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***100x100. Nasze stulecie [Our century]*, ed. Joanna Lusek, Bytom: Muzeum Górnośląskie w Bytomiu, 2018, 437 pp.**

Celebrated in 2018, the centenary of Polish independence, became an impulse to organised many different forms of its commemoration. Increased interest in the past began already in 2014, when the World commemorated the outbreak of the Great War. However, for Poles who have been fighting in the armies of the occupying countries, i.e. Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia¹, only their defeat in 1918 opened the possibility of creating their own state and establishing its borders. In the centenary celebrations, the question of how to remind the general public of those incidents a hundred years ago so that they fully reach the contemporary Pole came to the fore. The authors of last year's exhibitions and various activities commemorating the centenary of Poland's independence attempted to answer these and a number of other questions related to the problems of contemporary museology and our historiography². The form of exhibition venues and projects was extremely diverse, but it seems that the initiative of the Upper Silesian Museum (MG) in Bytom deserves special attention. The museum documented and recorded its centenary exhibition of 1918 in an extensive publication titled *100x100. Our Century*, edited by Joanna Lusek. The exhibition was devoted to Bytom,

¹ However, there is interest in these issues and it is even growing. An example is the work: Ryszard Kaczmarek, *Polacy w armii kajzera. Na frontach I wojny światowej*, Kraków 2014.

² The Polish state runs a separate programme for the years 2017–2020 to support commemoration activities entitled “The Independent. Polish Centenary of Independence”. On the programme website there is an extensive list of various centenary projects (<https://niepodlegla.gov.pl>, access: 10 XII 2018).

a medium-sized Upper Silesian town with a rich and complicated past of its inhabitants engaged in Polish patriotic activities, whether cultural, insurgent or plebiscite, in the years 1918–1921. Yet, the town did not become part of the reborn Poland, remaining until 1945 on the western side of the Polish-German border drawn in 1922. Its line was set in Geneva, under the auspices of the League of Nations, despite the armed effort of the participants in the three Silesian uprisings and the declaration of Polish national-political identification in a plebiscite held in Upper Silesia in 1921. Bytom became a town situated almost on the border itself and in the centre of the Polish-German dispute about the nationality and the line of the border.

However, when presenting the phenomenon of Bytom at that time, the creators of the Bytom exhibition did not follow the easiest and most obvious course, i.e., they decided not to prepare an exhibition that would show, in conventional terms, a local chapter in the great international and national history. Known and seen many times when rich (and expensive) multimedia equipment is brought in alongside valuable exhibits. The Upper Silesian Museum has shown that nothing can replace a specific artefact in the exhibition, even if it seems to be “ordinary”, even common. It is the object, or rather a hundred of objects from the “Century of Independence”, condensed in the title as *100 x 100*, that became the main structure of the Bytomian exhibition³. They create this exposition in the material dimension, but their strength lies not so much in the physical form as in the emotional dimension associated with them. This is their ability to “tell” stories and speak to the viewer, and to point out the symbolic connections they contain within themselves. All of these elements inscribe the object in a network of diverse, intertwined cultural contexts. They place what is individual in what is collective and common.

The very idea to construct an exhibition in such a way is not entirely original. There are many examples of the use of “a hundred” in exhibitions and publications⁴. But the subject of this review is not the exhibition itself, but a 500-page catalogue that accompanies it. This canniest published volume, as is usually the case with

³ For more see: http://muzeum.bytom.pl/?exhibition=100-x-100-nasze-stulecie-2&exhibition_date=2018-05-17 (access: 10 XII 2018).

⁴ In relation to the history of the 20th century, among others: Roger Moorhouse, *The Third Reich in 100 Objects. A Material History of Nazi Germany*, London 2017; Herman Schäfer, *Deutsche Geschichte in 100 Objekten*, München 2015. This key was used in the latest exhibition organized on the centenary of the famous trend of modern design in the interwar period, i.e. Bauhaus: <https://stilwerk.com/de/events/das-bauhaus-in-100-objekten-bndnwk-2019> (access: 10 XII 2018).

this type of publications, not only complements the exposition, but also extends its impact beyond the specified presentation period. It becomes an extremely important 101st object, which can be treated – after dismantling the exhibition – as a kind of time capsule protecting a certain proposal of presenting, understanding and taming “The Age of Extremes” (E. Hobsbawm). The reading of this publication is also very necessary both to fully understand the construction of the exhibition (seemingly very simple) and to notice various connections of Silesians and Poles with individual, local, regional and, finally, national history, which the exhibition wanted to draw attention to.

The book, which was prepared under the supervision of Joanna Lusek, curator of the Upper Silesian Museum, consists of two parts. The first one contains three introductory texts. They are important for understanding the main idea of the exhibition as well as for recognizing its meanings, especially in relation to the issues of collective memory and memory policies. Leszek Jedliński, the Director of MG, devoted a part of his discussions to the significance of the year 1918 and the historical period it began. Reflecting on how to see this moment, he points to three aspects: the end of the bloody war, whose memory in Upper Silesia is still alive and connected with the memory of families (which is a certain regional specificity compared to the rest of Poland), then the victory of the idea of national self-determination (“the Autumn of New States”) and the beginning of “a new opening of civilization and the birth of ideologies that will plague the already post-modern world until the end of the past century” (p. 3). These long-lasting effects of the events of 1918 were the basis for the idea of creating an exhibition commemorating not only this limited, fleeting moment on the chronological axis, but rather the entire century it started. Here, in line with popular for a long time trends in museology (as well as historiography), there appears a tendency to show the century and its several historical eras “through the prism of fate of ordinary people” (p. 4). Thus, in this approach, great history becomes a kind of a small history (micro-history), located within the fences of our homes, but not at all isolated from what is sometimes called the mainstream of events. So the exhibition, and the catalogue itself, took on the form of a “unique biographical story about ourselves” (p. 4). The objects presented at the exhibition, and coming exclusively from the MG’s collection, were chosen because of their “value, symbolism and emotions”, which made a private object a “collective memory” of a national, ethnic or religious community. As Jedliński points out, the selected objects carried the “seeds of a story”. By revealing their story, they tell about

significant events, wider processes, showing their significance in “our Silesian community”. Moreover, the departure from presenting centred on the whole nation, focused directly around such symbolic places as Warsaw, or such figures as Józef Piłsudski or other “Fathers of Independence”, made it possible to create a narrative that has its own character, is attractive and open to various directions of interpretation (and even to reflect on why these and not other objects were chosen...). Emotions and inspirations triggered by the exhibition should encourage visitors to “sail” towards their own “memory archipelagos”. It may begin with a visit to a forgotten drawer...

The next article, by Robert Traba, a well-known researcher of historical memory and Polish-German relations, places the exhibition in this very space of reflection. The author reminds that the black and white picture of events is dominant, in which national borders are of fundamental importance. However, for such regions as Silesia, whose history is neither nationally nor religiously unequivocal, and creating visions like this is false. Traba refers to the concept of history of mutual interactions, which poses questions about exclusivity of historical subjects and exclusivity in “reaching historical truths in the perspective of experiences and sentiments of other social and religious groups, or individual feelings of witnesses of events” (pp. 6–7). Its application in research and educational practice leads to make the vision of the past more nuanced and to break simple divisions. It makes us realize how strongly we depend on external influences, how much they shape us. Another theoretical assumption mentioned by Traba is the “memory of things” which allows us to go beyond formal criteria of evaluating their meaning. It makes the reader aware, following Krzysztof Pomian, among others, that things are “carriers and catalysts of memory” as well as symbolic meanings. Recalling borrowed memory, they play a huge role in the intergenerational transmission of memory, in the formation of collective memory. Traba reminds us that things are not only traces or remnants, but thanks to them the past, which we are not able to see, becomes in a sense “contemporary and tangible”. This fragment of the reflections acquaints the reader with the main views of the classics authors of this current of reflection on the past: Mauric Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, as well as an important part of contemporary historiography, which is connected with “deconstruction of national perceptions of the past” and learning about “collective mechanisms of remembering” (pp. 9–10). He also embeds his reflections in the literary trends associated with such artists, explorers of human memory as Marcel Proust and the

contemporary Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, for whom selected everyday objects were an instrument for reviving memories, resurrecting the past. Referring directly to the contents of the exhibition (and the catalogue), he notes that although attempts were made to introduce internal divisions, many objects break them, as they pass from one period to another in their functions and meaning. He appeals to us – with a view to understanding our present, but also to giving meaning to the future – to ask our own objects, which are sometimes part of the family heritage, about their own stories and try to inscribe them in our knowledge. The result, however, is not to be a “new interpretation of history”, but to allow those things to add unknown threads “in the background of the great narratives” (p. 15). Traba thus, in a way, warns the reader that the book will not give them an overview of a wonderful and clearly defined vision of the past, but rather a polyphony of stories and expressions.

The analysis of the image(s) of the past century offered by the discussed book (or rather exhibition) has been provided in the following text by Ewa Chojecka, an art historian, the great expert in the history of Silesian architecture. In her opinion, a colourful, ambiguous image of the “difficult time” has been created, open to interpretation and presented “from the inside”. She draws attention to the multiplicity of forms of selected objects, to the inclusion of damaged and injured objects among them, which made the viewer sensitive to the historical dramas of the last century. She has stressed that the exhibition shows inconsistencies, cracks that were not attempted to be hidden. In her opinion, the stories told by 100 objects are free of “hatred, depreciation of the Stranger”, but stimulate reflection on “awareness of one’s own history”, the influence of material heritage on the formation of our identity (p. 23). “This is not an illustration of the past century, but rather a picture of the condition of our injured memory”, she sums up, referring to the chapters of 20th century history that were the most destructive and devastating for the continuity, order and morality (p. 25).

After reading the above introductory texts that give more knowledge and awareness of the debates in contemporary humanities, the reader can set out on the intricate paths of hundreds of individual, unique stories, for which the starting point is a specific object. As Joanna Lusek, the curator of the exhibition, announces in the prologue to this part of the book, “following in the footsteps of things” arranged in chronological and narrative order, she discovers the past time, and more importantly she has the opportunity to “add a further sequence of everyday and unusual stories from the point of view of the present, ordinary people, ORDINARY

US [so in the text – MR]” (p. 28). Thus, it highlights the unnoticed, disregarded extraordinary nature of seemingly ordinary equipment, material crumbs of bygone everyday life. We could make an appeal here: let’s respect these little things, let’s respect the stories connected with them, because not much more will be left after us for our successors to read from them... A selected hundred photographs of the artefacts of the last century and related articles have been grouped – according to the exhibition scenario – into seven modules: The End and the Beginning, At the Threshold of Freedom, The Crazy Twenties, The Independent and New – the Interwar Culture, The (Un)obvious Times – World War II and Its Consequences, Worlds of the People’s Republic of Poland, The Defiant 1980s, It Was Yesterday. However, the objects have not been mechanically separated into groups equal in number. Some periods are more saturated with historical “happening”, which also had a stronger impact on this ordinary/extraordinary everyday life. Small articles (1–2 print pages) tell the story of a given object itself, its owners or users and guide the reader through the connections, associations, relations linked to it. They show how small, sometimes banal objects are connected both with an individual story and the great one – the history of a region, nation or state. The articles have also been provided with bibliographic guidelines to further explore the subject signalled by a particular object.

So, what did the museologists – after a difficult selection – choose to present? We have here artefacts belonging to various spheres of human activity, strictly private, family, connected with functioning in the local community, with political activity, but also with religious or sporting life. There are here works of art by great artists as well as home-grown ones, representatives of the so-called Naïve Art. There are here things professionally designed, associated with the best design of the era, as well as home-made by a caring hand of a housewife. There are things, which could be said to be trivially useful at home, and objects that evoke respect and even fear. To discuss them all is virtually impossible, and probably unnecessary. Let us limit ourselves to a few examples illustrating the principle of the books’ structure. A walk following traces of the objects is opened by a small notebook in which someone wrote down in German with a pencil the information about the ceasefire under the date 11 November 1918. The last object is a painted dwarf from the early 1980s, reminding about the front of the fight against communism running on walls where brushes, stencils and paints were used. Between them we encounter, among others, an urn for voices from the times of the Upper Silesian plebiscite of

1921, an insurgent banner and a *pepesha* of a Red Army soldier from the Second World War. There is a brick with an inscription scratched out by a prisoner, tortured by the Nazis, and a *uhlan* sabre with an engraved inscription “Honor and Fatherland”. There is a wedding souvenir and a beautiful glass set for a dressing table of an elegant lady from the inter-war period. We have a stripped uniform of a concentration camp prisoner and a travel trunk of a family displaced from the Eastern Borderlands. There are food stamps and a cupboard from the PRL era. A porcelain service and a propaganda poster. The famous “Frania” washing machine, a gramophone, a pocket radio, a watch presented “for faithful service”. A glass bottle of Coca-Cola – a trace of longing for a consumer paradise, but also a “big little badge” of Solidarity. A yarmulke of a certain Jewish inhabitant of pre-war Bytom, as well as clips, which were collected by children participating in the Nazi collection of recyclable materials. Diplomas, which were awarded to insurgents and shock workers. A damaged marble bust of Pope Pius XI and an “eternally alive” plaster Lenin. Letters from the prisoner-of-war camp and the school notebook with wrong verses. There are various references to mining as the basis of the local economy and lifestyle. So we have before us a mosaic of everyday life consisting of hundreds of very different elements. We can watch its fragments in any order. We can jump over the parts of the book, delving into the reading when something intrigues us, catches our eye, triggers an association. The discussion about the appropriateness of choosing this or that object is actually missing the point. The subjectivity of both the selection and one’s reception of the exhibition has been repeatedly stressed. This was meant to be its strength. The authors of the exhibition and catalogue have tried to find in the MG collections objects that will lead a viewer to the most significant 20th century phenomena, including the tragic ones. However, a certain sense of shortage – perhaps based on the reviewer’s subjective perception of the history of this part of Silesia – was aroused by the small presence of the German Silesians. This has probably resulted from the basic assumption of the exhibition – the desire to show the “Polish” century. There was also a lack of an object related to the events of early 1945, called the Upper Silesian Tragedy (merely a mention about it in the article concerning the post-war national verification is not enough). In recent years a lot has been done to spread the knowledge about the repressions which then fell on the Silesians and the dramatic consequences of mass deportations

from the region deep into the USSR⁵. It seems that this theme of forced migration of the 1940s should be represented at the exhibition as a separate component of the collage of memory and meaning created through the objects.

Generally speaking, however, we are dealing with a narrative so multithreaded, even full of tropes, connections, as well as inspirations that it is difficult to indicate significant gaps or omissions. It is a work with which the receiver enters into an emotional relationship, which even invites them to add their own traces so that someone can follow them. In her introduction to the exhibition, Joanna Lusek stated: "We live following traces. Let's try to see them" (p. 32).

⁵ This is the main interest area of the institution located not far from Bytom: Centrum Dokumentacji Deportacji Górnolężaków do ZSRR w 1945 roku [The Centre of Documentation of Upper Silesians Deportation to the Soviet Union in 1945] in Radzionków. See: <https://deportacje45.pl/index/pl> (access: 20 XII 2018).