop at the moment—but it will still only be the second in Europe). The solutions we have adopted are beginning to be used by other places of memory—as components of public contracts submitted to conservation companies. History is in the making here, we should say; there was nothing like this before, nobody had even asked themselves these questions.

Right now there are more than thirty qualified conservation workers whose skills cover almost all of the areas that are most critical for us. Then there are the archaeologists, chemists, biochemists, etc. No other places of memory in Europe have such conservation teams.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

A vast area of the
Auschwitz II-Birkenau
camp. April 2018.
© Maciej Foks



The third element was to develop a logical plan for this work, which took three to four years. So far, we have proceeded according to the following terms: we commissioned a company which—for better or worse—carried out specific tasks. However, everything happened without a comprehensive will to get to grips with the issue, not to mention to resolve the problem. So we had to trespass into the old order with our thoughts.

And this is something completely new. Let me give you an example: in 2007–2008 we purchased the railcar which stands on the ramp at Birkenau at the moment. The railcar was imported from Germany. The seller offered to restore the railcar before shipping it to us. We received the plans for the work, which involved making the railcar into a factory-new one, like we see in scientific museums. My conservators put their heads in their hands.... No, that's not what we want at all.

AKP: The two blocks, numbers 2 and 3, make an amazing impression, and in them the restoration of the breaking plaster walls...

PC: ... not to mention the underground areas. The same philosophy that tells us to keep the suitcases in their optimal state, as well as the elements we found in them (if some things are rotting inside them, then remove them, and conserve and preserve them separately), told us to remove the original sewage equipment, and also to maintain it. Meanwhile, this kind of procedure entails huge costs—at the moment the restoration work costs several million zloty every year.

FD: These numbers can be seen in the museum's reports...

PC: They can. However, the greatest difficulties concern the acquisitions for the conservation companies' work—the limits are often really human. On the other hand, of course, the money was not there a decade ago, and we had to find it from somewhere.

AKP: And this is another of the challenges which you faced as director of the museum.

PC: All credit to my predecessor [Jerzy Wróblewski – ed.], thanks to whom—in the days after the fall of Communism—a number of different individual things were achieved. And it was good that that happened, because otherwise the situation would be even more tragic.



FD: At that time museums in Poland and Central & Eastern Europe, and the entire post-Soviet orbit, were really left to themselves.

PC: Yes. Together with Jacek Kastelaniec, who was assisting me at that time, we wondered for nearly a year how we could escape from this insane method of getting small amounts of money to do spot work. The problem is, that by doing this spot work it was completely impossible to devise comprehensive solutions like creating a conservation workshop. Secondly, you're dependent on the mercy of the sponsor. If the sponsor wants to renovate a wooden hut, then they will not want to spend money on renovating the guard towers, or anything else that might be more important. Thirdly, you assume that the public decision-maker who decides to allot the public money is doing so in the knowledge that his voters will understand and appreciate his choice. But understanding arises because you can see the result of the activity, and you can see it because the building was preserved. Meanwhile conservation itself, naturally, is the procedure which comes before the final result.

The museum's conservation laboratory. July 2018.
© Katarzyna Adamów

We wondered [...] how we could escape from this insane method of getting small amounts of money to do spot work. [...] doing this spot work it was completely impossible to devise comprehensive solutions like creating a conservation workshop.

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Interiors of Block 2 in the Auschwitz I camp—final effect of the conservation work. The seemingly deteriorating interior is a result of very careful effort aimed at securing and preserving the building's original condition. July 2018.
© Katarzyna Adamów



So then we decided to create a permanent fund that was ironcast, inviolable. We calculated it to be €120 million, so that we could raise several million euros every year. Of course that fund could have been bigger, but at that time €120 million already seemed like a crazy amount, they looked at us as if we were mad.

FD: Are we still talking about the founding grant for the Foundation?

PC: Yes. I got the impression that the people favourable to me from those years in the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage were worried about the state of my mental health, because that sum far exceeded the imagination of many employees at the Ministry.

But thanks to the creation of this fund, which we organised in its essential framework within just a few years, we managed to create a really big team of conservators, re-equip the laboratories, and begin work on a scale incomparable to anything we had done hitherto. There's no other project in the world, no such place defined as important, a UNESCO World Heritage site etc., which has such a fund behind it; of international provenance, inviolable, secure, unthreatened by any political or other movements. The Foundation is such a good solution because it is strongly independent, and secondly, it is strongly definable in its statutes. Everything else can be easily changed—any law can be replaced by voting through another one on any evening; but statutory changes are much harder—they require consultation, collective decisions and so on. As guarantees of security, we listed even more guarantees: any changes to the foundation's statutory aims must be communicated to all the donor-states to the fund, that's 40 different governments.

AKP: So task number one: endurance and preservation. The second part of the action was to raise funds. I'd also like to talk about one thing which made a big impression on us (and which we had the opportunity to see ourselves during our visit to the Museum): the visitor statistics. This is a huge logistical challenge.

PC: This is a very difficult thing. I think that if we accept what the maximum capacity is, then it's a number of the order

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of 3 to 3.5 million visitors. Of course, that assumes that from opening to closing, 1000 people per hour enter the Museum, which is what we estimate. However, it's difficult to expect that a thousand people will come in between 7.00 and 7.30 in the morning. So actually the maximum number of visitors will be a little bit lower.

It is a big challenge, but not only because of the numbers. Its complexity lies in the fact that these are people from all around the world, with very different cultures, with very different languages. Often these are young people, so they do not speak good English; they have their own cultural baggage and their own codes under which they interpret the place. It's inevitable—we cannot expect that we can impose some other cultural codes on them within a visit of three or four hours. And the challenge becomes much less a question of the number of visitors, but precisely this diversity among them. Whether it's a million people, or two, or two and a half, that's a matter of ins and outs, of traffic organisation. On the other hand—I don't remember the numbers for 2017—but in 2016 there were probably only three countries in the world from where we had no visitors.

AKP: Amazing.

PC: Yes. One was North Korea, of course; then, a small country in Africa and a Pacific island. Three countries out of almost two hundred. And that's the challenge. Most museums, including places of memory, offer information in only two languages, English and their own. The Holocaust Museum is only in English; at Yad Vashem the signatures are in two languages, English and the local one. And the same is true at the Gross-Rosen Museum or the Stutthof Museum. That's normal.

Meanwhile, among the number of people who know English, suddenly 300,000 people are visiting us from the UK. But the fact that they understand English, only superficially makes the task easier: out of those 300,000 people more than 200,000 are very young. Before the guides begin to speak to them, they need to recognise how their education system operates and evolves; they need to know what associations work within them, which analogies they can make, and which they can't—in short—what's inside their heads.

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7:05 a.m.: first group of visitors at the entrance of the Auschwitz I camp. July 2018.

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FD: The simplest example: the Spanish-speaking tour guide can come across people with very different backgrounds, from the Philippines, from South America, and from Europe.

PC: Of course. But even in Europe, one group might come from Madrid, and another from Catalonia. And how the visitor receives the message is affected not only by today's conflicts, but by the wars in Gen. Franco's times, or their endorsement of one system or another. So what they come with, this baggage, is sometimes completely incoherent.

FD: In Auschwitz I got the feeling that there was an ambient aura of what might be called "the gentrification of terror", the "thrill of the journey" through personal contact with an authentic, unembellished terror exceeding all comprehension, which is intended to serve the people as a personal experience.

PC: You could ask questions like this. However, I put them aside quite quickly, for two reasons. First of all, I cannot analyse human intentions, and nor is it my place to do so. People can come and visit this place, and all the other places in the world, with very different intentions, and you can't stand in the door and say, "just a moment, your intentions

are wrong, please leave here.” And this is not out of stubbornness. Maybe some skinheads will come. Maybe. As long as we don’t see the patches on their clothes, we can’t identify them—they come dressed like everyone else. I do not know. Here you can play some long-term educational roles, but that’s all. Everything else is just wishful thinking.

FD: The guides must be ready for it.

PC: Yes, of course they are.

FD: You can’t cut yourself off from this.

PC: No, the guides are prepared for all possibilities. The second point: while I don’t care what people come with, I am more curious as to what they leave with. Some come because it’s a school trip; they had to choose either Auschwitz or Białowieża or Wieliczka, and they chose Auschwitz, or their parents chose for them. Others come because they were driving to Prague on holiday and it was on the way. Third—because the parents said they were coming to visit it. Others—they read seven or eight books, and they were so appalled that they felt that they had to see it, because if they didn’t, their life would have no meaning (which is also a symptom of a kind of “non-standard” behaviour). And that shouldn’t really be of any interest to me.

While I don’t care what people come with, I am more curious as to what they leave with.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

Information boards at the entrance to the Auschwitz I camp: descriptions in three languages. July 2018.

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A school trip arrives—people pour out of the coach, they go for a smoke behind the coach (so the teacher can't see), they flirt, they take selfies. But after 100 metres, after they exit Block 4, you don't see this type of behaviour any more. [...] The coach journey back [...] happens in complete silence.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

FD: Isn't it true that popular culture sucks everything in, and processes it, transforms it in a way that really negates everything that we can experience at a place of memory?

PC: First, if it didn't suck everything in, that would be a much bigger problem. Second, if it makes people come, that's something good in itself which we must accept. That's why I say that I'm more interested in what people are leaving with. A school trip arrives—people pour out of the coach, they go for a smoke behind the coach (so the teacher can't see), they flirt, they take selfies. But after 100 metres, after they exit Block 4, you don't see this type of behaviour any more. Many times I wanted to draw the attention of those very lively young people entering the gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*, until I realised: "Let them go 150 metres further, they'll fall silent in a moment." The coach journey back—and we know this from working with very numerous tour operators from around the world, the teachers, the educators who bring these groups—happens in complete silence. The young person

experiences sensations so deep that he has to figure it out for himself, and the prospect of sharing it with someone else is not an option. For the first three to four days, the young people aren't very capable of really talking about where they were, even within their own families. And that's much more interesting for me. On the one hand, it indicates a very strong influence. On the other, in the back of my head all the time, I have the idea that the trauma that is born still doesn't require any clarifying or managing, because maybe it's somehow easier to pass on certain conclusions.

The question is: do we have the right to do so? And so we return to the first part of the discussion... Meanwhile, what people arrive with, I'm really not interested in that. They could come with really no imagination, they could explore without a guide, or maybe only with the printed version of the tour, but whatever they see, whatever they understand, maybe sometime later they'll come back with the impression that they haven't seen enough.

FD: I'm also impressed by how the Museum's Twitter account is run. And not only because of the information posted there, but also how it operates in the context of the functioning of social media.



PC: An enormous part of our activity takes place in the virtual sphere. There is a magazine in two languages, there are e-learning lessons, there's a virtual guided tour, historical materials are put online, and so on. However, this still isn't enough—because we have so few IT specialists and educators, we can literally count them on the fingers of one hand, really a tiny team, we can't do much more or work any faster. But this—and I can say this with full awareness—is a place of memory that has the world's most widely used tools offered by the Internet.

It should be remembered that tools (i.e. means of contact) such as Twitter or Facebook are a way to reach people from afar who can't get here any other way. When we launched the so-called virtual tour (the 360-degree panorama of Auschwitz), in general it went unnoticed in Europe, while in South America it made the front pages of newspapers. There's often a great desire to know more, but it's impossible to fly here, a 30-hour flight costs some people seven months' salary.

FD: Can we talk about the ethical criteria and the workshop's limits on interpreting the past, and the political application of interpreting the past? Why do I ask...

Block 4 in the Auschwitz I camp: exhibition "Extermination". July 2018.
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Exhibition in Block 4:
the Zyklon B canisters.
July 2018.
© Katarzyna Adamów

PC: Yes, why?

FD: ... What we see in the place of memory gives a meta-political message. In short, it doesn't have to be associated with a regime, a political option, or even with a political paradigm, but it still raises questions. We know that this camp represented a specific political option, with specific paradigms, that ordered the trains to be sent there, while 200 km away the fight to hold the front line was going on. How far can we talk about the presence of Auschwitz in the meta-political life?

PC: I don't remember who said it (but I must emphasise that, so as not to keep the credit for this cool idea for myself), but the community of life today is manifested, among others, in the problem of politicians, and in how they should argue. Argument is the substance of clarity in a politician, so politicians need to argue. What was it like before, when a politician wanted to argue? Let's take a historically unlikely event—a war with Slovakia (there are few boundaries which have been as stable over the centuries in Europe as the Polish–Slovak border). Some politician mobilises his forces, invades Slovakia, beats, rapes, murders, steals, burns, and returns home satisfied. He has achieved something as a politician, he's morally satisfied, he gets the nickname “the Great”.

Who knows, maybe after he dies he gets some honorific religious titles, of course, as the defender of the nation. Meanwhile today, we have to be communal, we have to hold dialogues, so it's a lot more difficult to invade someone else.

FD: Unless someone completely doesn't care about that.

PC: Yes, but then he is excluded from the community—he gets the stigma of being the bad guy, and inevitably that doesn't suit him.

This means (just like that author said, who I don't remember) that the conflicts have spilled out onto the historical plane. As—let's leave the poor innocent Slovaks alone—we can't invade Brandenburg itself, so perhaps we can hit Chancellor Merkel verbally, with remarks on the historical interpretation. And such an attacker will make a good defender as well. It's interesting that the attacker is always presented as the protector; this ubiquitous, misanthropic approach allows us to return home with our shield, and not on it; that is, to make a positive impression on the electorate. The costs are generally lower, and the effect is similar. And it's very important to say that we are living in a society where the cost of courage is becoming lower and lower, and courage is becoming even more...


FD: It leads to a brutalisation of the discussion.

PC: Without a doubt. If any opinion about Germany from the last year, two, three, five years had been heard in the days of Bismarck, we would have been guaranteed an immediate invasion, because then the concept of honour meant something. In contrast, this trivialisation of tension—potential conflicts, conflicts which are unwanted, unsolicited, artificial, or not artificial—is phenomenal, and is being transferred into historic spaces. This allows us to avoid direct responsibility for what is said. And this can affect a place of memory, and memory in general. That can sometimes be very cruel, because it touches the still painful places in some specific people. It's sometimes perceived as just an oddity that once existed, although now no-one remembers it.

What in my opinion is the limit? It's metaphysical in nature. I'm sorry that I'm resorting to an answer that eludes political discourse, but after living for as long as possible, I will die sometime, and I will knock on those doors, and I will come (I hope) through that gate;

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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD



[The conservator's] ideal is to combine a knowledge of chemistry with beauty. When you put this man in front of 110,000 shoes, that poses a completely different challenge to him [...] he must revise his entire system of professional values, and think about the meaning of his life choices.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

Exhibition in Block 5: The personal belongings (shoes) of the murdered deportees. July 2018.
© Katarzyna Adamów

Exhibition in Block 5: the personal belongings (kitchen utensils) of the murdered deportees.
July 2018. © Katarzyna Adamów



and there, I suspect, that 1.3 million very curious people will be waiting and will look me straight in the eye. Why? Because in some way I'm responsible for the memory of them, and for making some kind of sense out of the senselessness which they encountered. They will be curious at my coming and, apart from my immediate family, they will probably be the first natural people whom I will meet there. I'd love to be able to meet the gaze of those 1.3 million people, that is, not to lower my eyes with shame, because that will be the most important final settlement.

And it will be the final settlement. This means that no other settlement, including with my quite-good ministers of culture, four of whom I have survived (in the ministerial, not the personal sense)—this will not matter. Those settlements are of this earth, this is not the meaning of my work.

AKP: It's only of short-term importance.

PC: Yes.

FD: In short, the memory of the victims demands that at some point we must exclude the political criterion.

PC: Yes. That is, we make a very great effort in the museum not to interfere in strictly political issues, because we have no right to do so. It would be a misappropriation of others' suffering, and after all we still don't know what the Third Reich was. Was it a socialist construction, or something of the extreme right?... Was it a right-wing extreme, or rather one of the responses to the social ills of nascent modernity?

FD: It was certainly a modern design.

AKP: And effective.

PC: Yes, for sure. And positivist. Devilishly positivist. When I see what positivism can lead to, it awakens a romantic spirit in me... But I steer clear of current political debate, I hope a little naively that politics will also learn to steer clear of this place from afar. All four ministers of culture (Ujazdowski, Zdrojewski, Omilanowska and Gliński) understood that well, and we should hand that to them. And that's not something that every politician who aspires to a public voice understands. Of course, we also could feel exempt from this distance, and we could get violently involved in any discourses.

FD: But would that serve the place of memory?

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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

The story of the camps is continually being crushed between two communities of historians, whose approaches to the subject not only have no mutual contact, but which even exclude each other.

Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

PC: I don't know, but it would definitely mean that after crossing those pearly gates I would have to avert my eyes.

We should also pay attention to one more thing: the story of the camps is continually being crushed between two communities of historians, whose approaches to the subject not only have no mutual contact, but which even exclude each other. On the one hand we have the story of the resources of the World War II—so, eminent specialists in the particular forms of the Wehrmacht's armament, experts on every street in Stalingrad, the people who can count every metre of the way to Monte Cassino, the people who really know every single bunker, but who completely fail to perceive the problems of the civilian population and the Holocaust. An example could be from the Warsaw Rising Museum, where in its view, the Warsaw Rising is purely military, there is almost nothing about the hundreds of thousands of people forcibly deported from Warsaw (there are a few pictures placed at the end of the exhibition,

which you might or might not get to). No problem. And this is very, very common. Those historians of the World War II don't notice that this war was different from all others precisely because of the fate of the civilians, including the Holocaust—as an element which absolutely surpasses all other previous experiences.

And the second group: historians of the Holocaust who know well facts such as which ghetto ended up in which camp, the dates and the numbers of the victims of all the transports from all over Europe, and so on, but who generally don't notice the World War II in the background. At all. They're surprised that the situation existed, or that the course of events accelerated just because the front broke...

FD: In general, camps of this kind, like in Auschwitz, could only be created because of war, nothing else.

PC: That's a little too strong. But undoubtedly there was a very strong feedback loop between the two things. In any case, there are two worlds. Political discourse, at least in Poland, involved the first world almost exclusively — the world of military war. The latter lives in its own reality, it rarely emerges from it. Perhaps most importantly, these two worlds



don't talk together at all, they don't know each other, I even get the impression that they don't like each other.

AKP: They avoid each other...

PC: Yes, and this phenomenon is characteristic of the whole world right now. The best World War II historians don't deal with the Holocaust, and it bothers them—perhaps subconsciously—that this is the subject of the era which is gaining in importance, and yet it has nothing to do with Messerschmitts, tanks, etc.

FD: It's really becoming a problem, because it may appear that these groups, which should be defining specific resources of knowledge, and therefore also the opinions about them, are essentially operating in isolation from the resources which they should work with.

Every country has a different definition of a politics of memory, but they do not always carry it out.

PC: That would require a definition of "politics of memory". I really don't like this type of concept, including the concept of "politics of history". I'm rather wary of assumptions. Somewhere in the back of my head I see a decision-maker who is considering what he should include in this politics of history—what pays him best, what shows him in a favourable light...

Auschwitz I camp: a warning sign at the camp's inner perimeter. July 2018.
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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD



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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp.
March 2017.
© Maciej Foks

In general, it seems to me that if you assume the existence of a politics of history—because I consider it not to have been fully documented—you have to do it in a completely non-partisan and therefore minimal way. The only thing which could make sense would be to combine all the serious political and ideological currents which have existed in the last 20 years in Poland. Even then it would probably only be 10% of what each of these trends considered important... I don't know, everyone has their own world.

FD: Pluralism would strengthen the message a little...

PC: In contrast, that would only make any sense in an absolute, total and natural conjunction of all possible [political] forces. As long as we're in a situation where every time one force, or a conglomerate of two or three forces, redefines everything every few years, then there is absolutely no sense to it—it's just money thrown into the mud, completely unproductive bickering.

FD: I was rather thinking of approaching the image of Auschwitz as a fixed point for the imponderables of the state.

PC: This is not a state policy, because it doesn't concern the state, it affects the whole continent. So it's essential to establish

Railway siding near
Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp.
April 2017. © Maciej Foks



a politics of history on the continental scale at least. And since we are unable to set that as a politics of history... it's a little like the *raison d'état*—we all appeal to it, but no one has ever seen it with their own eyes. The only solution that I can see today is to move in an intuitive space, without any definition. For example, Auschwitz is not closed away and focused on the issue of genocide alone, although that's an important factor in the history of the camp—maybe even the most important—but it's not the only one. Auschwitz carries an enormous knowledge and collective experience in the form of the lives of the prisoners, the groups of prisoners (I'm not talking about trivial issues like the Kapos, and so on), the experiments which—as we know—were also conducted after the war. So already it has nothing even closely to do with genocide. This applies to quite different anthropological layers—how humans function in situations of extreme danger and destruction, mainly by hunger, which had a greater impact on changes in mentality than might seem the case today. I'm relating this very specifically, because I'm talking here about the death of millions of people.

FD: Especially as this tool, that is, maintaining or artificially inducing hunger—it's not just a matter for Auschwitz. It was a tool used many times in the past.

AKP: There's a problem with the politics of history today: on the one hand it's stated that it is a tool of soft power commonly used in international relations, and that as a country we need to pursue a politics of history, if we want to be treated as an entity by other countries which pursue historical policies...

PC: We can rattle off a long discussion on the subject of the politics of history. Whereas in Germany certain approaches to World War II are coherent regardless of political party (omitting the extremes), and in France they approach the French Revolution similarly, and so on, there are also countries which do not conduct historical policies. There's also the question of whether we are talking about politics of history as a kind of external promotion, or as an element in the construction of identity...

In any case, it's not true that politics of history is some kind of “to be or not to be”. It is a certain kind of madness

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Piotr M.A. Cywiński PhD

which is probably associated with the Polish experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

FD: In short, identity is so important because we have nothing else.

PC: Yes, and that's linked so closely to history. This is a strange thing that exists everywhere, we're convinced of it—completely convinced, although it hasn't so far been proven anthropologically.

AKP and FD: Thank you for the interview.



Auschwitz I camp.
March 2017.
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