

A “museum boom” can be noticed in Poland during the last 15 years: new museums open every year, while the older ones renew their permanent exhibitions, to an increasing number of visitors. It was the Warsaw Rising Museum that was the first to attract such attention when it opened to the public in 2004. This moment can be seen as the beginning of the boom in Poland. The WRM’s exhibition is spectacular, using diverse media, engaging different senses, encouraging visitors to interact and presenting an attractive story. More and more museums follow the trend: from huge institutions, like the Polish History Museum and Polin – Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, or the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, to museums focused on regional and local history, like for instance the Silesian Risings Museum in Świętochłowice, the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in Markowa or the Dialogue Center “Upheavals” in Szczecin. Consequently, a new model of Polish historical museums can be observed. Compared with traditional museums, primarily aimed at education and transmitting information, new ones concentrate on producing intensive, attractive and various experiences for the visitors. As a result, they shape opinions, emotions and identities, and can become useful tools of historical politics. After 15 years the whole constellation of museums should be carefully investigated, as a new phenomenon of Polish culture, reflecting perception of the past.

The research has two equally important objectives: to describe the development of the Polish museum boom after 2004 and to distinguish general rules of Polish memory culture that can be observed with reference to the museums. Firstly, it will be about the contemporary history of Polish museums, analysing differences and similarities between them. Secondly, the research on museums will support answering more general questions, for instance: to what extent is the past important in contemporary Polish culture? What messages are attributed to the historical events, what stories are shaped about them? What values occur the most important? What may be seen as less important or hidden? How does such an image of the past shape contemporary identity? In addition, it will be a goal of the research to prepare a theoretical model for describing the museums’ work in the context of memory culture, to be used in further research, not only of Polish cases.

The most important new Polish historical museums will be examined as follows: after the data on exhibitions and institutional activity of the museums is gathered, it will be analysed in order to interpret the Polish museum culture, as well as, to a greater extent, the Polish memory culture. The research will be carried out within the framework of cultural studies, and more specifically, in the areas of museum studies and memory studies, both intensely developing in the humanities in the world and recently also on the Polish academic scene. Being elements of the memory culture, museums are described in the project as “memory devices”: it means that they influence the collective and cultural memory via making visitors perceive the past in particular ways. Museums can thus introduce, support or modify tendencies of remembering: for instance, popularize a heroic image of the Warsaw uprising as a crucial event in the Polish history. The research assumes that in the times of the boom museums can display mechanisms of memory culture in a particularly distinct way.

The aforementioned museum boom is undoubtedly an important phenomenon of contemporary culture – both because of the number of new museums being opened and the subsequent public interest in them. Yet, it has not been sufficiently, thoroughly and comparatively described. Such a description will not only fill in the gap, but also enable us to learn more about the culture we live in, to recognize the sensitive aspects of “difficult memory” and suggest ways to address them. The results of the research will also provide museum professionals with important feedback, as profound discussion on their work is constantly necessary. Plus, the research can influence critical attitudes of the museum public, for instance via museum education. The impact of the research should be thus scientific, cultural and social simultaneously.