

## **On the conference “Cultural Education Policies in Europe” held on 22 March 2018 in Krakow**

### **A retrospection**

As Joanna Orlik (Małopolska Institute of Culture) bade the conference participants farewell at the end of the event, she invited us to provide feedback on the “Polish part” of the conference – a request I am very happy to accept on behalf of KulturKontakt Austria.

To provide a better understanding of the overall context of the event, I would like to shed light on the interconnection of the “Polish part” with the other parts of the conference. Already on the eve of the event, we were given the opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the Polish discourse by visiting local exhibitions – the exhibition located in Schindler’s Factory as well as the exhibition in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Krakow (MOCAK). The film *Schindler’s List*, directed by Steven Spielberg in 1993, has unequivocally contributed to Oskar Schindler’s renown. It relates not only a piece of the history of the Polish Jews, but also tells of the opportunities and the risks of resistance against an imperious National Socialist occupation regime. The film was well received throughout the world and became known as a work of remembrance of the persecution of the Jews in Poland during the German occupation. The Holocaust remains a pivotal and ambivalent issue in Poland’s culture of remembrance.

Both the exhibition on *Kraków Under Nazi Occupation 1939–1945* and the exhibition of Polish contemporary art at MOCAK are located on the renovated premises of Schindler’s enamel factory. The two museums were opened by the Municipality of Krakow in 2007 and 2011, respectively, after the necessary preparation phase. The current special and permanent exhibitions at MOCAK provide an account of the artistic positions of present generations as well as the history of aesthetic and political criticism of past and existing social and political phenomena in Poland.

Although both of these programme elements can be viewed as being part of the standard side programme intrinsic to a conference setting, in our context they provided a consciously defined framework for the discussions that took place during the conference. Ultimately, they bore upon a reflection on the culture of remembrance and, in this connection, specifically on the remembrance culture since the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

### **Polish romanticism**

Most of the international participants were largely unfamiliar with the concept of Polish romanticism; the first panel discussion of the event dealt with the historical significance of Polish romanticism for contemporary cultural phenomena in Poland. The introduction of the concept in the context of cultural education criss-crossed our expectations and thus came as a great surprise. Tomasz Plata took us on a journey into the collective Polish consciousness, in which – contrary to the assertion that political romanticism ended with the democratic change of 1989 – a romanticist orientation still prevails today, and indeed continues to be fuelled. Plata related that the return to a romantic interpretation of the present is proving to be an effective instrument for right-wing and clerical politics. He called attention to this in his interpretation of the plane crash near Smolensk in April of 2010, in which the Polish Prime Minister Lech Kaczyński and a number of Polish government and parliament members as well as high-ranking military personnel were killed. According to Plata, the tragic events of the plane crash, which are still being examined today through various conspiracy theories, are being reinterpreted by the political right as an attack and a consequential Polish “blood

sacrifice". He noted that even the political left is not free of romanticist interpretations and orchestrations of present-day Poland, as evidenced by the frequent use of the symbol of the white, burning candle in political demonstrations organised by the Left. Plata pointed out the importance of recognising that this romantic view of Polish history can also be expected to have an important influence on the country's cultural education.

The presentation by Tomasz Skudlarek of the University of Gdańsk echoed this claim and outlined the political context of cultural education within the developments in the democratisation of Polish society after 1989, emerging neoliberal policies, influences of civil society, and the developing culture of remembrance, which is currently marked by the revival of national/nationalist interpretations of history.

### **On remembrance and historical interpretation in selected Polish museums**

Lucja Piekarsk-Duraj introduced us to various (also unconscious) narratives in selected Polish museums, which she used to explore the extent to which they can contribute to the visitors' identity formation in the form of a religious exaltation of papal dignitaries (as in the case of the birthplace of Karol Wojtyła) or as a narrow interpretation of history as a history of the aristocracy that excludes important areas of life. At the same time, the official criticism of an exhibition at the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk made it clear that the focus of the museum's presentation of the events of the Second World War on the living environments of the affected population was strongly condemned by the state. Or, as one Polish participant at the conference put it: "In fact, nothing can be learned from this exhibition (from history, for the future)." Doesn't everyday history (social history) generally belong to the official repertoire of scientific historical methodology?

In this context, a video that had been "imposed" in retrospect, as it were, on the exhibition in Gdańsk and which apparently seeks to change the narrative of the exhibition, evoked a strong impression on the conference participants. The video is presented at the end of the exhibition and was not included in the original exhibition concept. Leaning heavily on the aesthetics of war game trailers, it presents an interpretation of Polish history as a hero's ordeal extrapolated into the future, and reduces the history of the Second World War to one of Poland's heroic suffering. The resulting simplification of historical and political interrelationships is, as the film emphatically underscores, also valid for Poland's present and future. It extrapolates Poland's historical path of suffering into the future and smacks of a sense of the country needing to be on its guard.

### **Remembrance in the context of the European Union**

The "PUDDING" concept for the interpretation of the function of museums in the context of their importance as European cultural institutions as presented by Lucja Piekarska-Duraj the following day was a topic I consider particularly interesting. This matrix examines the story(ies) consciously or unconsciously recounted by each museum based on the notions of *progress, utility, dignity, diversity, inclusion, narrativity, and governance*. These terms were distilled from key documents published by the European Union that make up a part of the EU's collection of cultural policy documentation. On this basis, museums could be examined in a matrix procedure for European (national?) narratives. Yet here, too, the question of the fluidity of value systems arises, particularly with regard to a widely perceptible shift to the right among governments within the European Union.

A concert performed by Capella Cracoviensis under the direction of Jan Tomasz Adamus marked the transition to the second part of the conference. In a subsequent artistic manifesto, he underlined the universal significance of art for the democratic education of

young people. Thus the transition to the international part of the conference was accomplished in a congenial fashion.

### **The role of cultural education in the light of the nation-building process, the legacy of the communist era, and global migration**

The focus here was on examples of cultural policy education strategies of other EU member states, which were characterised by the diversity of the developments. The first panel discussion was held with representatives from Finland, Estonia, and Latvia, while a second discussion provided us with an impression of approaches to cultural education in Germany, Austria, and the Netherlands. The diversity of the cultural-political contexts presented became evident in a multitude of criteria: for example, the varying importance attached to cultural heritage in the corresponding educational concepts; the different lines of tradition underlying this heritage (nation state, Soviet hegemony, Cold War, European Union); and the current social/political orientation of cultural education as a means of "securing domestic political peace" (participation and audience development, use of financial resources, support in coping with refugee integration, contribution to national self-concept).

A discussion following the presentation briefly sparked the notion of a Europe of varying speeds in the field of cultural education, which was, however, very quickly rejected by most of the discussion participants.

### **Impulses for ENO's further work**

The conference in Krakow was very well organised in terms of both structure and content, and was so compelling that the participants gladly accepted the limited physical mobility inherent in a conference setting in exchange for the opportunity to exercise their intellectual flexibility. Europe is bursting with diverse traditions, concepts, and languages, and the same is true of the field of cultural education. To accommodate this, the Polish team proposed the establishment of a working group at the ENO meeting to address the various concepts as well as the terminology in the field of cultural education, which is often misinterpreted by those outside the field. This raised a number of questions that we should address in upcoming ENO meetings: for instance, the use of key terms that are of central importance for the respective country; the question of existing and educationally relevant concepts at the UNESCO or EU level (such as those relating to diversity and cultural heritage) that should accompany the work of ENO; and ultimately, the idea of a substantive ENO mission statement that could also reflect a thematic localisation of these issues.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks for the many high-quality suggestions we received in Krakow. The fact that the content of the various presentations at this conference was documented in a corresponding brochure makes it considerably easier to remember the discussions.

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