






MUSEUM OF THE CURSED SOLDIERS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS OF POLISH PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC – FORMER MOKOTÓW PRISON IN WARSAW, POLAND

—	Prison's buildings of original compound (today's Museum)	- - - -	Economic and residential part of original compound (today's Central Directorate of Prison Service)
1	Administration building	6	Boiler devices building
1a	Administration wing	7	Wall of Death (execution site at the prison's wall behind the boiler devices building)
1b	Prison wing	8	Printing house
1c	Execution site in the basement (with remains of the gallows)	9	Central Directorate of Prison Service building on the site of non-existing residential building for prison wardens and employees
2	Block X and Block XI	10	Main prison gate
3	Block XII	11	Former Tsarist prison cemetery (after World War II the prison yard)
4	Block of the Investigative Department of the Ministry of Public Security ("Palace of Miracles")	12	Victims of 1944 execution original burial site
5	Hospital		
	Pre-1956 buildings		Post-1956 buildings
	Residential buildings		

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THE MUSEUM OF CURSED SOLDIERS AND POLITICAL PRISONERS OF THE POLISH PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC (CURRENTLY BEING CREATED) –

THE HISTORY OF THE BUILDING COMPLEX, ITS MISSION AND PLANNED ACTIVITIES

Abstract

This paper focuses on the goals of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic (currently being created) and the activities it offers. The Museum has been established in place of the former detention centre and prison. An outline of the prison's history, presented here, is an introduction to the future mission of the emerging Museum and a permanent exhibition (in the works). The paper presents an overview of current exhibitions, educational programmes and commemorative endeavours.

Keywords: museum, prison, German occupation, political repressions, communist crimes, Polish People's Republic

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to present the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic. The Museum, founded in 2016, is still in the works. The first part of the article outlines the history of the venue. The second part presents the mission of the Museum, current exhibitions, educational programmes and activities aimed at raising historical awareness. Such a two-fold division of the paper is compatible with the scheme adopted in the *Institute of National Remembrance Review* for presenting museum establishments and places of remembrance.

The key terms pertaining to the topic discussed in this paper are related to historical memory. The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is a narrative museum in the sense in which Dorota Folga-Januszewska and Paweł Kowal have used the term:

“The function of a narrative museum goes beyond the mere accumulation of exhibits, their conservation and maintenance, or the promotion and presentation of items that make a given collection. Coordinators, who are in charge of cultural institutions, and curators are supposed to recount a self-contained history via an exhibition to stimulate a discussion and not just to narrate the events.” (Folga-Januszewska, Kowal, 2019, 49).

The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is still in the making, and therefore it does not yet fully implement the idea proposed above. The programme will be put into practice once the permanent exhibition is in place. It is worth remembering, at the same time, that the term ‘narrative museum’ is ambiguous and that it has been interpreted in various ways (Kobielska 2020). The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is situated in its historical location. Thus, it is a museum of remembrance *in situ*. It recounts the history of the place, or, to put it differently, it zooms into the 20th-century Polish history via the history of the place itself.



The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic in Warsaw – a Place of Remembrance

View of the prison from Rakowiecka Street. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

The mission of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is

‘to commemorate the history of Poland and the activities of the Cursed Soldiers, members of the anti-communist underground movement and anti-communist opposition in Poland between 1994–1990.’
(*Zarządzenie Prezesa IPN*, March 29, 2022).

Thus, its major goal is to ensure that the history of the fight for independence and sovereignty undertaken by consecutive generations of Polish people during the communist regime will not fade. An inherent element of the memory of the fight for freedom lost in 1939 – in the aftermath of German and Soviet aggression against Poland – is to upkeep the awareness that the communist system in ‘people’s’ Poland was indeed oppressive, and to shed light on the role the communist apparatus of repression played in it.

The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic (currently being created) was established by the ordinance of the Minister of Justice regarding the institution and regulation of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic on April 4, 2016 (*Zarządzenie Ministra Sprawiedliwości*, April 4, 2016). Initially, the Museum was part of the Central Board of the Prison Service (Centralny Zarząd Służby Więziennej), as the Office of Historical Education – Museum of the Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic (*Zarządzenie Ministra Sprawiedliwości*, February 29, 2016). Four years later, it was transformed into a state cultural institution by the Minister of Justice, whereby it acquired the status of a legal entity (*Zarządzenie Ministra Sprawiedliwości*, March 1, 2020). The president of the Institute of National Remembrance became the coordinator of the Museum (*Ustawa*, January 27, 2022). It is the only Polish museum coordinated and governed by the Institute of National Remembrance.

37 Rakowiecka Street – a Historical Space



A corridor in the main building of the Rakowiecka Prison, March – April 1946. Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN GK 4084/63492

The Museum is being created in a historical space, namely in a prison built by the Tsarist annexionist authorities during the partition. The building's infrastructure covers an extensive area. At first, it comprised 6 hectares, and later, beginning in the 1960s – 4 hectares, 2 being assigned to the Central Board of the Prison Service (Centralny Zarząd Służby Więziennej) (Gruszczynski 2023, 100). From September 1902, when the construction works started, until November 1904, when they were completed, the whole area was beyond Warsaw administrative boundaries. It fell within its boundaries no sooner than in 1916

(Gruszczynski (2), 2; Pawłowicz 2017, 39; *Więzienie karne...*, n.p.).

The original design project comprised the main building and a prison pavilion (built in the form of a cross), a hospital, a boiler house, several outbuildings, a residential home for the administrative staff and prison wardens, and a paper mill (separated from the actual prison). The prison could accommodate up to 800 prisoners (Gruszczynski (1), 4; Karpowicz 2004 (2), 9–11; Pawłowicz 2017,



A building on the corner of Niepodległości Avenue and Rakowiecka Street (1946–1947). The building of the Rakowiecka Prison administration, one of the prison gates, sentry booth, and a roadblock barrier (part of Rakowiecka Street adjacent to prison was blocked for public traffic) can be seen on the left side of the photo. Photo: Stefan Rassalski, courtesy of St. Rassalski descendants. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Archiwum fotograficzne Stefana Rassalskiego, ref. no. 3/27/0/-/1469

39–40; *Więzienie karne...*, n.p.). The main building included workshops where the prisoners worked. The outbuildings and stables, situated alongside the northern and western part of the complex, separated the prisoners' section from the area in which the staff residential building was located.

At the time when the Tsarist power supervised the prison, it was overcrowded: at times, it accommodated as many as 1800 prisoners. Among the prisoners were people who took part in the 1905 Revolution and the events that followed until 1907 (Gruszczyński (1), 6–7; Karpowicz 2004 (2), 13). Therefore, during a reconstruction process in 1908, the kitchen annex and the workshops were transferred from the basement to a new building, while the vacant space was re-used to create additional prison cells (Pawłowicz 2017, 40; Karpowicz 2004 (2), 13).

During World War I, in the summer of 1915, Germans, who captured Warsaw, took control of the prison. In September 1918, still



before the German surrender, the prison fell under Polish jurisdiction (Gruszczyński (1), 7–8; Karpowicz 2004 (2), 14, 17; Pawłowicz 2017, 41–42; *Więzienie karne...*, n.p.).

In the 1920s, the Mokotów prison was one of the toughest penitentiaries in the Second Polish Republic (which regained its independence in 1918). Although the prison was destined for criminal prisoners, people like Stanisław Dubois and Norbert Barlicki – the socialists convicted in the so-called Brest-Litovsk political trials in 1932 – served their time here, too (*Więzienie karne...*, n.p.). There were also communist prisoners. It should be noted that the communist party was deemed illegal in the Second Republic of Poland as a pro-Soviet organisation acting against the sovereignty of the state (Orlikowski 2004, 43–45). The prison workshops, including a tailor's, ironworker's, and carpenter's shops, a shoe repair shop and a bakery, were still functioning at the time and operated by prisoners qualified for a specific branch. Operating on site were also a branch of *Polish Security Printing Works* (Polska Wytwórnia Papierów Wartościowych, PWPW) and a number of workshops producing goods for external companies, such as silk and shoe factories, soap stores, basket-weaving and brush-manufacturing firms (Gruszczyński (1), 10–11; Orlikowski 2004, 22–23, 39–40; Pawłowicz 2017, 42).

During the Second Republic of Poland, between 1925 and 1933, four prisoners convicted for criminal offenses were executed at the prison courtyard. Whether any executions were carried out before that when the prison was under the annexionist's and occupier's jurisdiction, is not clear (Gruszczyński (1), 11; Orlikowski 2004, 46). However, the aforementioned executions were likely the first to have taken place there, and, it should be stressed, none of them was due to political reasons.

On September 28, 1939, after German aggression on Poland and Warsaw's capitulation, the prison was taken over by the occupier. Renovation works were underway until January 1940, even though the first prisoners had already been incarcerated. The renovations were implemented to remove the damage caused during the bombings and the siege of Warsaw. From May 1940, the majority of inmates were common criminals, both Polish and German, and it was the only Warsaw prison that fell under the Kripo jurisdiction, that is German Kriminalpolizei (Gruszczyński (1), 16–18; Karpowicz 2004 (1), 51–52; Pawłowicz 2017, 44; Wróblewski 2023, 117). Imprisoned here were also Polish people who were helping the Jews (which was strictly forbidden under death penalty in the areas of Poland occupied by

Germans), and, before the Ghetto's main Detention Centre (Centralny Areszt Getta) was established, also the Jews and people of Jewish origin arrested outside of Ghetto (Dylewski; *Uciekaliśmy boso...*, 22). Yet another group of inmates comprised Polish political prisoners convicted in German special courts, i.e., *Sondergerichte*, especially in the early period before the spring of 1940, when the prison was managed by Germans only (Gruszczyński (1), 20–21; Karpowicz 2004 (1), 54; Pawłowicz 2017, 42).

The prison was overcrowded during the German occupation, too. At the end of 1941, there were as many as 2500 prisoners, which was the highest number ever held there during World War II. (Gruszczyński (2), 16; Karpowicz 2004 (1), 54; Pawłowicz 2017, 42; *Więzienie karne...*, n.p.).

The first documented execution of political prisoners at 37 Rakowiecka Street took place on January 27, 1942, when five Poles were executed by firing squad 'on a charge of espionage' (Gruszczyński (1), 20).

On August 1, 1944, an uprising against the German occupier broke out in Warsaw. It was also an attempt to manifest Polish fight for sovereignty especially in light of the fact that extensive areas of the former pre-war Eastern and Central Poland were taken by the Soviets, and the Red Army was breaking down constitutional and clandestine Polish structures, killing the members of the Polish Underground State. After the outbreak of the anti-German uprising, the prison was hit by a massacre. Six hundred prisoners were executed by Germans both inside as well as outside its walls – on the north side of the Rakowiecka street (Bartelski 1986, 278; Motyl and Rutkowski 1994, 135; Pawłowicz 2017, 45–46). The mass massacre made some prisoners rebel and escape alongside rooftops to the area controlled by the insurgents. From several dozen to three hundred people are estimated to have salvaged their lives in this way (Bartelski 1986, 278–279; Karpowicz 2004 (1), 63–64; Motyl and Rutkowski 1994, 135; *Więzienie karne...*, n.p.). The prison also served as a place of execution of the inhabitants of the Mokotów district – the victims of German pacification and terror actions in the area (Pawłowicz 2017, 47).

The bodies of victims murdered by the Germans were buried within the prison grounds. In April 1945, after the front moved on (and the Soviet units left the prison), the communist authorities exhumed the remains of over seven hundred people. At first, the remains were



The main prison's building (right) and Block X and XI (left), connected by a passage, the "Palace of Miracles" on the left. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

buried in mass graves at Aleje Niepodległości, a street perpendicular to Rakowiecka Street. However, in December the same year, the remains were transferred to the mass grave of the Warsaw Rising insurgents at the Military Cemetery at Powązki (Motyl and Rutkowski 1994, 135). As it turned out later, not all of the bodies were recovered at the time. In 2016–2022, a seven-stage exploration works on site, carried out by the Office of Search and Identification of the Institute of National Remembrance (Biuro Poszukiwań i Identyfikacji Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej), revealed the remains of over thirty more people (Trzaska 2021, 181–187). Some of the bodies were identified as victims of the German war crimes dated to World War II.

For a brief period of time, when the Red Army occupied Warsaw from January to March 1945, the prison was subject to the Soviet NKVD, and then it came under the jurisdiction of the communist government of post-Yalta Poland (Pawłowicz 2017, 47; Wróblewski 2017, 150).

According to some estimates, during the period of the Polish People's Republic, when political repressions increased, the number of prisoners went up to six thousand (Gruszczyński (2), 16). This number, however, seems unlikely and should be verified further. Given the prison infrastructure at the time, *circa* five thousand prisoners seems to be a more likely figure.



For Polish communists, the prison at 37 Rakowiecka Street had two functions. First, it served as a custody, which, at the beginning, consisted of the so-called Pavilion X and Pavilion XI (these were located in the southern part of the building ‘built in the form of a cross’ and connected to the administrative building and the block of prison cells by a special skywalk). Second, it was a prison proper including the so-called ‘ogólniak’ (‘a general one’), where the convicts were kept. Due to the scale of communist repressions and the increasing space demands (the number of detainees retained on site during investigation processes was bigger and bigger), the investigating department of the Ministry of Public Security (Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego, MBP) decided to extend the prison complex. In 1949, a new Investigation Department of the MBP pavilion was put into service. Prisoners called it a ‘Miracle Palace’, since the detainees tortured there were said to miraculously plead guilty (Gruszczyński (2), 6; Pawłowicz 2004, 70; Pawłowicz 2017, 49). In 1950, another annex – Pavilion XII – was added. The building was adjoined to Pavilion X (and Pavilion XI), and was intended to house additional cells (Gruszczyński (2), 7). Located inside the new Pavilion were also machine and car workshops (*Więzienie karne...*, n.p.).

In the newly built Pavilion XII, a section for political prisoners was established after the 1956 ‘thaw’.

Blocks X, XI and XII (right) and the "Palace of Miracles" (left).
Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

From 1945 to 1956, the Rakowiecka prison became the key element of the communist repression system in 'people's' Poland targeted at those who opposed the Sovietization of the country. People who got arrested (often without a warrant), detained members of underground groups fighting for the state independence, and, up to 1947, also openly operating political opposition members, or simply people deemed to be potential opponents of the system – were all subject to brutal investigations and trials, and once convicted – they were killed or incarcerated. Testimonies were obtained via brutal physical and psychological tortures. Hearings in court cases, mockingly called 'kibłówki' or 'rozprawy kiblowe' (that is, 'potties' or 'potty hearings', since they were regularly conducted in a cell while the defendant was sitting on a pot or a bucket serving as a toilet (i.e. Pol. 'kibel'), often took place on the premises. The communists aimed at eliminating political opponents who strove to restore independence in Poland under the colour of law. Another method they applied simultaneously involved the criminalization of the active members of the independence movement whom they accused of common crimes. In effect, both the activists and their cause were compromised in the public eye. Among the prisoners were not only the members of the principal Polish underground organizations, such as the Delegatura Sił Zbrojnych na Kraj (Armed Forces Delegation for Poland, DSZ), Zrzeszenie „Wolność i Niezawisłość” (Freedom and Independence Association, WiN), Narodowe Siły Zbrojne (National Armed Forces, NSZ) and Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe (National Military Union, NZW), but also members of Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish People's Party, PSL), Stronnictwo Pracy (Labour Faction, SP), or pro-independence socialists. Imprisoned at the 37 Rakowiecka Street were also conspirators and members of minor regional and local underground organizations, as well as people suspected of pro-independence activities deemed as espionage (in the communist law-making and case-law, the term 'espionage' had a broad definition – suffice it if the accused had some contact with the free world or have returned from the West). Subject to imprisonment were also people accused of economic sabotage (in many cases this meant only some mishandlings or technical accidents), the so-called 'whispering campaigns' (i.e. gossip, anti-government jokes and comments, etc.), the so-called 'conspiracy in the army' (of which accused were the officers of the communist 'people's' Polish Army who had served in the ranks of Armia Krajowa (Home Army, AK), or Polish Armed Forces in the West (Polskie Siły Zbrojne, PSZ), or sometimes even

in the pre-war Polish Army), to name just a few fabricated political crimes. Paradoxically, the detention centre at Mokotów was also the place where communists accused of leaning towards the national right-hand ideology were kept and tortured. In fact, the latter group merely opted for an alternative approach towards the Sovietization of Poland, divergent from the practice implemented by Bolesław Bierut, appointed by the Kremlin in 1948 to rule Poland.

The prison at Mokotów became a symbol of the communist regime repressiveness. It has been estimated that between 350 and 400 people, convicted by the communist tribunals, were killed here, either by hanging or shot in the back of the head. The majority of victims were members of the Polish underground independence movement and partisans, but there were also German war criminals from World War II, Poles collaborating with Germans, and members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Українська повстанська армія, УПА*) (responsible, among other things, for the genocide in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, during which over 100,000 Polish civilians were murdered), and, lastly, common criminals. Thus, in post-war Poland, occupied by the Soviets and subordinate to the imperial policy of the Kremlin, 37 Rakowiecka Street was the place where the most people were executed. In no other prison were so many executions carried out. The prison at Rakowiecka is, therefore, a special place of remembrance and martyrology.

Of special significance for the Museum visitors are the places associated with the major figures of Polish resistance movement. In the Pavilion X cells the following people were imprisoned, *inter alia*: colonel Łukasz Ciepliński (alias 'Plug') – president of the IVth Executive Board of WiN; the main underground organization operating after the Polish Underground State, founded during World War II, had been shut down, derived directly from the Home Army and continuing its ideological line); major Hieronim Dekutowski (alias 'Zapora' – one of the elite special-operations paratroopers trained by SOE, one of the best-known partisan commanders from the post-war period, fighting in the ranks of WiN; major Zygmunt Szendzielarz (alias 'Łupaszka') – commander of the Home Army 5th Wilno Brigade (V Wileńska Brygada AK), captain Gracjan Frog (alias 'Szczerebiec') – commander of the Home Army 3rd Wilno Brigade (III Wileńska Brygada AK), cavalry captain Witold Pilecki (alias 'Witold') – intelligence officer of the Polish Armed Forces in the West, who during World War II voluntarily allowed to be imprisoned in KL Auschwitz to set up an underground resistance organization there, and fled the concentration camp over two years

later; lieutenant colonel Stanisław Kasznica (alias 'Przepona') – the last commander of the National Armed Forces (NSZ), the second largest, after WiN, underground organization operating in Poland; priest Rudolf Marszałek (alias 'Opoka') – prisoner of KL Mauthausen-Gusen, a German concentration camp, NSZ chaplain in the rank of major, liaison officer and a courier of the partisan NSZ Group of captain Henryk Flame (alias 'Bartek'). All of the above were murdered in the Mokotów prison after violent and brutal investigations. Before 1944/1945, all of them were outstanding members of conspiratorial groups fighting against the German occupier, and – in some cases – also against the Soviet occupier. Likewise, all of them were sentenced by military courts and murdered with a shot in the back of the head.

The most likely place of their death seems to have been the area along the western prison wall, the southern part of which was hidden from the rest of the site by the boiler house. In 2017, during archaeological excavations, some bullet marks were uncovered in the wall. Executions were probably carried out by this wall even earlier – by Germans during World War II, and after the war, by domestic Polish communists (*Odkryto ścianę...*; Gruszczyński 2023, 189). This wall is one of the most important historical exhibits and also part of

Reconstruction of the 1940s-1950s prison cell. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)





the architectural fabric of the Mokotów prison. Executions were also carried out in other places, for example, near the so-called ‘wet-cell’ – a solitary confinement located in the underground corridor which linked Pavilion X and the ‘Palace of Miracles’. It is possible that after the executions, the bodies were hauled out of the building through a window (Nowik 2015; Gruszczyński 2021, 62–63). However, this hypothesis seems somewhat controversial (Gruszczyński 2023, 189). Some of the executions may have also been carried out behind Pavilion X (Gruszczyński 2021, 13), on the spot where Pavilion XII was erected later on. Yet another possible place of executions was reported to have been situated in the basement of the Pavilion XII (Leopold, Lechicki 1983). However, given that the latter does not have a basement, it is difficult to ascertain which place exactly the prisoners who

A passage between the “Wall of Death” (right) and the boiler building (above). Marks of bullets on the “Wall of Death” (below). Photos Katarzyna Adamów (2023)





Maj. Zygmunt Szendzielarz (nom-de-guerre "Łupaszka") (1910–1950), arrest photo (1948). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0259/436, vol. 2



Cav. Capt. Witold Pilecki (nom-de-guerre "Witold") (1901–1948), arrest photo (1947). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0259/168, vol. 7



Gen. Emil Fieldorf (nom-de-guerre "Nil") (1895–1953), arrest photo (1950). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN GK 919/1678

reported on this may have had in mind. Yet another possible location may have been a spot in the boiler house through which the prisoners were led one or several stairs down. However, the latter has not been identified yet.

Sentences passed by special and common courts were carried out by hanging. At least three members of the independence movement were killed in this way, namely, general August Emil Fieldorf (alias 'Nil') – one of the highest-ranked officers of the Home Army and the only general of the Polish Army, killed by the communists in post-war Poland; a pre-war policeman, major Bolesław Kontrym (alias 'Żmudzin') – member of the elite special-operations paratroopers of the Polish Army in exile, trained by SOE, and a Warsaw Rising soldier; second lieutenant Julian Czerwiakowski (alias 'Jerzy Tarnowski') who served during the war in the rank of an officer of the National Armed Forces (NSZ), and became a member of WiN after Poland was occupied by the Red Army. All of them were killed in 1953, probably in the basement of the main administrative building at a place which has survived until this day (Gruszczyński 2023, 189).

German war criminals were also executed in the Mokotów prison. These executions were always carried out outside on wooden gallows. Contrary to hypotheses proposed hitherto, they were not carried out in the prison yard, but behind its wall on the western side. Today, the Central Board of the Prison Service is situated in this area. In the post-war years, there was a farm yard in the very same place which could be conveniently accessed from the prison grounds via an internal passage that led through the printing house building.

The cells in Pavilion X at 37 Rakowiecka Street are, therefore, a unique space, a place of remembrance, especially as regards the prisoners held there before the 'thaw'. Of equal significance is Pavilion XII where dissidents from later years were detained. It is here that students, the participants of the protest in March 1968, and representatives of all significant opposition organizations in later years, were detained: people accused in the so-called 'Taternicy' 1970 trial, members of 'Ruch', Workers' Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR), Movement for Defence of Human and Civic Rights (Ruch Obrony Praw Człowieka i Obywatela, ROPCiO), Confederation of Independent Poland (Konfederacja Polski



Bishop Antoni Baraniak (1904–1977). Passport photo (after 1962). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN Po 822/4316

Niepodległej, KPN), Free Trade Unions (Wolne Związki Zawodowe, WZZ), Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ (‘Solidarność’), Independent Students’ Association (Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów, NZS), ‘Fighting Solidarity’ (Solidarność Walcząca), Trade Union of Individual Farmers ‘Solidarity’ (Solidarność Rolników Indywidualnych), Freedom and Peace Movement (Ruch Wolność i Pokój, WiP), and dozens or hundreds of other minor regional and local organizations whose goal was to overthrow the communist system. Among the prisoners were the following anti-communist opposition activists: Czesław Bielecki, Zbigniew Bujak, Andrzej Gwiazda, Jacek Kuroń, Antoni Macierewicz, Adam Michnik, Karol Modzelewski, Kornel Morawiecki or Jan Rulewski (Janowski 2004, 81–82). Józef Szaniawski was the last political prisoner of the People’s Republic of Poland to leave the walls of the Mokotów prison on December 22, 1989 (Frąckowiak 2014).

The main administrative building has been subject to many refurbishments. In effect, very little of the actual historical fabric has remained to this day. Undoubtedly, special places of remembrance in the building include the basement cell where prisoners were hanged and the former chapel turned into a prison common room. Due to reconstruction works, a unique place, namely a collective death cell, located in the western prison flank (i.e. the General Pavilion) was irretrievably lost. At the time of the Polish People’s Republic, a staircase leading to a newly constructed floor was built in its place.



Jacek Kuroń (1934–2004), arrest photo (1964). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0330/327, vol. 16



Karol Modzelewski (1937–2019), arrest photo (1968). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0276/276, vol. 19



Antoni Macierewicz (b. 1948), arrest photo (1968). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0276/276, vol. 19



Czesław Bielecki (b. 1948), arrest photo (1968). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 0276/276, vol. 19



Andrzej Czuma (b. 1938), arrest photo (1970). Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN 024/237

The Collection

The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic has been collecting items related to its statutory mission, namely to the underground and opposition activities, in the first place. At the end of 2022, the museum had 18 800 exhibits. The collection has been growing ever since.

The collection includes elements of uniforms worn by underground soldiers (including major Hieronim Dekutowski's (alias 'Zapora') uniform jacket, or captain Jan Dubaniowski's (alias 'Salwa') four-cornered cap), weapon (non-functional and functional) used by the partisan soldiers, non-dated weapon of unknown provenance, minor everyday items, such as, cameras, watches, cigarette cases, etc. One of the most treasured artefacts are the soles of boots worn by Danuta Siedzikówna (alias 'Inka') – a nurse from the 5th Vilnius Brigade of the Home Army (sentenced under fabricated charges and executed in 1946, several days before her 18th birthday). The soles were recovered from a death pit during exhumation works carried out at the Garrison Cemetery in Gdańsk in 2014 (Owczarska, 2022, 193–203).



The exhibition room in the administration wing of the Rakowiecka Prison's main building. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

The Museum's collection also includes larger utility items, for example, an armchair used for taking file photographs of the inmates, the so-called 'signal photos', some furniture from major Zygmunt Szendzielarz's (alias 'Łupaszka') hiding place (after the dissolution of his partisan unit, 1947–1948), or the Border Guard file cabinet. Objects from more recent history are also part of the collection. The latter include, a loudspeaker used during opposition demonstrations, donated by Andrzej Czuma, a member of Ruch and ROPCiO. There are also personal belongings of Emil Barchański (1965–1982), the youngest victim of the Martial Law (persecuted by Security Services functionaries for his opposition activities found drowned in suspicious circumstances). An important group of artefacts are various objects made by prisoners for the sake of entertainment, for instance, chess pieces made of bread (for the lack of other stuff available for prisoners), religious items, such as rosaries, messages smuggled in and out of prison, and even a diary written in blood on a piece of linen by Maria Krawiec, who was detained in Poznań from 1951 to 1952.

The Museum's collection of photographs has been systematically expanded. The collection includes a repository of historical documents and photographs confiscated during the arrest of General August Emil Fieldorf.



The Museum is also in possession of various objects of art, for instance, paintings by Władysław Gurgacz (alias ‘Sem’) – the Jesuit chaplain of the Polish Underground Independence Army (Polska Podziemna Armia Niepodległościowców, underground resistance organisation active in Southern Poland), killed by communists in the Cracow prison at Montelupi Street in 1949.

The collection also includes historical vehicles, such as an electric battery-driven cart, like the one used, for example, by the workers during the June 1976 protests in Radom. Other items include vehicles operated by the Communist apparatus of repression, such as, a police van – Nysa, an off-road vehicle of the UAZ brand, a popular ‘watering cart’ (*polewaczka*) – Jelcz Hydromil II – a truck water cannon used to suppress street demonstrations, and a Soviet BTR-60 armoured infantry carrier used by the Communist army during the Martial Law (Owczarska, 2021, 165–170).

To protect the artefacts gathered in the museum from deterioration, conservation works are systematically conducted. Conservation is carried out on the premises, at the Museum's conservation workshop. Some works are done outside the Museum by external experts.

The collection also comprises uncensored prints issued illegally in the Polish People's Republic – books, periodicals, leaflets, posters, etc. Statistically, this is the largest set of artefacts (A. Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, F. Musiał, et. al., 2023, 18–19).

A collection of illegal prints. The exhibition room in the administration wing of the Rakowiecka Prison's main building. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

Man Versus a Totalitarian System

The Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is still in the process of creation, which means that there is no permanent exhibition, and visitors have limited access to the buildings on site. Due to these limitations, only guided tours around the museum are offered at present.

The mission of the Museum is to expand historical awareness regarding the post-war underground and resistance movement. At the same time, it is a museum of commemoration *in situ* (i.e. in a historical place). The past of the Mokotów prison has an effect on how the post-war history is perceived: the Museum is a place of martyrdom. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is located in a historical space where people actually suffered from repressions and even executions. Until recently, it was, in fact, a cemetery. When the exhumation works were completed, it became a symbolic cemetery.

The prison at the Mokotów district may be called a place of remembrance in the sense in which Marta Kasztelan describes the notion: 'Such phenomena, being part of collective memory, strengthen the identity of the group and help solidify collective self-definitions' (Kasztelan 2012, 193). If we take 'collective memory' to mean the way in which a given community conceives of its past – transformed and unified (Szacka 2006, 41) – we should not underestimate the importance of such places in societies that have had totalitarian experience. According to Aleksandra Kmak-Pamirska,

'[...] historical memory creates a shared image – a strong conviction – either regarding a group, or an individual, or else it constructs a certain image of a person or an event. Historical memory should be objective, but is often affected by external factors: political, social or ideological, and may, therefore, be manipulated. In this way, indoctrinated historical memory may be created.' (Kmak-Pamirska 2017, 36)

Naturally, Kmak-Pamirska draws the concept of manipulated memory (also known as ideologized memory) from Paul Ricoeur (for more see, Greloff 2021, 200–202). National communities, such as Polish, that were exposed to propaganda for many years tend to undergo a process of memory cleansing after they, more or less successfully, reject the totalitarian system.



The main corridor and staircase of the Blocks X and XI.
Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)



The main corridor and staircase of Block XII.
Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)



The underground corridor connecting Block X and the "Palace of Miracles".
Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

Memorial sites and narrative museums help in the cleansing process. Hence, they play an important role in such communities. On the one hand, they bring the collective memory of the community closer to historical reality, and, on the other, they strip the latter of the remnants of the communist propaganda.

The role of The Museum of the Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic is to recount the history of Polish pursuit for freedom. It is a place that, thanks to its past, can best bring to memory the complex history of the Republic of Poland. This history has its roots in the fight for freedom which goes back to the generations from before the time of the Third Partition. It continues throughout 123 years of partition, during which five generations of Poles managed to preserve their national identity, protect their tradition, culture and language, only to undertake effective struggle for the restitution of the independent state during World War I. The prison walls have preserved the memory of the Second Polish Republic, a short 20-year long period during which a sovereign country was being rebuilt, strong enough, it was hoped, to resist the growing imperialist powers of Nazi Germany and the communist Soviets. It also preserves the memory of many historical places that suffered from German crimes during World War II, and then from the harsh reality of Soviet enslavement, which affected especially the Eastern areas of Poland in 1939–1941 and after 1944, as well as Central Poland after 1944.

The leading theme of the permanent exhibition, as planned by the founder and the current coordinator of the Museum, is to be the period of communist dictatorship. Poland, the country under German and Soviet occupation, and subsequently, a subject of the communist regime and imperialist interests of Moscow for half a century between 1939 and 1989, will eventually be able to recount the history of those who never accepted the communist system. We will be able to listen to the history of men fighting against the totalitarian system by means of arms and politics, in conspiracy and in open public. We will also get to know the anatomy of communist crimes – beginning with brutal investigations and tortures, through staged trials, to prison and death sentences. We will get to know the price paid by each and every one of those who found enough strength and courage to stand up to the communists. For anyone who fights against the totalitarian system is all alone in the end. At some point, these people had to go through the hardest trial on their own and take up the road to the Mokotów Wall of Death. The histories told at the Museum are universal and their elements are identifiable in the life of every single man who has faced a totalitarian system. They are also nationwide to an extent that they talk about everyone who opposed communism in ‘people’s’ Poland. Finally, they are also local inasmuch as they speak through actual historical places and lives of people imprisoned at 37 Rakowiecka Street. The history of men broken by the communist system is also a history of victory over an inhuman system. 37 Rakowiecka Street is a place of martyrdom, through which Polish history shows the sense of sacrifice – a communal victory which surpasses personal defeat (as long as one considers death or

An execution site in the basement of the prison’s main building. The remains of a gallows trapdoor. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)





A reconstruction of the interrogation room. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

long-term imprisonment in such categories). People whose lives we get to know at the Museum of the Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic may have failed in human terms. Apparently, general Fieldorf, major Dekutowski, cavalry captain Pilecki, and hundreds of others who were tortured and died here, have failed. Yet, only apparently. Successive generations of those who contested the system paved the way for the 'Solidarity' movement, which gained enough power to change the course of history and to become a vehicle to freedom. Today, in the free Third Polish Republic, the murdered heroes of the war and post-war resistance movement are role models and pillars of the independence tradition: streets are named in their honour, monuments are built to commemorate them,

they become patrons of military units... Thus, at 37 Rakowiecka Street, we follow a path full of pain, suffering and sacrifice that ultimately led to freedom. And freedom has always been especially valued in Polish history.

One should not forget that looming in the background are other histories and the lives of the so-called communist 'apparatchiks' (functionaries of the apparatus of violence and those who fell out of the system of power in effect of party games). And so, we will witness histories of declining values, the selling out of national tradition and culture in exchange for personal benefits. We will get a closer look at the anatomy of the 'Hegelian bite', or the belief in the redemptive power of communism and the inevitability of historical necessity.

The permanent exhibition is still being created. The narrative part will be presented in the administrative building. Pavilion X



and the better part of Pavilion XII will become commemorative places. At the 'Miracle Palace', that is, the former MBP Investigation Department (Departament Śledczy MBP), visitors will be able to see another narrative exhibition showing the communist apparatus of repressions as a means of oppressing the society and suppressing the fight for independence.

At present, the main guided tour leads via the administrative building where selected artefacts are displayed on the ground floor. This temporary exhibition is entitled 'From the Collection of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic'. This exhibition is a synopsis of the future permanent exhibition and it introduces the history of opposition and resistance in 'people's' Poland.

An important element of the tour are the places of execution. We show the prison pavilions and the cells of general August Emil Fieldorf, cavalry captain Witold Pilecki, archbishop Antoni Baraniak, and Kornel Morawiecki, among others. We also show the places where Polish heroes were murdered – the Wall of Death, the so-called wet cell – a solitary confinement cell, and the room with the remains of the gallows (Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, Musiał, et.al. 2023, 30). It is worth pointing out that these are not only the places of torment and

A reconstruction of the 1960s-1980s prison cell. Block XII. Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

execution of heroic Poles but also the places of remembrance. A guided tour around the Museum becomes an unrivalled experience owing to a unique combination of emotions, impressions and sensations. The mere fact that during the tour one may not only listen to a guide's historical account, but also experience it with their senses – by smelling it (due to a characteristic odour, especially in the wet cells) and touching it (by feeling the original walls of the building which date to the earliest days of the prison), gives a unique opportunity to come into contact with historical artefacts. Such an enhanced perception is an additional bonus for young people and has outstanding educational benefits (Bogusz 2023).

The remains of
a gallows devices.
Photo Katarzyna
Adamów (2023)



Furthermore, visitors may explore several long-term exhibitions. One of them, entitled 'Baraniak. 145 interrogations at 37 Rakowiecka Street', is dedicated to Archbishop Antoni Baraniak – a Salesian

Father working as a secretary at the Polish Episcopate, one of the closest associates of the Primate of Poland, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński.

Baraniak was imprisoned when the primate was interned by the communists in 1953. He was tortured for several months by the communists who wanted to extort a confession defaming Cardinal Wyszyński. The exhibition includes the archbishop's personal belongings, photos he took and liturgical vestments. One of the focal points of the exhibition is a large oak wardrobe with an interior hidden altar used by the bishop for mass celebrations after his release from prison (Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, Musiał, et.al. 2023, 32).

Another long-term exhibition presented at the Museum and coordinated by the Institute of National



Remembrance is entitled ‘The Evidence of Crimes. Objects from Łączka in Pavilion X at Rakowiecka Detention Center’. It closes the history of the Polish heroes imprisoned and murdered at 37 Rakowiecka Street. This exhibition presents artefacts recovered from hidden burial sites of the victims, who were either murdered or who died in the prison. They include, for example, personal items dug out from the so-called death pits at the ‘Ł quarter’ (‘Łączka’, ‘little meadow’, place where bodies of murdered prisoners were clandestinely buried) in the Military Cemetery at Powązki. The items were found during the process of exhumation and identification of the members of independence movement at Powązki (Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, Musiał, et.al. 2023, 34).

An important part of the current Museum presentation is yet another exhibition entitled ‘Bedbugs in the hotel, shadow in the street’. Secret techniques of the Polish People’s Republic Security Service, which shows the ‘people’s’ Poland from the viewpoint of the methods used by the communist apparatus of repression – the mechanisms, forms and means of its *modus operandi*. This exhibition complements the history of the underground anti-communist movement, the opposition and social resistance in the Polish People’s Republic. It shows how the totalitarian authorities pacified anti-government

Blocks X, XI and XII (right) and the "Palace of Miracles" (left).
Photo Katarzyna Adamów (2023)

actions. Owing to a range of fascinating artefacts, including the original operational technology and communication devices, we demonstrate how surveillance operations were used to victimize anyone who stood up for the free Poland (Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, Musiał, et.al. 2023, 36).

Yet another exhibition to be seen at the Museum at present introduces one of the opposition organizations from the 80-ties of the 20th century. 'Fighting Solidarity' is a state-of-the art display concerned with one of the most interesting initiatives undertaken by the opposition in the 80-ties. Augmented with numerous multimedia, it tells a story of a group of activists who strongly opposed any attempts at negotiating with the authorities and contested any evolutionary change within the structures of the Polish People's Republic. Instead, the group demanded that the 'authorities be deprived of authority'. Owing to the up-to-date technologies, young people who cannot remember 'people's' Poland may see for themselves what their parents and grandparents went through several dozen years ago. This exhibition is an effect of a collaborative endeavour between the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic, Fundacja Pomorska Inicjatywa Historyczna and Stowarzyszenie Solidarność Walcząca (Hałaburdzin-Rutkowska, Musiał, et.al. 2023, 40).

Two of the aforementioned exhibitions, namely 'From the Collection of the Museum of Cursed Soldiers and Political Prisoners of the Polish People's Republic' and 'Fighting Solidarity' may be seen online via the Museum website: www.muzeumrakowiecka37.pl

The Museum offers educational activities and classes for young people, organizes debates on contemporary Polish history, lectures, conferences (scholarly, popular and didactic – for teachers), film shows, theatrical performances based on post-war historical events. The Museum also organizes concerts to celebrate historical events and historical figures.

Being an important place of remembrance, the Museum also coordinates commemorative ceremonies for the former prisoners murdered at 37 Rakowiecka Street (typically on their deathday). The following celebrations take place annually: National Remembrance Day of the Cursed Soldiers [Narodowy Dzień Pamięci Żołnierzy Wyklętych], commemorated on 1 March, Remembrance Day of the Martial Law Victims [Dzień Pamięci Ofiar Stanu Wojennego], commemorated on 13 December, and celebrations in honour to general August Emil Fieldorf and Witold Pilecki, on the day of their death anniversaries, that is on 24 February and 25 May, respectively.

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