











Anna Ziębińska-Witek

People's History Turn in the Museum Space

Nowa historia ludowa w przestrzeni muzealnej

ABSTRACT

The people's history turn is a movement that seeks to reinterpret Poland's history from the perspective of the previously marginalized social classes. The aim of the article is to assess the presentation of peasants in museums and to find out whether the people's history turn is reflected in museum exhibitions. Museum exhibitions are the place where the cultural canon is created and they define how communities want to be perceived. It appears that, in the context of the people's history turn, peasants are present in museums to a limited extent, represented first of all in open-air museums, and in the martyrological context. In ethnographic and open-air museums, the peasant culture is often presented in a mythical and a historical way, which results in the strengthening of stereotypes. These exhibitions, despite certain positive changes, continue to offer an idealized picture of the country, focusing on folklore and traditions rather than on real social problems. Less often, peasants are presented as heroes of martyrdom with their activities during WW2 being glorified, leading to the emergence of simplifications and stereotypization. Museums as institutions are constantly mediating between the historical truth and the needs of the contemporary public. Changes in the approach to representing history, including

PUBLICATION INFO				
	 WYDAWNICTWO		 UNIWERSYTET MARIA CURIE-SKŁODOWSKIEJ	e-ISSN: 2449-8467 ISSN: 2082-6060
				
THE AUTHOR: Anna Ziębińska-Witek , the Institute of History of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland; e-mail: anna.ziebinska-witek@mail.umcs.pl ; https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2682-748X				
SOURCE OF FUNDING: Statutory Research of the Institute of History of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin				
SUBMITTED: 2025.02.19		ACCEPTED: 2025.08.31		PUBLISHED ONLINE: 2025.11.28
WEBSITE OF THE JOURNAL: https://journals.umcs.pl/rh		EDITORIAL COMMITTEE e-mail: reshistorica@umcs.pl		
		DIRECTORY OF OPEN ACCESS JOURNALS		 
				

people's history turn, can lead to a more diverse and inclusive narrative, which takes different perspectives into account.

Key words: people's history turn, historical exhibition, heritage, historical museum

STRESZCZENIE

Nowa historia ludowa to koncepcja, która stara się zreinterpretować historię Polski z perspektywy dotychczas marginalizowanych warstw społecznych. Celem artykułu jest ocena przedstawienia chłopów w muzeach oraz sprawdzenie, czy nowa historia ludowa znajduje swoje odzwierciedlenie w ekspozycjach muzealnych. Ekspozycje muzealne są miejscem, gdzie tworzy się kanon kulturowy oraz definiuje, jak wspólnoty chcą być postrzegane. Wydaje się, że w kontekście nowej historii ludowej, chłopci są w muzeach obecni w ograniczonym zakresie, reprezentowani przede wszystkim w skansenach oraz w kontekście martyrologii. W skansenach i muzeach etnograficznych, kultura chłopska przedstawiana jest często w sposób mityczny i ahistoryczny, co prowadzi do utrwalania stereotypów. Ekspozycje te, pomimo pewnych pozytywnych zmian, wciąż oferują wyidealizowany obraz wsi, koncentrując się na folklorze i tradycjach, a nie na rzeczywistych problemach społecznych. Rzadziej chłopci są przedstawiani jako bohaterowie martyrologii, gdzie ich działania w czasie II wojny światowej są gloryfikowane, co również prowadzi do uproszczeń i stereotypizacji. Muzea jako instytucje są w ciągłym procesie negocjacji pomiędzy historyczną prawdą a potrzebami współczesnej publiczności. Zmiany w podejściu do reprezentacji historii, w tym historii ludowej, mogą prowadzić do bardziej zróżnicowanej i inkluzywnej narracji, która uwzględni różne perspektywy.

Słowa kluczowe: nowa historia ludowa, wystawa historyczna, dziedzictwo, muzeum historyczne

INTRODUCTION

The people's history turn is, in the most general terms, an attempt to create 'a narrative about the history of the Polish Republic from the perspective of the subordinated classes (peasants, workers) or to describe the strategies of resistance shown by serfs, it therefore appears as a project that is an opposition towards the nobles' history'¹. The books by Jan Sowa (*Fantomowe ciało króla*, 2011), Adam Leszczyński (*Ludowa historia Polski. Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania*, 2020) or by Michał Rauszer (*Bękarty pańszczyzny*, 2020, *Siła podporządkowanych*, 2021) offer a critical perspective on the previous narrative about the past, mainly in the context of the economic and political system dominated by the nobility class. The above-mentioned authors propose a new interpretation for the role of the nobility

¹ M. Gospodarczyk, Ł. Kożuchowski, *Nowa ludowa historia: charakterystyka i społeczno-polityczne korzenie współczesnych narracji o historii chłopów polskich*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 2021, 2, pp. 177–198.

in history: as 'brakes of progress' rather than creators of Polish culture and the mainstay of freedom. These scholars use the *subaltern studies* terminology and their objection is aimed at the 'nobles' narrative', dominant in academic and journalistic circulation, i.e. such a vision of Poland's history which is narrated primarily from the perspective of the upper classes. Peasants are usually ignored here or treated as an inferior group, less worthy of attention or simply uninteresting². Those assumptions are increasingly making their way into the public consciousness not only owing to scholarly publications but also to the popular culture, an example being the widely commented comedy TV series about the Sarmatians (i.e. members of the Polish nobility), titled *1670*, produced for Netflix. Its authors: Jakub Rużyłło, Maciej Buchwald, Kordian Kądziała admit that they were inspired by Jan Sowa's book³. The co-author of the whole trend, Adam Leszczyński, writes moreover that the people's history turn 'is not, and is not meant to be, an exclusively scientific undertaking [...], but it is also an attempt to restore the 'lower 90 percent' of Polish society's due position in the narrative about the collective past, so consequently, it is a political project'⁴. At the same, it is an interventional and ethical undertaking, which consists in rewriting history and rekindling the memory of the marginalized groups. This kind of trend has an emancipatory potential – it forces one to critically view one's culture, its official values and untold assumptions⁵.

The aim of the article is to assess how peasants are represented in museums and to check if the new trend in historiography is reflected in exhibitions. It is a significant issue because museums, especially historical ones, can be perceived as institutions that create the self-image of a nation/group i.e., how specific communities want to be perceived 'on the outside'. Exhibitions become a collection of cultural patterns teaching a community how to identify themselves, to define and show 'the other', and create the national 'brand'. At the same time, (unlike amateurish grass-roots activities) the authority of the institution continues to remain unchallenged, while (national) ideas and objects ('speaking for themselves') impress on visitors that there is indisputable and unmediated

² *Ibidem*, pp. 182–183.

³ A. Kyzioł, *Polewka z sarmatów*, "Polityka" 13 December 2023, p. 80, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/2237968,1,polewka-z-sarmatow-1670-netflixa-to-wielki-powrot-smiesznej-polskiej-komedii.read> [access: 12.02.2025].

⁴ A. Leszczyński, *Czym jest „nowa ludowa historia”, a czym nie jest? Odpowiedź na artykuł Marty Gospodarczyk i Łukasza Koźuchowskiego zamieszczony w numerze 2/2021, „Studiów Socjologicznych”, „Studia Socjologiczne” 2021, 3, p. 181.*

⁵ K. Sobczak, *Ludowa historia po raz pierwszy (albo i nie pierwszy), ważne – by nie ostatni*, "Czas Kultury" 2021, 2, <https://czaskultury.pl/artykul/ludowa-historia-po-raz-pierwszy-albo-i-nie-pierwszy-wazne-by-nie-ostatni/> [access: 12.02.2025].

evidence in support of specific theses. The museum is perceived as the owner of national treasures and the place of dissemination of knowledge, which makes the cultural attributes of the nation tangible and visible. The presence of concrete subjects in the museum space means that they are ingrained in cultural memory. The latter is nowadays defined as long-term memory serving to transmit experience and knowledge over generation borders and based on external media and institutions that provide information⁶. It is aimed at facilitating communication in the long-term historical perspective and at stabilizing the identity based on tradition and wide-ranging historical experiences. Transferred onto material carriers (artifacts, texts), the repertoire of cultural memory requires constant adjustment and renewal as well as interpretation and discussion since it is continuously adapted to the needs and requirements of the present⁷.

To study museum expositions, the author uses a methodology that combines the methods of anthropology and visual history⁸, i.e., disciplines that analyze visual presentations in the historical context with the interpretation of written texts and material culture. In her research into expositions, the author is mainly interested in the area of creating meanings by specific representations. This area consists of several dimensions explored by the author: technological (i.e. which elements form an exhibition), compositional (that which is its spatial organization), content (which historical facts and phenomena it actually presents, which elements are the most important, what has been omitted) and the world view (what ideas or message are conveyed by a specific representation, what social functions it fulfills)⁹.

The popular classes of the Polish society do not often appear in historical museums, and if they are present, the representation is usually confined to two ways: one is implemented in ethnographic and open-air museums, the other (rare) – in martyrological commemorations referring to the WW2 period.

The ethnographic and open-air museums present the material culture of the Polish countryside in the 19th-century style, i.e. in an ahistorical,

⁶ A. Assmann, *Między historią a pamięcią. Antologia*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska, Warszawa 2013, p. 55.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

⁸ On visual history, see inter alia P. Witek, *Andrzej Wajda jako historyk. Metodologiczne studium z historii wizualnej*, Lublin 2016; D. Skotarczak, *Historia wizualna*, Poznań 2013; R. Rosenstone *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Cambridge 1995; P. Burke, *Naoczność. Materiały wizualne jako świadectwa historyczne*, transl. J. Hunia, Kraków 2012.

⁹ For more on the specificity of museum research methodology see: A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Muzealizacja komunizmu w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 2018, pp. 31–37.

mythical way and suspended in time¹⁰. The canon of people's culture at Polish universities and museums was determined by the intelligentsia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Roch Sulima argues that: 'History of culture shows that their dominant tendency was to think in general-theoretical or mythological terms about people and folk character. It mostly meant thinking in terms of allegories of the rural people, symbols of peasantry, which were most often reduced to literary and cultural stereotypes. In the fields of philosophy, social thought, belles-lettres or literary criticism there developed specific figures of thinking about popular (folk) character'¹¹. The repeated manifestos of that time called for 'saving the popular (folk) character'. This was obviously about saving people's culture in, as Sulima put it, 'its organic form, i.e. the culture understood as a certain historically formed type of mentality, social organization and the way of living'¹². The established stereotype of 'sweet and simple country life' was documented by material artifacts assembled in museum collections.

Despite a certain evolution of open-air museums: from presenting single objects or their sets to 'park-type' museums, where objects or detached farmsteads are fenced off from one another by greenery screens, to 'rural-type museums', where spatial and settlement structures typical of individual regions are reconstructed¹³, the image of peasants at the exhibitions has not changed. The visitors are presented with an idealized picture of peasants celebrating during ceremonies (in the museum rooms devoted to annual rites), wearing colorful and rich costumes (in display cabinets with folk attires), sometimes working in the fields using archaic wooden tools or making different beautifully ornamented objects from natural materials. In open-air museums the graphic layout of an exhibition is well-planned and far more 'typical' than real life. The exhibitions are organized in accordance with the standards of present-day arrangement, while the objects that come from different localities and times, integrally not connected apart from their indefinite origin from some period and region, are assembled together.

¹⁰ This pattern is the least followed by the Ethnographic Museum in Krakow, which also shows different dimensions of people's culture via temporary exhibitions. They do not, however, meet the criterion of the people's history turn.

¹¹ R. Sulima, *Literatura a dialog kultur*, Warszawa 1982, p. 23, cited after: K. Barańska, *Muzeum etnograficzne. Misje, struktury, strategie*, Kraków 2004, p. 71.

¹² R. Sulima, *Kultura ludowa i polskie kompleksy*, in: *Czy zmierzchn kultury ludowej?*, ed. A. Dobroński, Łomża 1997, p. 114, cited after: K. Barańska, *Muzeum*, p. 72.

¹³ K. Karbownik, *Muzea na wolnym powietrzu jako element narracyjny dziejów kultury chłopskiej*, https://nikidw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Chłopi-polscy_artykul-Krzysztofa-Karbownika.pdf [access: 6.01.2025].

For example, the Lublin Open-Air Village Museum, established in 1970, has assembled such geographically and ethnographically diversified collections that the exhibition is divided into seven sectors: Lublin Upland (a windmill, a blacksmith's shop, an oil mill, a shrine, a well, an aviary, a detached peasant cottage and four peasant farmsteads; Roztocze Region (a blacksmith's shop, beer house, a Greek-Catholic church with a belfry and a cemetery lapidarium, two shrines, five farmsteads and two detached peasant cottages); Podlasie Region (a fire station); Lublin's Vistula Region (farmsteads, shrines), Lublin's Bug River Region (under construction) as well as the manorial sector (two manors, living quarters of farm helpers, granaries) and the small-town sector (a church with a belfry, a cemetery lapidarium, a parson's granary, a dovecote, and a well))¹⁴. In 2008 an exhibition devoted to Jewish culture was added to the small-town sector. The Museum has a very broad educational offer for different age groups, and it also serves as a film location.

A strong point of open-air museums is, without doubt, that they enable the public's contact with authentic objects, while the need to interact with the material heritage increases because of the ubiquity of visual experiences. In the case of open-air museums, the material object is the nucleus and axis of museum activity, the core around which other activities are created. However, the exhibition as a whole – regardless of noble intentions – offers only a feeling of nostalgia, without contributing much to the knowledge about the realities of peasant life. Open-air museums have become first of all tourist products that offer a variety of services (museum lessons, workshops, entertainment events, recreation) to the wide public, the offered product having to meet both the expectations of visitors and their perception capabilities. At present, a large part of the public does not have any insight into the popular character of their culture because most of the present-day tourists have not had an opportunity to associate with the 'real' countryside¹⁵.

The second option of representation of the peasant class in exhibitions is martyrdom and heroism during WW2, where peasants are presented as patriots and freedom martyrs, i.e. they demonstrate virtues characteristic of the narrative about the nobility. This can be exemplified by two new museums: the Mausoleum of Martyrdom of Polish Villages in Michniów and the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II in Markowa. They show the perspective of heroic peasants fighting for freedom and sacrificing their lives for others.

¹⁴ <https://skansen.lublin.pl/pl/ekspozycja/> [access: 6.01.2025].

¹⁵ D. Werczyński, *Skansen jako produkt turystyczny. Analiza wybranych przykładów*, "Zeszyty Naukowe. Turystyka i Rekreacja" 2014, 1 (13), pp. 157–177.

The Mausoleum in Michniów, opened in 2021, is an exhibition complex comprising the grave of the murdered Michniów inhabitants, St. Margaret's Chapel, the exhibition pavilion, and the monument by Wacław Stawecki, called the Michniów Pieta. The extraordinary structure of the pavilion designed by Mirosław Nizio is based on the idea of the house-cottage seen in the front façade of the structure. In the successive parts it undergoes intended gradual deformation and degradation, and in the final stage the space is open to weather conditions. The Mausoleum complex is surrounded by the Memory Wall in the form of a concrete wall with the attached plates bearing the names of pacified villages. The Mausoleum is a historical-martyrological museum, and, at the same time, a site of National Remembrance whose main objective is to preserve the memory of 817 Polish villages pacified during WW2. The exhibition catalog contains the solemn words: 'at that time the words God, Honor, Fatherland inscribed in the hearts and work-worn hands guided the Polish peasantry, showing the path to fighting against the enemy and to helping Jews condemned to extermination, prisoners of war, and escapees from concentration camps and forced labor'¹⁶.

At the same exhibition there is a short text on the life of the Polish countryside before the war. The public can learn that 'many peasants were unable to subsist on working on their own land' and that is why they had to seek 'additional sources of income'. Nevertheless, in rural areas 'rich social and cultural life' developed, 'technical innovations were available, and economic initiatives flourished'. An illustration is an excerpt from a documentary presenting peasants in traditional folk costumes celebrating and playing instruments. There is no reference to the real problems of the countryside, the attitude of the upper classes towards peasants and of the peasants themselves to the Polish state, not to mention the complicated Polish-Jewish relations.

The further part of the exhibition has only a martyrological dimension, and the heroism and martyrdom of the inhabitants of Michniów pacified on 13 June 1943 symbolize the fortune of Polish villages during the war. The suffering of Michniów and the peasant population is an indisputable fact; however, it is a narrative about 'peasants' from the perspective of the upper classes. In this case, peasants are shown as the mainstay of Polishness and Polish identity, they mature politically and make sacrifices, as did the nobility for centuries, i.e. they become worthier, as it were, and closer to the upper classes in their conduct.

¹⁶ E. Kolomańska, *Michniów. Mauzoleum Martyrologii Wsi Polskich, Muzeum Wsi Kieleckiej* (katalog), Kielce 2010, p. 7.

Another example of the exhibition that in turn presents individual and exceptional behaviors of peasants as a norm is the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II in Markowa, opened in 2016. Heroic attitudes are exemplified here by the Ulma family from the Sub-Carpathian region (Podkarpacie), who gave shelter during the war to eight persons of Jewish origin: five men from Łańcut, their neighbor's two daughters and the child of one of them. On 24 March 1944, following a denunciation by a so-called navy-blue police officer (member of the Polish Police of the General Government during WW2) Włodzimierz Leś, German Feldgendarmier (military police) officers and navy-blue policemen from Łańcut came to Markowa. They murdered the eight Jews and the Ulmas as well as their six children. The authors of the museum recognized the fate of the Ulma family as the symbol of dedication of the Polish society (not only of peasants but all social classes) and of the utmost sacrifices suffered in the name of rescuing Jews.

The museum design authored by Mirosław Nizio, like the above-described Mausoleum in Michniów, refers to the idea of a peasant house, its shape resembling a simplified contour of a rural cottage covered on its outside with Corten sheets with a characteristic rust-colored layer. The building is modern and attractive, darkened inside, and artificially lit, which enhances the drama of the exhibition. The presentation is chronological (it starts from 1939 and the German occupation), but it devotes most room to stories of saving Jews by Poles.

The Ulmas themselves cannot be regarded as representatives of a 'typical' Polish peasant family. Despite a lack of formal education, Józef and his wife Wiktoria were open-minded persons. Józef Ulma was a well-read person, having a home library and subscribing to periodicals. He was also well-known for his involvement in social initiatives at the local level: he was active in several cooperatives, and as a young man – in the organizations associated with the Catholic Church and the Polish Union of Rural Youth "Wici". Wiktoria attended courses organized by the People's University in Gać and performed in a country theatre. They both represented the peasant intelligentsia¹⁷. The exhibition shows their heroism as permeated with Christian and family values.

The ultimate effect of the museum experience is to convey to the visitors the impression of widespread Polish solidarity with Jews. However, scholars who study the subject claim that the exhibition conceals many facts and documents showing the exceptional conduct of the rescuers

¹⁷ M. Szpytma, *Na czym polega wyjątkowość rodziny Ulmów*, <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/historia-z-ipn/190555,Mateusz-Szpytma-Na-czym-polega-wyjatkowosc-rodziny-Ulmow.html> [access: 9.01.2025].

in comparison with widespread indifference, reluctance and complicity in murdering Jewish victims¹⁸.

In all the above-mentioned cases the image of the peasant class is very positive yet superficial and stereotypical, which obviously invokes a feeling of self-satisfaction among the audience, without, however, providing complex knowledge about the past. There is no requirement or even possibility that an exhibition should provide detailed academic knowledge concerning a given phenomenon or fragment of the past: selection is always indispensable both at the level of facts and representative objects, documents or arrangements. It cannot however mean a selection conducted in such a way that facts match the pre-selected line of interpretation that passes over the latest research results of academic history. Measures like that change the meaning of the whole message and the represented past, whereas it is the invariable goal of historical exhibitions to create the picture of the past reality faithful to the historical truth.

In this context, an exceptional presentation is offered by the exhibition *Chłop-niewolnik? Opowieść o pańszczyźnie*, opened on 28 April 2024 in Szreniawa. The exhibition curators decided to show the life of the peasants from an entirely different angle. They focused on serfdom as a phenomenon present in Poland's territories from the 16th to 19th century but they also showed the present-day reception of the phenomenon¹⁹. The formation of the exhibition was preceded by four academic seminars held in 2019–2021, attended by authors of the historical discourse called people's history turn.

The exhibition in Szreniawa is divided into nine autonomous, chronologically and thematically organized sections. Along with factual descriptions, the exhibition contains elements of social and cultural life. To construct the narrative, the curators used the objects taken from folk culture and art, making use both of authentic artifacts (borrowed from other museums) and copies. The exhibition, its authors maintain, is educational because the knowledge about serfdom and subjection is not very broad in Polish society. Beside the presentation of serfdom in a historical perspective, the exhibition also brings up difficult subjects such as 'offences' and punishments of peasants, violence towards peasant women,

¹⁸ J. Grabowski, D. Libionka, *Markowa. Żydowska śmierć, polska wina, wspólny strach*, "Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn" 9 December 2016, the text available at: <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,21097043,markowa-zydowska-smierc-polska-wina-wspolny-strach.html> [access: 29.12.2018].

¹⁹ W. Szot, *Ludowa historia Polski wkracza do narodowego muzeum. Przełomowa wystawa*, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,31047855,chlop-niewolnik-pionierska-wystawa-pod-poznaniem.html#S.MT-K.C-B.2-L.1.duzy> [access: 21.07.2024].

or strategies of peasant resistance. The exhibition ends with a panel 'post-serfdom' showing different artistic responses to the phenomenon of serfdom and their ties²⁰. The elements accompanying the exhibition are: the publication of studies from the above-mentioned academic seminars²¹ and the catalog containing the texts by Adam Leszczyński, Michał Ruszer, or Kacper Pobłocki, the already mentioned scholars who co-create people's discourse. The whole, i.e. the exhibition, its accompanying seminars and publications, is without doubt an event on which the scholarly and reflective status can be conferred.

The last form of speaking about or, specifically, not speaking about the peasant class is the discourse of stately magnate residences, where peasants are entirely ignored. Great aristocratic families are presented without showing the economic bases of their existence because this would carry with it many problematic elements indicated by the researchers of people's history turn. One of the best-known and spectacular historical buildings is the castle in Łańcut, built in the mid-16th century by the Pilecki family and then enlarged by the subsequent owners: the Stadnicki and the Lubomirski families. The residence was converted into a museum in 1945. The building has preserved the largest number in Poland of historical interiors from different periods; its rich collections have survived as have the park and palace complexes, dwelling houses, outbuildings as well as the coach-house with the collection of horse-drawn vehicles. The Castle-Museum in Łańcut as a documentary place represents the lifestyle of the upper classes in Poland in the 18th century together with the architectural and decorative elements of material culture characteristic of the nobility. The exhibition focuses on authentic objects used or present in the residence in the past. The guides' narrative contains many details about the lives of the successive residents of the Łańcut castle, especially the social and cultural aspects. The audience is meant to be convinced of the greatness and splendor of the magnate families, but they (the public) do not learn anything about them that could disturb the idealized image of the past. This knowledge includes, among other things, the methods of enforcing the nobles' authority over peasants or the use of free peasant labor to build up their economic position.

The literature on the subject rarely emphasizes the fact that remembering is an exceptional activity requiring special tools, while forgetting

²⁰ A. Floryszczak et al., *Chłop-niewolnik? – przewodnik po wystawie*, in: *Chłop-niewolnik. Opowieść o pańszczyźnie. Katalog wystawy*, eds. W. Kuligowski, A. Jełowicki, Szreniawa 2024, pp. 13–20.

²¹ *Chłop-niewolnik? Szreniawskie seminaria antropologiczne*, ed. W. Kuligowski, Szreniawa 2023.

is a natural process²². Forgetting can be just as much of a constitutive element in shaping national identity as remembering is: communities are willing to discard memories of those facts and historical processes that do not serve present-day goals and 'current' identity; they remember phenomena that are significant from a new socio-cultural perspective²³, which is clearly visible in the described museum exhibits. In the case of narratives concerning the peasant strata, there is a lack of representation created within the critical paradigm that shows the complexity of social, political, and cultural situations. As a result, the process is repeated as diagnosed by Piotr Kwiatkowski who claims that knowledge about the sources of national pride has a different social status than knowledge about reasons due to shame: 'The view that we can be proud of certain figures and phenomena in national history belongs to the common, socially established knowledge recorded in texts and works of art – recognized by the community as obvious and transmitted through various channels of education and communication. Meanwhile, opinions that we should be ashamed of some actions of the ancestors are largely private knowledge, which individuals acquire independently, although a specific pattern of social and political conditions stimulates to a greater or lesser extent the process of acquiring it'²⁴.

The currently observed accelerated 'musealization' of the past is a significant challenge both to researchers, curators, the public, and museums themselves. The latter, like other cultural institutions, try to find their way in the face of changes brought by modern times and seek to develop strategies that attract visitors without abandoning their traditional functions. Most curators declare their loyalty to academic historical science, validated by research and assuming a proper relationship between the object, the text, and the exhibition context. In their content, exhibitions most often refer to an objectivist, traditional model of historiography, but (to varying degrees) they also respond to what is happening in global science.

Certainly, compared to a systematic and detailed presentation of evidence in the form of text, museum exhibits must be treated as incomplete. Unlike the linear argumentation that is constructed in a text, a museum exhibition cannot rely on a strong assumption about what the audience have seen or understood from the exhibition before moving on to the next

²² See: A. Assman, *From „Canon and Archive”*, in: *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. J.K. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, D. Levy, Oxford 2011.

²³ P. Connerton, *Seven types of forgetting*, "Memory Studies" 2008, 1, pp. 59–71.

²⁴ P.T. Kwiatkowski, *Jaką historią interesują się Polacy? Pytanie o kształt pamięci zbiorowej i jej przemiany po 1989 roku*, in: *Historia Polski od-nowa. Nowe narracje historii i muzealne reprezentacje przeszłości*, eds. R. Kostro, K. Wóycicki, M. Wysocki, Warszawa 2014, pp. 137–138.

element. Even when following a designated route, the museum public rarely views all the elements. The possibility of choice (of the routes and objects viewed, as well as the subtitles read) makes a museum a less powerful instrument for presenting narratives than, for example, a novel, a film, or a television program. That's why some museums employ certain measures meant not only to force the public to follow a specific path but also to strengthen parts of the narrative using various exhibition techniques.

The fundamental difference between academic historiography and a museum exposition is the purpose for which they exist. A characteristic feature of history as a scientific discipline and of historiography as an account of research is a critical distance from the past, their goal being to discover the truth²⁵. For history, the true knowledge is the knowledge that is obtained in accordance with the rules of research considered scientifically valid, which distinguishes it from collective memory, for which what is true is that which is consistent with current feelings, and the way of valuating and perceiving the surrounding world²⁶. In his works, Jerzy Topolski also emphasized that regardless of the changing forms of historiography, its distinguishing feature is the pursuit of scholarly rigor 'understood as the conduct in accordance with the evolving standards of scientific rationality, defining how to seek the truth'²⁷.

A museum in turn operates within three interconnected and imprecise spheres: history, collective memory, and heritage. In practice, the task of the museum discourse is to naturalize the relationship between these three discourses: history (both as *res gestae* and *rerum gestarum*) is used to build the coherent identity and cultural memory of a community, to construct the fundamental canon of knowledge about the past, and to foster the feeling of pride in national heritage. The musealized fragments of the past reality are thus treated as tools for achieving specific, contemporary goals. History as a science is used for cognitive purposes, but the narrative of the past presented in an exhibition primarily serves an identity function, which influences the selection of events and historical processes represented in the exposition.

In this context, it is worth examining the issue of the representation of popular classes in museums from the perspective of critical heritage studies, which investigate the competing versions of the past, with particular emphasis on those emerging from the grassroots. In this aspect, heritage is perceived not so much as a material legacy, but as a dynamic

²⁵ K. Pomian, *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin 2006, pp. 148–187.

²⁶ B. Szacka, *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006, pp. 19 and 29.

²⁷ M. Solarska, M. Bugajewski, *Historia historiografii jako historia prawdy. Dwugłos o podstawach teoretycznych historii historiografii Jerzego Topolskiego*, "Historia@Teoria" 2017, 3, 1, p. 124.

process of involvement, assigning significance to the past in the present and for the present. On one level, heritage is thus a promotion of a specific version of history through legally (state-) sanctioned cultural institutions. On the other, it is a resource of knowledge and experiences that can be used to challenge and/or redefine values and identities by various minority and subordinated groups²⁸. The dominant discourse of heritage becomes a form of social control, an important political and cultural instrument for managing, defining, and legitimizing identities. However, exhibitions also hold the potential to show the public a diversity of perspectives and subjective viewpoints that can resist top-down, objectified narratives. In this way, they support decentralization and detraditionalization of official (conventional) history, and the ambiguity of exhibitions can have both inspiring and intervening effects on controversial phenomena, which contradicts the idea that museums promote a passive process of 'consumption' of historical heritage by audiences craving for easy entertainment. The emotions evoked in such places are also not inherently negative, as emotional engagement can serve as a gateway to a more critical attitude towards the past.

REFERENCES

Studies

- Assman A., *From „Canon and Archive”, in: The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. J.K. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, D. Levy, Oxford 2011.
- Assmann A., *Miedzy historią a pamięcią. Antologia*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska, Warszawa 2013.
- Burke P., *Naoczność. Materiały wizualne jako świadectwa historyczne*, transl. J. Hunia, Kraków 2012.
- Chłop-niewolnik? Szreniawskie seminaria antropologiczne*, ed. W. Kuligowski, Szreniawa 2023.
- Connerton P., *Seven types of forgetting*, "Memory Studies" 2008, 1.
- Floryszczak A. et al., *„Chłop-niewolnik? – przewodnik po wystawie”, in: Chłop-niewolnik. Opowieść o pańszczyźnie. Katalog wystawy*, eds. W. Kuligowski, A. Jełowicki, Szreniawa 2024.
- Gospodarczyk M., Kożuchowski Ł., *Nowa ludowa historia: charakterystyka i społeczno-polityczne korzenie współczesnych narracji o historii chłopów polskich*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 2021, 2.
- Grabowski J., Libionka D., Markowa. *Żydowska śmierć, polska wina, wspólny strach*, "Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn" 9 grudnia 2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,21097043,markowa-zydowska-smierc-polska-wina-wspolny-strach.html> [access: 6.01.2025].
- Karbownik K., *Muzea na wolnym powietrzu jako element narracyjny dziejów kultury chłopskiej*, https://nikidw.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Chlopi-polscy_artykul-Krzysztofa-Karbownika.pdf [access: 6.01.2025].
- Kolomańska E., *Michniów. Mauzoleum Martyrologii Wsi Polskich, Muzeum Wsi Kieleckiej (katalog)*, Kielce 2010.

²⁸ L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge 2006, pp. 1–4.

- Kwiatkowski P.T., *Jaką historią interesują się Polacy? Pytanie o kształt pamięci zbiorowej i jej przemiany po 1989 roku*, in: *Historia Polski od-nowa. Nowe narracje historii i muzealne reprezentacje przeszłości*, eds. R. Kostro, K. Wóycicki, M. Wysocki, Warszawa 2014.
- Kyziół A., *Polewka z sarmatów*, "Polityka" 13 December 2023, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/2237968,1,polewka-z-sarmatow-1670-netflixa-to-wielki-powrot-smiesznej-polskiej-komedii.read> [access: 12.02.2025].
- Leszczyński A., *Czym jest „nowa ludowa historia”, a czym nie jest? Odpowiedź na artykuł M. Gospodarczyk i Ł. Kożuchowskiego zamieszczony w numerze 2/2021 „Studiów Socjologicznych”*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 2021, 3.
- Pomian K., *Historia. Nauka wobec pamięci*, Lublin 2006.
- Rosenstone R., *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, Cambridge 1995.
- Skotarczak D., *Historia wizualna*, Poznań 2013.
- Smith L., *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge 2006.
- Sobczak K., *Ludowa historia po raz pierwszy (albo i nie pierwszy), ważne – by nie ostatni*, "Czas Kultury" 2021, <https://czaskultury.pl/artukul/ludowa-historia-po-raz-pierwszy-albo-i-nie-pierwszy-wazne-by-nie-ostatni/> [access: 12.02.2025].
- Solarska M., Bugajewski M., *Historia historiografii jako historia prawdy. Dwugłos o podstawach teoretycznych historii historiografii Jerzego Topolskiego*, "Historia@Teoria" 2017, 3, 1.
- Sulima R., *Literatura a dialog kultur*, Warszawa 1982.
- Sulima R., *Kultura ludowa i polskie kompleksy*, in: *Czy zmierzch kultury ludowej?*, ed. A. Dobroński, Łomża 1997.
- Szacka B., *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mīt*, Warszawa 2006.
- Szpytma M., *Na czym polega wyjątkowość rodziny Ulmów*, <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/historia-z-ipn/190555,Mateusz-Szpytma-Na-czym-polega-wyjatkowosc-rodziny-Ulmow.html> [access: 9.01.2025].
- Szot W., *Ludowa historia Polski wkracza do narodowego muzeum. Przelomowa wystawa*, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75410,31047855,chlop-niewolnik-pionierska-wystawa-pod-poznaniem.html#S.MT-K.C-B.2-L.1.duzy> [access: 21.07.2024].
- Werczyński D., *Skansen jako produkt turystyczny. Analiza wybranych przykładów*, "Zeszyty Naukowe. Turystyka i Rekreacja" 2014, 1 (13).
- Witek P., *Andrzej Wajda jako historyk. Metodologiczne studium z historii wizualnej*, Lublin 2016.
- Ziębińska-Witek A., *Muzealizacja komunizmu w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 2018.

Netography

<https://skansen.lublin.pl/pl/ekspozycja/> [access: 6.01.2025].

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Ziębińska-Witek – full professor, employee of the Institute of History of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. A historian-methodologist, she specializes in museology, theoretical problems of knowledge of the past and the problems of representing history in verbal and visual discourses of contemporary culture.

NOTA O AUTORZE

Anna Ziębińska-Witek – prof. dr hab., pracownik Instytutu Historii Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, historyk-metodolog, zajmuje się muzeologią, teoretycznymi problemami wiedzy o przeszłości oraz problematyką reprezentacji historii w werbalnych i wizualnych dyskursach kultury współczesnej.

ISSN 2082-6060

