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# THE POLISH DISCOURSE ABOUT THE RIGHTEOUS AMONG THE NATIONS BETWEEN COMMEMORATION, EDUCATION AND JUSTIFICATION?<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** In recent years, the Righteous Among the Nations have become a particular topic of interest for the official politics of memory, historians, NGO activists and the public sphere in Poland. Against the background of an on-going debate on Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, the attitude of Polish society during the war and the commemoration of Holocaust sites in the country, the Righteous Among the Nations are presented as a positive aspect of this history of which many Poles are still proud. Thus, the topic has been frequently addressed by different actors and in different commemoration projects in recent years. This article aims to determine the various ways of how and with what aims the story of the Righteous has been used and defines three main directions: commemoration, education and justification (the latter in the sense of an attempt to cover up upcoming accusations of participation of Poles in the Holocaust). Another aspect covered will be the political use of the narrative of the Righteous in recent years, which will be shown on the basis of selected case studies. Based on the findings, the article investigates if and how the heritage of the Righteous is restricted to a national, patriotic context or goes further and comprises elements of what can be called a European set of values and contexts.

**Key words:** Europeanization, Righteous, collective memory, narratives, Poland

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<sup>1</sup> This text was finished in mid-January 2018 and therefore does not include the current international controversy concerning the amendment to the Polish Act on the Institute of National Remembrance (February-March 2018).

Human rights, pluralism and democracy are core values of the European Union. Europeanization should therefore, if understood as an on-going process in political, economic and social terms, include an on-going process in all spheres, and also encompass collective memory, education and narratives of the past. Thus, the question of how the past is depicted in an EU-country can give hints about the progress of Europeanization in the sense of it 'getting European' (adopting European values) in the sphere of culture. This is even more true when speaking about historical events that affected entire Europe and became an important reference point for the EU, as it is the case for the Holocaust in its different dimensions. One of the main aspects of the memory of the Holocaust and World War II, apart from the commemoration of the victims, are the Righteous Among the Nations – non-Jews from all over the world who were awarded a medal by Yad Vashem for rescuing Jews during World War II. This issue has become a famous topic of interest for the politics of memory, historians and the public sphere within Poland and many other European countries<sup>2</sup> in the last years. Just recently, the Polish Parliament proclaimed the Jan Karski Year<sup>3</sup> (2014), accompanied by numerous events and exhibitions all over the country. Furthermore, the Polish Righteous and their appropriate commemoration have been subject to public debates, exhibitions and other initiatives within Poland and beyond, which were not deprived of political claims and undertones. Major commemoration initiatives in Poland in recent years involve the planned monument for the Polish Righteous in Warsaw, the new Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II and a set of projects in honor of Jan Karski in his native town Łódź.

The process of coming to terms with the past of the last world war has occupied the Polish public discourse since the late 1980s, with the debates about the Jedwabne

<sup>2</sup> For example, initiatives in other countries: Sweden celebrated the Raoul Wallenberg Year in 2012 (Wallenberg was a diplomat and businessmen who saved tens of thousands of Jews – for more information see: U. Zander, "Remembering and Forgetting the Holocaust. The Cases of Jan Karski and Raoul Wallenberg", in K. Kowalski, B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *The Europeanization of Heritage and Memories in Poland and Sweden*, Kraków 2016, pp. 189-211). The Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, France, has installed a 'wall of the Righteous' presenting the names of more than 3900 French Righteous. The initiative Austrian Friends of Yad Vashem has developed a website and exhibition on the Austrian Righteous Among the Nations, which is subsequently shown in different places in Austria (more information: Die Gerechten unter den Völkern, at <<http://gerechte.at/die-ausstellung/>>, 26 September 2017). K.-G. Karlsson, "The Holocaust as a Problem of Historical Culture", in K.-G. Karlsson, U. Zander (eds.), *Echoes of the Holocaust. Historical Cultures in Contemporary Europe*, Lund 2003, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Karski (born as Jan Koziński) was a Polish soldier and courier of the Polish government-in-exile during World War II. He was awarded the medal "Righteous Among the Nations" for his attempts to inform Jewish leaders and heads of states and government abroad about the on-going mass murders of Polish Jews in 1982.

massacre after Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbours*<sup>4</sup> as a culmination point.<sup>5</sup> In this context, scholars have observed a shift from an exclusive victim narrative to a more differentiated assessment of Polish war history.<sup>6</sup> The period between the late 1980s and now, as Aleida Assmann observes, marks a general shift in collective memory formation in the Western world: *Today, we see that the future has lost much of its power to integrate, while the past is becoming increasingly important in the formation of identity. This shift of orientation from future to past occurred in the 1980s and 1990s with the growing acknowledgement of historical traumas.*<sup>7</sup> The latest World War II-related debates in Poland were mainly linked to scholarly publications or controversies about the forms and instruments of commemoration and have inspired the government to the inclusion of the issue into its official historic-political discourse. State-driven politics of memory in turn, among other strategic goals, aim at strengthening the positive collective memory of a society.<sup>8</sup> Events in local, regional, national or transnational history are picked according to current political convictions and intentions and then propagated in society by the mass media. Thus, the narrative of the Polish Righteous for the sake of this article will be primarily understood as a means of politics of memory, which is used to achieve certain long-term aims within society by different actors. This approach does not exclude bottom-up initiatives without predetermined functions, as those in many cases occur as reaction to a trend started from above. One example is the government-proclaimed Jan Karski Year, which inspired many Polish schools and smaller NGOs to manifold commemoration initiatives.

While scholars still argue as to how far the Holocaust as such can be a foundation and starting point for a common European or a distinct national identity,<sup>9</sup> the memory

<sup>4</sup> See: J.T. Gross, *Neighbours. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, Princeton 2001. In the book, Gross writes about the responsibility of the local Polish villagers from Jedwabne for the mass killing of the Jewish population of the town in July 1941. Although there was historical evidence for this before, the revelation of the participation of Polish people in the pogrom was a shock to public opinion.

<sup>5</sup> For a distinct analysis of this issue, see: B. Törnquist-Plewa, "The Jedwabne Killings – A Challenge for Polish Collective Memory", in K.-G. Karlsson, U. Zander (eds.), *Echoes of the Holocaust...*, pp. 141-171.

<sup>6</sup> The historian Joanna Michlic i.e. sees the debate about *Neighbours* as a *reflection of the process of democratization of Poland's political and social life after 1989* – J.A. Michlic, *The Polish Debate about the Jedwabne Massacre*, p. 33, at <<http://sicsa.huji.ac.il/sites/default/files/sicsa/files/21michlic.pdf>>, 29 August 2016. For a detailed collection of press reactions, please see: A. Polonsky, J.A. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond. The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*, Princeton 2004. Historian Marcin Kula considers the discussion about guilt and responsibility of Polish townspeople with regards to the killing of local Jews in Jedwabne (and other villages) to be the biggest debate about the history of the war in Poland for a long time. M. Kula, *Uparta sprawa. Żydowska? Polska? Ludzka?*, Kraków 2004, p. 132.

<sup>7</sup> A. Assmann, "Europe: A Community of Memory? Twentieth Annual Lecture of the GHI, November 16, 2006", *GHI Bulletin*, no. 40 (2007), at <<http://www.ghi-dc.org/files/publications/bulletin/bu040/011.pdf>>, 16 April 2015, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> L. Nijakowski, *Polska polityka pamięci. Esej socjologiczny*, Warszawa 2008, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> The historian Dan Diner for example sees the Holocaust as a paradigmatic European *lieu de mémoire*. See: A. Assmann, "Europe: A Community of Memory?...", p. 13.

of the Righteous Among the Nations is thus vividly celebrated as positive connotation in collective memory. Poland, on whose soil the Nazi German occupiers located all major death camps as well as thousands of ghettos and killing sites, plays a specific role in this phenomenon. Polish citizens were witnesses to the Holocaust on a daily basis and apart from a number of debates on so-called 'dark sides' of Polish-Jewish relations under German occupation in the last 15 years, Poland is at the same time the country with the largest number of medals from Yad Vashem.<sup>10</sup> In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the number of initiatives, exhibitions, educational programs and workshops related to the commemoration of the Righteous Among the Nations in Poland is constantly on the rise. At the same time, Poland has repeatedly protested against the use of the historically inaccurate term of 'Polish death camps' abroad in order to correct falsified depictions of history and deny wrong accusations.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to the difficult process of 'coming to terms with the past' in Poland in the last 30 years, it is possible to identify three main ways of reaction: recognition (i.e. openness to critical facts that questions established narratives), complete negation (often linked to the reproach of anti-Polonism on the site of right-wing journalists) or a mixture of both. These three ways of reactions are multi-leveled. Recognizing reactions might occur on a formal, official level, i.e. state authorities, but can lack within mainstream society. This was the case during the official commemoration ceremony of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre, where the then-president of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, recognized and publicly apologized for the mass murder of the local Jewish community by their Polish neighbors, while the atmosphere amongst the local population was complete opposite.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> As of January 1, 2017, Yad Vashem gives an official number of 6,706 honoured Polish nationals. See: "Names of Righteous by Country", Yad Vashem, at <<http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html>>, 16 February 2018.

<sup>11</sup> According to official information from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more than 100 interventions were issued to foreign authorities due to the use of the term 'Polish death camps' between 2008 and 2012 alone. See: "Przeciw 'polskim obozom' – Interwencje", Archiwum MSZ, at <<https://archive.is/20120804162507/www.msz.gov.pl/Interwencje,6509.html>>, 24 March 2017. Although the topic was frequently addressed in the Polish media, it became subject to an international debate after the speech of the Israeli ambassador to Poland, Anna Azari, who criticized the planned amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance on the occasion of the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the liberation of KL Auschwitz-Birkenau on 27 January 2018. She expressed concern that the amended version of the act would punish journalists or even Holocaust survivors sharing stories about individual Polish collaborators. The new wording of the act prohibits ascribing Nazi crimes to the Polish nation or the Polish state and thus it also penalizes the use of the term 'Polish death camps'. The amended version of the act came into force on 1 March 2018 but expert panels consisting of specialists from Israel and Poland are planned for the coming months. In late January and early February 2018, the topic was widely discussed in Poland and abroad, with Polish authorities frequently citing the high number of Polish Righteous as an argument to demonstrate the allegedly common positive attitude of Polish society towards Jews under the German occupation.

<sup>12</sup> For a full transcript of the speech of President Kwaśniewski, please see: *President Kwasniewski's Speech at the Jedwabne Ceremony*, 10 July 2001, at <<http://www.radzilow.com/jedwabne-ceremony.htm>>, 29 September 2016. Reactions can be found in the book: A. Polonsky, J.A. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond...*

In this article, I propose to base these three approaches on the concept of different uses of history introduced by Klas-Göran Karlsson, who stresses that *history is made use of, when aspects of a historical culture are activated in a communicative process in order for certain groups in a certain society to satisfy certain needs or look after certain interests*.<sup>13</sup> Using history for contemporary aims can, according to Karlsson, take different forms depending on the respective aims. Among them are the moral, political-pedagogical and ideological use.

The moral use of history corresponds with the commemoration function of Righteous narratives in Poland. It is based on the conviction that the heroic deeds of Polish Righteous are too little present in Polish society and abroad and attempts to restore this memory. According to Karlsson, the moral approach also functions as a *counter-reaction*<sup>14</sup> to denying or trivializing efforts from some parts of society. Commemoration therefore is not only perceived as a value *per se*, but also as a means to restore the 'objective historical truth' and to adjust the image of Poland in the eyes of the world. Alternatively, the approach can be widened to contemporary education of young people or entire societies about tolerance, human rights and anti-discrimination based on the heroic deeds of the Polish Righteous during World War II.<sup>15</sup> This concept corresponds with the political-pedagogical use of history proposed by Karlsson, which uses the past *as an aid in attacking what are felt to be severe and concrete political and social problems in a later era*.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, the concept is narrow, as it is restricted to connect historical events and current politics. Similarities between past events and the present situation are identified and mapped in order to make a certain point. Education – no matter if the focus is put on children and youth or on society in general – is used to connect the past with the present and future.<sup>17</sup> World War II and the moral dilemmas of individuals confronted with the persecution and mass murder of their Jewish neighbors as well the threat of losing their own lives are used as a kind of canvas against the backdrop of which one can tackle actual issues, like discrimination against ethnic or sexual minorities or genocides in other parts of the world after 1945. This universal approach includes a wider perspective and is in line with views that see Europeanization as an attempt to define a common set of values, including democracy, human rights and tolerance.<sup>18</sup> The third approach is the justification narrative, which uses history

<sup>13</sup> K.-G. Karlsson, "The Holocaust as a Problem...", p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> For an account on the role of the Righteous in Polish collective memory, see: K. Suszkiewicz, "The Rise of the Righteous Among the Nations as a New Model for the Polish Hero", in K. Kowalski, B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *The Europeanization...*, pp. 213-240.

<sup>16</sup> K.-G. Karlsson, "The Holocaust as a Problem...", p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> See i.e.: the Toolkit on the Holocaust and Human Rights Education in the EU, at <<http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/toolkit-holocaust-education/index.htm>>, 28 March 2017, where the initiators (the Fundamental Rights Agency – FRA and Yad Vashem) emphasize the *correlation between preservation of memory and the shaping of a better future*.

<sup>18</sup> Ł. Piekarska-Duraj, "Democratization as an Aspect of Heritage Europeanization. The Museum Triangle", in K. Kowalski, B. Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *The Europeanization...*, p. 41. For a detailed account



for ideological aims (Karlsson) and tries to create an alternative world-view. Although ideological elements can always influence, or be part of, any approach, the distinction of a specific ideological use of history is useful in this regard. Attempts to whitewash one's own history, negate its dark sides or hide the inglorious aspects of their own past are a frequently used method for creating common narratives and identities. Thus, by concentrating on the heroic deeds of individuals, narrators attempt to cover negative aspects of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust with the heroism of the Righteous. History is therefore employed in order to build legitimacy, dictated by a *desire to convince, influence, rationalize and authorize with the aid of [...] history*.<sup>19</sup>

As the inner-Polish debate on Polish-Jewish relations during World War II and the role of Polish gentiles during the occupation has shown,<sup>20</sup> justification is one of the possible reactions to the unveiling of what is perceived as dark spots in the own national history. The most famous example was the country-wide emotional debate about the Jedwabne massacre in 2001.<sup>21</sup> Also during earlier controversies about the planned establishment of a Catholic monastery in one of the historical buildings next to the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (1989-1990)<sup>22</sup> and the papal cross next to the Auschwitz museum site (1998),<sup>23</sup> the range of reactions on the Polish side included charges of anti-Polonism and historical denial. Both denying any negative aspects of history and solely focusing on positive figures and events (i.e. Jan Karski, the Righteous) would be a symptom of justification as a strategy to handle the past and form a collective memory in the future.

A discourse within society is then to be considered as democratic if it includes contradicting narratives which are debated on different levels by different actors. Therefore, the main landmark issue is if and how the three narratives of commemoration, education and justification function and interact in Polish society and public debate and which actors are actually involved. For this purpose, the following questions will be asked: In which contexts and environments did and does a discourse about the Righteous appear in Poland? Is there a visible tendency of 'using' this discourse to defend a certain world-view of 'good Poles' or 'bad Poles'? Is it possible to identify cases, where the heroic deeds of the Righteous are used as a sort of refuge, in order to avoid serious historical debates about the attitude of Polish society during the war? Which one of the three groups of narratives (commemoration, education, justification) dominated the discourse? Does the respective initiative go further than just presenting the personal

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on the problem of heritage democratization, see: K. Kowalski, *O istocie dziedzictwa europejskiego – rozważania*, Kraków 2013.

<sup>19</sup> K.-G. Karlsson, "The Holocaust as a Problem...", p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> For more information, see: J.T. Gross, *Neighbours...*, and idem, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation*, Princeton 2006.

<sup>21</sup> For more details about the debate, see: A. Polonsky, J.A. Michlic, *The Neighbors Respond...*; M.J. Chodakiewicz, *The Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941. Before, During, After*, New York 2005.

<sup>22</sup> See: W.T. Bartoszewski, *The Convent at Auschwitz*, New York 1990.

<sup>23</sup> See: G. Zubrzycki, *The Crosses of Auschwitz. Nationalism and Religion in Post-communist Poland*, Chicago-London 2006.

fates of one or many Righteous and does it include more than a regional/local context (typical for the commemoration function), by touching upon more general, contemporary questions (educational function)?

For the sake of this analysis, the term 'discourse' shall be understood as a compilation of both press and media publications and initiatives, exhibitions and workshops. The aim of this broad definition is to include a large spectrum of contemporary discussions and activities concerning the commemoration of Polish Righteous Among the Nations in the public sphere.

The term 'Righteous' itself has been used with different meanings by different memory agents in the last couple of decades. Subsequently, probably the best known definition of Yad Vashem is only one of many ways of capturing the term. Until recently, the term 'Righteous' was even exclusively linked to Yad Vashem and the medal in honor of gentiles rescuing Jews during World War II. Since 1963, the Yad Vashem Institute honors non-Jews who (1) were actively involved in saving one or several Jews from death during the Holocaust, (2) risked their life, liberty or position by doing so and (3) provided aid which was unbiased/unpaid.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the medal was awarded exclusively based on the request of the saved person, supported by appropriate testimonies and documentation. In this sense, the term 'Righteous' is formally defined and strictly linked to the decision process of the Yad Vashem Institute.

In contrast, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (INR) has developed a broader concept of so-called 'rescuers'. The INR historians focus on all examples of support and aid and therefore not solely on cases where the gentile party was awarded the official medal "Righteous Among the Nations" of Yad Vashem. The Institute deals also with cases of documented help and rescue, where the rescuing action ended with the death of both/either rescued and/or rescuers. In the last 15 years, INR has carried out a series of extensive research projects concerning Polish-Jewish relations, followed by a number of significant publications.<sup>25</sup> Yet another, much broader definition was adopted by the European Parliament on the occasion of the introduction of a European Day of Remembrance for the Righteous.<sup>26</sup> This initiative wants to honor all *people who saved lives during all genocides and mass murders [...] perpetrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century*.<sup>27</sup> It therefore includes, among others, rescuers during the genocides in Rwanda

<sup>24</sup> "About the Righteous", Yad Vashem, at <<http://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-righteous.html>>, 16 February 2018.

<sup>25</sup> The first project (2001-2006) concerning this topic ended with the two publications by P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (eds.), *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1: *Studia*, vol. 2: *Dokumenty*, Warszawa 2002, and the book by A. Żbikowski (ed.), *Polacy i Żydzi pod okupacją niemiecką 1939-1945. Studia i materiały*, Warszawa 2006. Since 2007, the INR is publishing a series called "*Kto Ratuje Jedno Życie...*" about the aid provided to Jews by Polish society.

<sup>26</sup> For more details about World War II related EU and international remembrance days, please see: E. Büttner, K. Suszkiewicz, "Remembrance Days in European Union – between Oblivion, National Manifestations and an European Narrative?", *Studia Żydowskie. Almanach*, vol. 6 (2017), pp. 141-159.

<sup>27</sup> *Declaration of the European Parliament of 10 May 2012 on support for the establishment of a European Day of Remembrance for the Righteous*, at <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0205+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>>, 17 January 2015.

and Cambodia. According to the official declaration of the European Parliament of 10 May 2012 on support for the establishment of a European Day of Remembrance for the Righteous, apart from honoring the Righteous, the education of the young generation is one of the major aims of the initiative.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, the focus of the European Day of the Righteous is placed more on general human values and attitudes than on a specific case, date or group of victims/aid providers and aims at education of future generations.

## PLANNED MONUMENT IN HONOR OF THE POLISH RIGHTEOUS IN WARSAW

The discussion about the erection of a monument initially entitled “For the Righteous Poles who rescued Jews” is still underway and subject to constant debates. Already the title “From Those You Saved” itself could be seen as problematic, as Polish journalist Beata Chomątowska noted: *Despite the existing testimonies, the title could suggest that this [aid-providing – E.W.] was the prevailing attitude in society.*<sup>29</sup> The question, which attitude prevailed in Polish society towards the persecution of Jews by Nazi Germany, has been debated for many years in Poland with more and more critical evidence coming to public attention. Major controversies however evolved around the location of the monument. The Warsaw City Council opted in an official decision for Grzybowski Square in the area of the former Warsaw ghetto and Jewish quarter. The initial idea of a group of activists around Zygmunt Rolat<sup>30</sup> in contrast foresees the square in front of the new POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, also in the heart of the former ghetto. This idea was perceived very critically. Scholars and publicists claimed that the support of the Righteous did not take place on the territory of the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>31</sup> According to the critics, the combination of the well-known Monument to the Ghetto

<sup>28</sup> Quote from the Declaration (link above): *Whereas the remembrance of good is essential to the process of European integration because it teaches younger generations that everyone can always choose to help other human beings and defend human dignity, and that public institutions have a duty to highlight the example set by people who managed to protect those persecuted out of hate.*

<sup>29</sup> B. Chomątowska, “O warszawskie pomniki idziemy w bój”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 10 (2015), p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> According to Konstanty Gebert, the initial idea for a monument in honor of the Righteous came from the Association of Children of the Holocaust in Poland and the Polish Association of the Righteous Among the Nations, who contacted the Polish-Jewish American businessman and philanthropist Zygmunt Rolat. Later on, Rolat invited a number of other personalities to engage into the founding process of the monument, among them the former Polish politician Daniel Rotfeld and Gebert himself. From the very beginning, the square in front of the POLIN Museum was meant to be the potential site for the monument. See: interview with Konstanty Gebert, member of the Remembrance and Future Foundation, which engages in the project since the very beginning, conducted on 28 June 2016.

<sup>31</sup> This argument was brought up among others by Henryk Grynberg, as Konstanty Gebert relates. See: interview with Konstanty Gebert.



Heroes<sup>32</sup> and a separate, new memorial installation for the Polish Righteous would not only lead to an overload of memory messages in one single place, but might also evoke the impression of one story being deliberately pushed into the foreground at the cost of another.<sup>33</sup>

In 2015, Zygmunt Rolat as part of the foundation Remembrance and Future<sup>34</sup> finally organized an international tender for a monument entitled "From Those You Saved". The winner was the project "Forest" by Austrian architects Eduard Freudmann and Gabu Heindl, which included a tree nursery to be installed in the square in front of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, with the trees to be transferred to villages with former Jewish communities all over Poland after a period of 18 months. However, the project was rejected by Rolat himself, who did not accept it as a permanent monument and was concerned about budget issues.<sup>35</sup> In the summer of 2016, the foundation asked the renowned Israeli sculptor Dani Karavan, the author of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, to develop a new project, which is expected to be ready in the coming months and will then need to undergo a series of approvals by local public authorities.<sup>36</sup> Although the debate is currently sidetracked, it will be supposedly re-evolve after the official presentation of the new project by Karavan and its possible realization.

The still on-going debate about the monument in honor of the Righteous in Warsaw can be seen as an example for what Karlsson called the moral use of history – commemoration is used as a way to 'unveil', so far perceived as underrepresented and less-known, aspects of the past to the national and international public in order to present a subjectively 'true' picture of Polish-Jewish relations. In general, the subject of commemoration is often deliberately chosen by the actors involved in the construction of collective memory. One form to create collective memory are monuments that have existed and functioned as preservers of the past since antiquity. As Peter Carrer writes, their function is the *cohesion of social groups via the cultivation of collective memories*.<sup>37</sup> Although Carrer argues that in times of digital advertisements and billboards, traditional monuments are intrinsically invisible to society due to their familiarity, lack of

<sup>32</sup> The Ghetto Heroes Monument (Pl. Pomnik Bohaterów Getta) was erected in 1948 and commemorates the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. Numerous public ceremonies have been held in the square in front of the monument since then, with the visit of the then chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany Willy Brandt in 1971 as the most well known example.

<sup>33</sup> See: interview with Konstanty Gebert. Gebert gives a longer relation on the course of the discussion about the localization and authorship of the future monument, in which he also mentions the major arguments brought up for and against the localization next to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

<sup>34</sup> See English website of the foundation and the planned monument: "From Those – You Saved", Remembrance and Future Foundation, at <<http://www.raff.org.pl/en>>, 19 April 2017.

<sup>35</sup> "Muranów. Dani Karavan tworzy dla Warszawy pomnik Polaków ratujących Żydów", *Gazeta Wyborcza. Warszawa*, 3 July 2016, at <<http://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/1,34862,20339462,muranow-dani-karavan-tworzy-dla-warszawy-pomnik-polakow-ratujacych.html>>, 13 July 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> P. Carrer, *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory. France and Germany since 1989*, New York–Oxford 2005, p. 16.

aesthetic values and their outdated visual character,<sup>38</sup> the meaning of the Warsaw monument in honor of the Righteous is significant – despite the fact that the monument itself does not exist yet, it has been subject to a debate that unveiled the intentions and concerns of the different actors involved. The discussion about the monument for the Righteous should therefore be conceived in at least two wider perspectives: the social and political discourse, which always and everywhere accompanies the process of erecting public monuments on the one hand, and the specific sensitive discourse of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II and nowadays on the other hand. The main supporters of the monument, as Konstanty Gebert emphasizes, belong to a foundation of a Jewish business man (Rolat) and also the support committee is Polish-Israeli-American – the monument itself is supposed to be an expression of gratitude to the Polish heroes.<sup>39</sup>

The question of whether to build a monument at all is not subject to major controversy in Poland, as it would unquestionably be part of a positive narrative about Polish war history and therefore be congruent with the wider historical policy of the Polish government.<sup>40</sup> As a logical consequence, the danger emerges and is perceived by part of the discussants, that the deeds of the Righteous might be identified with the attitude of entire Polish society during the war. The ‘use’ of the monument, its localization and final message should therefore be the subject of further investigation after its final construction and unveiling.

In terms of the pedagogical use of history (education), the potential of a monument *per se* is less variable than of an exhibition. Nevertheless, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, which functions next to the planned localization of the monument, has initiated a number of events and a short exhibition on the history of the Polish Righteous.<sup>41</sup> In combination with the museum, the monument can therefore play a significant role in tackling *what are felt to be severe and concrete political and social problems*<sup>42</sup> in the present – namely, for example, the perceived need for a positive,

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Konstanty Gebert. Gebert goes on: *I would be very glad if the Polish State did more in this question* [i.e. commemorating Polish Righteous – E.W.], *but this does not relieve us* [the Jewish community – E.W.] *from the obligation to show gratefulness!*

<sup>40</sup> An example for this policy is the launch of a campaign to commemorate the so-called ‘Cursed Soldiers’, i.e. anti-communist resistance fighters at the end of World War II and in its aftermath. During the inauguration of the works on a Strategy for Polish Historical Policy in November 2015, President Andrzej Duda emphasized that the development of a historical policy based on civic and patriotic values is *one of the most important tasks for the president*. See: “Polityka historyczna służy budowaniu potencjału państwa”, Prezydent RP, 17 November 2015, at <<http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/art,67,musimy-ksztaltowac-postawy-obywatelskie-i-patriotyczne.html>>, 27 March 2017.

<sup>41</sup> One example is the exhibition *They Risked Their Lives – Poles Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust*, which was presented in the museum in March-April 2014. For details, see: *They Risked Their Lives – Poles Who Saved Jews During the Holocaust Exhibition*, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, at <<http://www.polin.pl/en/event/they-risked-their-lives-oles-who-saved-jews-during-the->>, 29 September 2016.

<sup>42</sup> K.-G. Karlsson, “The Holocaust as a Problem...”, p. 40.

patriotic politics of memory in Poland, as the president, Andrzej Duda, emphasized in an official speech on the occasion of a joint meeting about the strategy for a national politics of memory in 2015: *Politics of memory generally aim at building the potential of a state, not only society as such, but precisely state potential [...]*.<sup>43</sup> If the need to create state legitimacy will be the leading motive for creating memory initiatives, history is used for ideological aims. The memory of the Polish Righteous would then be in danger of being abused to cover cases of blackmailing, massacres or indifference, which indisputably also were part of war history in Poland.<sup>44</sup>

## THE ULMA FAMILY MUSEUM OF POLES SAVING JEWS IN WORLD WAR II

In contrast to the international involvement in the monument debate in Warsaw, the Ulma Family Museum in Honor of Poles Rescuing Jews in Markowa (opened in March 2016) is an example of a Polish local commemoration initiative. The museum honors Poles from the Podkarpacie region, who provided aid to Jews during World War II. The village of Markowa once was home to the Ulmas, a poor Polish peasant family with six children. The entire family was killed by German police forces, assisted by several Polish Navy-Blue police men, together with a group of 8 Jews who were sheltered by the Ulmas in their house.<sup>45</sup>

The initiative to build a museum dedicated to Poles who provided aid and rescued Jews was brought up by members of the local municipal council and the marshal of the Podkarpackie voivodship.<sup>46</sup> This local government institution now finances the museum together with a subsidy of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The museum contains six main sections covering different aspects of the war, the fate of the Ulma family and post-war commemoration: (1) the life of Poles and Jews before the outbreak of the war, (2) reality under the German occupation, (3) the support of persecuted Jews by local Poles, (4) the case of the Ulma family, (5) the trial of the perpetrator Josef Kohort and (6) aspects of commemoration since 1945.

<sup>43</sup> See: Speech of President Andrzej Duda on the occasion of the joint meeting of the National Development Council on "Politics of Memory: Contexts, Ideas, Realizations", which took place on 17 November 2015 in Warsaw. Full text in Polish retrievable under: *Zapis spotkania dot. Strategii Polskiej Polityki Historycznej*, p. 5, Prezydent RP, at <<http://www.prezydent.pl/kancelaria/dzialalnosc-kancelarii/art,-18,zapis-spotkania-dot-strategii-polskiej-polityki-historycznej.html>>, 25 April 2017.

<sup>44</sup> See: B. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945*, Warszawa 2011; J. Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews. Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*, Bloomington 2013.

<sup>45</sup> For more information on the Museum and the Ulma family, see the official museum website: "The Ulma Family", the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Savings Jews in World War II, at <<http://muzeumulmow.pl/en/museum/history-of-the-ulma-family/>>, 18 July 2016.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Bożena Knotz-Beda, employee of the Castle Museum in Łańcut and coordinator of the Markowa museum project, 10 April 2015.

According to the concept, the museum mainly concentrates on the local context of the tragedy of the Ulma family, which the visitor experiences via video clips, maps, photographs, holograms and the modern architecture of the museum site. The Ulma Family Museum is mainly based on data gathered by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance. Subsequently, the discourse therefore emerged on the local level, the museum is funded by local means of the voivodship and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage<sup>47</sup> without EU or other international institutions or foundations involved. Although a broader historical and political context is shown in the introduction part of the exhibition, the narrative focuses strictly on rescuers and the support provided in the Podkarpackie region. Here, the earlier discussed concept of ‘rescuers’ is used, which implies that the number of those honored is much bigger than the number of holders of the Yad Vashem medal “Righteous Among the Nations”.

An important part of the vision of the Ulma Family Museum is the education of different groups in society. One example is the project “The World of the Righteous – the Heroic Example of the Ulma Family”,<sup>48</sup> which includes two modules with a circle of ten workshops. The program is addressed to inmates of prisons from the Rzeszów region and offers the opportunity to discuss issues, such as family, values, respect, empathy and the identification with victims. In this regard, the program links the past (history of the Ulma family, the role of the family father Józef Ulma in the local society) with the present (identification with victimized individuals nowadays, empathy for handicapped people) and aims at the transfer of timeless values. According to the project initiators, *by learning about the emotions of the historical protagonists, [participants] get the chance to develop social skills, a set of values and empathy, as well as to learn the identification with victims of undeserved aggression and violence. They are taught that even if your own life is in danger, you are always free to take your own decision – to respect the health, life and values of others.*<sup>49</sup> History is here used as a means to educate society and form attitudes towards recent, contemporary problems.

Due to the limited size of the museum and the so-far restricted financial means, the subject of the exhibition focusses on aid-providing and the phenomenon of denunciations is not explicitly problematized. However, the exhibition does not lack references to this problem – the contemporary witnesses shown in the available video materials explicitly mention incidents of hostility towards persecuted Jews in their neighborhoods. Although the focus of the exhibition is regional, the initiators declare an openness to

<sup>47</sup> The entire project amounted to almost €9 million, according to the museum director, Mateusz Szpytma, while the Ministry of Culture contributed €1 million. See interview with Mateusz Szpytma: M. Szpytma, K. Przewrocka-Aderet, “Zmiana krajobrazu pamięci”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 14 (2016), at <<https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/zmiana-krajobrazu-pamieci-32994>>, 25 April 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Project description in Polish language on the homepage of the Ulma Family Museum, see: “Inauguracja programu ‘Świat Sprawiedliwych – bohaterski przykład rodziny Ulmów’”, Muzeum Polaków Ratujących Żydów podczas II Wojny Światowej im. Rodziny Ulmów w Markowej, 5 September 2016, at <<http://muzeumulmow.pl/pl/wydarzenia/inauguracja-programu-swiat-sprawiedliwych-bohaterski-przyklad-rodziny-ulmow/>>, 28 March 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.



cooperate on broader basis with institutions from Poland and abroad; furthermore, a dedicated cinema room within the museum is supposed to hold travelling exhibitions from other institutions<sup>50</sup> and leaves the possibility to tackle different aspects of the war.

## THE COMMEMORATION OF JAN KARSKI IN ŁÓDŹ

The third case study includes commemoration initiatives on the occasion of the Jan Karski Year (2014) in Karski's home city Łódź. Jan Karski was Polish officer and member of the resistance during World War II. Performing his secret duties during the German occupation, he got to meet many famous personalities including Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, to whom, as one of his tasks, he related the annihilation of Polish Jewry. After the war, he emigrated to the United States and was employed as a professor at Georgetown University. He became known to a broader public after Claude Lantzmman included parts of an interview with him in the famous documentary *Shoah*. Karski was awarded the medal "Righteous Among the Nations" in 1982. Łódź, the city, where he was born and spent his childhood, holds a lot of initiatives connected to his legacy and commemoration.

The main institution dealing with the legacy of Jan Karski in Łódź is the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center, a secular institution of culture founded in 2010 and devoted to promoting the multicultural and multiethnic heritage of the city with a special focus on Jewish heritage. Its aims are combating racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and disrespect towards people with different origin, culture and world views. Furthermore, the institution engages in multicultural education and the commemoration of the Righteous and the Holocaust victims.<sup>51</sup> According to the official information of the center, about 10,000 secondary school students from the region participated in educational initiatives about the multicultural past of Łódź, the history of the Łódź ghetto and famous individuals like Marek Edelman and Jan Karski.<sup>52</sup> The offer includes a workshop about the Righteous and their moral dilemma during the war and an educational game on the mission of Jan Karski, where the participants study the complicated Polish-Jewish relations before World War II and learn about the mechanisms behind the social stigmatization of persecuted groups.<sup>53</sup>

Another initiative commemorating both survivors of the Łódź ghetto and the Righteous from the region, is the Survivor's Park in the historical Jewish district of the city. The idea of the park, which was opened in 2004 with the planting of hundreds of

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Bożena Knotz-Beda.

<sup>51</sup> More details on the aims and initiatives of the Center can be found under: "O nas", Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana w Łodzi, at <<http://www.centrumdialogu.com/o-nas/o-centrum-dialogu>>, 24 July 2016.

<sup>52</sup> Information from the e-book on the educational offer of the Centre, available under: "Oferta edukacyjna", Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana w Łodzi, p. 2, at <[http://www.centrumdialogu.com/ebooks/oferta\\_educacyjna](http://www.centrumdialogu.com/ebooks/oferta_educacyjna)>, 24 July 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-11.

trees in honor of the Saved and the Righteous, stemmed from a survivor of the ghetto and was supported by the then-mayor of the city. After the inauguration of the park, a monument in honor of Polish gentile rescuers was established within the area. The monument combines a star of David and a plinth with the Polish eagle and encompasses blocks with a thousand plaques for the Polish Righteous and the name of their home cities. The park dates to 2004, the year of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liquidation of the Łódź ghetto.

An example for an exhibition concept on the commemoration of the heroism of the Righteous is the exhibition *Karski – Don't let the world forget*. Originally created under the auspices of the National Centre for Culture, it was presented in the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź between April and December 2014. Currently, it is available in a multimedia version via the website of the centre.<sup>54</sup> The narrative is divided up into five main plots: biographical information about Jan Karski, including historical facts and a variety of quotes showing his feelings, opinions and personal interpretations of facts; matters of universal meaning, i.e. the importance of individual attitudes in the face of evil; the influence of parents and the environment on the evolution of young people's attitudes towards minorities and perceived 'others'; problem of anti-Semitism in interwar Poland; and reactions from the outside world to the Holocaust.

The exhibition can be seen as an example of an attempt to link historical facts with contemporary issues in Europe and the world. The history of the Jews in the Łódź ghetto and their gentile rescuers is used as a canvas to understand the mechanisms of marginalization, persecution, blackmailing, help, morality in unmoral times and life rescuing during the war. With this approach, the discourse unequivocally presents a universal approach which links education for tolerance and human rights with historical education on the Holocaust and World War II. This approach is an example of both a moral and political-pedagogical use of history. The exhibition *Karski – Don't let the world forget* is a very clear example of a multi-faceted approach to the commemoration of the Righteous. The narrative does not use the discourse in order to defend one group and discredit another or 'whitewash' black cards of history, as the following quote from the exhibition catalogue illustrates: *Who was Jan Karski and who is he for us nowadays? A hero? A witness of the biggest crime in human history? Or maybe – a reproach for our conscience?*<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the narrative does not explicitly target a national (Polish) audience, it is directed to all potential visitors from anywhere in the world. The unspoken question 'have you done enough?' is therefore not exclusively reserved to contemporaries of Karski, it rather addresses all humans alive nowadays, wherever they are witnesses to mass murders, tortures or persecution and do nothing to provide aid and prevent. Furthermore, the exhibition contains a number of critical questions regarding the pre-

<sup>54</sup> Available under: "Wirtualny spacer po wystawie *Karski. Nie dać światu zapomnieć*", Centrum Dialogu im. Marka Edelmana w Łodzi, at <<http://www.centrumdialogu.com/wydarzenia/1494-wirtualny-spacer-po-wystawie-qkarski-nie-da-wiatu-zapomnieq>>, 29 September 2016.

<sup>55</sup> *Karski. Nie dać światu zapomnieć*, Exhibition catalogue, Łódź 2014, p. XX.

dominating imagination of history: *What happened to the Jews, aroused different feelings within Polish society and provoked different reactions. Some people were petrified by the cruelty of the Germans towards their Jewish fellow citizens, others uttered their satisfaction that 'Hitler finally cleaned up with the Jews,' many others just remained passive.*<sup>56</sup> This quote demonstrates the critical and anything but one-sided approach of the concept. It both emphasizes the proportions between helpers, bystanders and blackmailers and mentions the imminent death penalty for helping Jews. At the end of the exhibition, there is another quote of Jan Karski, which provides a summary and addresses once more the universal meaning of the Holocaust for the contemporary world: *The second primeval sin was committed by man as a consequence of self-imposed ignorance, insensitivity, selfishness, hypocrisy or soulless rationalization. This sin will persecute humankind until the end of the world. It persecutes me personally. And I want it to do so.*<sup>57</sup> This quote morally obliges the visitors of the exhibition to examine their own conscience and to understand the importance of remembering, regretting, commemorating and teaching about the Holocaust in the future. Furthermore, it emphasizes the universal message of the exhibition and links the past with the present and future, in line with contemporary trends of human rights education.<sup>58</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As the analysis of the chosen case studies has shown, the emphasis and focus of a commemoration initiative always depends on the intentions and worldviews of the actors involved. In the case of the planned Warsaw monument in honor of the Polish Righteous, the commemoration narrative seems to prevail, although the justification aspect also emerged in the course of the public debate on the location of the memorial. Among other reproaches, accusations emerged that the monument could possibly be used as an alibi for some observers to claim that no negative sides of Polish-Jewish relations during the war ever existed.<sup>59</sup> The concerns also pertain to the fact that the planned monument is to be entirely financed by private donations from Jewish communities in Israel and abroad.<sup>60</sup> Presumably, this could open the way for speculations that the monument proves the 'truth' of Polish heroism as the one and only reaction to the Holocaust and

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>58</sup> See i.e.: the DARE network (Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe) with 48 member organizations from 26 countries in Europe, at <<http://www.dare-network.eu>>, 29 September 2016, and the online Toolkit on Holocaust and Human Rights Education in the EU, at <<http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/toolkit-holocaust-education/index.htm>>, 29 September 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Gebert refers to a comment by Polish historian Jan Grabowski, who expressed his doubts about the monument during the debate. According to Gebert, some of the critics are likely to use the monument and the fact that it is a Jewish initiative to claim that Polish-Jewish relations during the occupation period were positive and all Poles heroes. See: interview with Konstanty Gebert.

<sup>60</sup> For more information, see: "From Those – You Saved"...

that after years of critical debates and resentments also 'the Jews' had to acknowledge this historical fact.

The second case study, the Ulma Family Museum, as a smaller local Polish initiative concentrates both on commemoration and education. Despite limited financial means, due to the educational projects and visits of important personalities at the museum, the institution aims at informing society about the heroism of local gentile aid providers, the danger for their own lives and the contemporary meaning and value of their moral dilemma during the war. In the course of the analysis of the main museum exhibition, critical voices of the witnesses and Righteous of the portrayed time have been found. This of course does not imply that an ideological use of history would be impossible, as the prevailing positive undertone of the exhibition contents can at any point be 'used' by observers to justify their own worldviews and convictions. However, the exhibition itself does not show signs of the ideological use of history.

The most unequivocal example for an open approach to history is represented by the exhibition *Karski – Don't let the world forget* in the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź (2014). With its critical questions, the discussion of moral dilemmas and the stressed universality and timelessness of Karski's moral legacy for contemporaries, it can be seen as an ideal example for the Europeanization of heritage. Karski and his life and legacy are not only proudly presented to the world, but function also as a canvas for a universal message and to link the (not only Polish) past with the future. This way, history is employed both for education and commemoration purposes without limiting the message down to the sheer transfer of historical facts.

An important role in the overall-assessment is played by the actors involved in the chosen commemoration initiatives. While the Warsaw monument is being planned by a Jewish foundation and paid for by Jewish donations from abroad, the Ulma Family Museum is a local Polish project with public funding and the Marek Edelman Dialogue Center in Łódź is an independent public, secular institution of culture. As the analysis has shown, not only the character of the initiating institutions has an influence on the contents presented to the public – if present, public debates and discourses can also be important landmarks for the assessment of trends and developments in collective memory formation.

Another difference between the discussed cases relates to the assumed definition of Righteous. The planned Warsaw monument strictly concerns the Polish Righteous Among the Nations honored by the Yad Vashem Institute, the Ulma Family Museum works with the definition of 'rescuers' and the Karski exhibition in Łódź focuses on contemporary attitudes towards minorities and 'others' in a wider sense. This way, it comes closest to the ideal of the European Day of the Righteous, which tends to be most inclusive and link past, present and future.

Finally, is the discourse in the presented cases used as a 'justification', 'excuse' or attempt to hide other aspects of history? Generally speaking, Poland has gone a long way towards confronting painful questions. Especially in the Łódź initiatives, the issue of individual approaches and anti-Semitism of part of society is discussed (see above). The



exhibition in the Ulma Family Museum also contains hints about the various types of reaction in Polish society and those who refused to aid or even denounced persecuted Jews. As discussed above, during the course of the debate about a monument in honor of the Righteous in Warsaw, voices emerged that reproached the initiative for counter-ing Holocaust commemoration with the narration of the Righteous.

The aim of the article was to confront the chosen case studies with three tendencies (commemoration, education and justification). As the analysis has shown, all three narratives emerged in the discourse. Especially where the material commemoration of the Righteous in the public sphere is concerned (i.e. the Warsaw monument), the reproach of a misuse of the heroism of the Righteous to cover up the dark sides of Polish-Jewish history comes up. Linking universal values, human rights and contemporary conflicts with historical education is, as the Jan Karski exhibition in Łódź demonstrates, a way to avoid a nationally focused and one-sided narrative.

Due to the specific situation of Polish society under German occupation as forced witnesses to the mass murder of millions of Jews in camps, ghettos and the countryside, the temperature of the public discourse about Polish-Jewish history in the war period is very high. The late Jan Błoński splendidly formulated what it means to live with an imperative of reflection and commemoration in 1987: *Our country is not a hotel in which one launders the linen after the guests have departed. It is a home which is built above all of memory; memory is at the core of our identity. We cannot dispose of it at will, even though as individuals we are not directly responsible for the actions of the past. We must carry it within us even though it is unpleasant or painful. We must also strive to expiate it.*<sup>61</sup> This legacy can and will be used in different ways, depending on actual political trends and the nature of the actors involved. Currently, a national-oriented approach seems to prevail in the Polish state administration, as the following quote of President Andrzej Duda shows: *I have no doubts: Europe is and will be an Europe of national states.*<sup>62</sup> As the discussed cases have shown, the exact direction of future commemoration initiatives – not only with regards to the Holocaust and World War II – will however also depend on NGOs as well as public and private actors from abroad.

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<sup>61</sup> J. Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto”, at <<http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/eehistory/H200Readings/Topic4-R1.html>>, 22 April 2015.

<sup>62</sup> See: *Zapis spotkania dot. Strategii...*, p. 5.

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- Bożena Knotz-Beda, employee of the Castle Museum in Łańcut and coordinator of the Markowa museum project, 10 April 2015.

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