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## *Polish Rock Music in Museums: A Study of Heritage and Cultural Memory*

Polska muzyka rockowa w muzeach. Badanie dziedzictwa i pamięci kulturowej

### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the commemoration of Polish rock music in museums. The study aims to outline the purposes of the museum's narrative memorializing rock music, in which history and heritage intersect with collective memory and nostalgia. The paper identifies different contexts of narrative: historical, artistic, political, social, and commercial, and the significance of these museums for host cities.

**Keywords:** rock music; Polish People's Republic; museums; Granary of Polish Rock; Museum of Polish Song in Opole; European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk

### INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years, stories about Polish rock music have reached an ever-widening audience because they have become part of museum narratives – they have been embedded in the wider story of the nation's past. They are also highly influential in perpetuating the canon of knowledge that exists in collective memory, as it is now museums, which have become part of mass intellectual entertainment, that deliver the most history to the public, in the most effective way, compared to historians<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> R. Starn, *A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies*, "American Historical Review" 2005, vol. 110, no. 1, p. 68.

By the “Polish rock” term, I mean rock music performed by Polish bands in the 1980s, when the adjective “Polish” is most often attributed to it in Polish literature<sup>2</sup>. Genre-wise, the music varied from punk rock, through “new wave” bands, heavy metal bands, as well as bands that were easier to listen to and aimed at a wider audience, but still described as “rock”. Moreover, in the 1980s in Poland, rock music was an important bonding agent for subcultures (e.g. punk rock) and a special channel of communication developed among young people, referred to as the so-called third circuit of culture, consisting of fanzines, lyrics, and self-reproduced tapes of rock concerts<sup>3</sup>. The rock of the 1980s was also music operating under specific conditions: the transition and transformation of the political and economic system.

Commemorating rock music and enclosing it in a museum display case, in itself, takes it into another dimension. In such places, as Robert Jarosz noted, it is possible to clearly observe how culture evolves, how from something inferior, marginalised, rejected, a waste of space as rock was regarded at the time; it has come to be one of the most important experiences of the past, determining the way it is perceived in the present<sup>4</sup>. This process can be seen all over the world, where permanent museums and temporary exhibitions are being created, dedicated to specific figures<sup>5</sup>, bands<sup>6</sup>, and the history of rock music in the broadest sense<sup>7</sup>. This is accompanied by an affirmation and revalorisation of meanings.

Museum exhibitions are spaces in which multiple actors operate: the originators of the objects on display; the curators, who are the creators of the reality presented in the exhibition; the historians – the experts; the designers dealing with the visual side; the “sponsor”, i.e. the state or private element; the public, especially in the case of recent history, when the memory of past events is still alive, who come to the museum with their own beliefs and memories and expect them to be confirmed<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> P. Zieliński, *Scena rockowa w PRL. Historia, organizacja, znaczenie*, Warszawa 2005, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> The third circuit functioned on the margins of official culture, promoted by the state, and at the same time in a different area and on different terms than the second circulation, which was illegal. See T. Junes, *Facing the Music*, [in:] *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Block: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russian and Eastern Europe*, ed. W.J. Risch, New York–London 2015, p. 245.

<sup>4</sup> R. Jarosz, *Dla mnie „Jarocin” był zdecydowanie artystyczny*, [in:] *Grunt to bunt. Rozmowy o Jarocinie*, ed. G.K. Witkowski, Czerwonak 2013, pp. 118–148; Robert Jarosz, interview by the author, 2 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., exhibition prepared by Victoria & Albert Museum, “David Bowie Is”, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., The Beatles Museum in Liverpool; Abba Museum in Stockholm.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Rock&Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio.

<sup>8</sup> A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Muzealizacja komunizmu w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Lublin 2018, p. 30; eadem, *Historia w muzeach. Studium ekspozycji Holocaustu*, Lublin 2011, p. 54.

Museum exhibitions are thus not a static whole representing a past reality, but a product of the present<sup>9</sup>. For everything they elect to show, there are corresponding fragments of the past they leave hidden, thus, they create a new world that never really existed. More than with history, the museum is linked to notions of collective memory<sup>10</sup>, heritage<sup>11</sup>, and nostalgia<sup>12</sup>. None of these is fixed – they change according to the needs of the present. More recent research points out that museums as institutions are not neutral and uninvolved. While they continue to collect, classify, preserve and exhibit objects, they also promote a well-defined narrative and occupy an increasingly important place in strengthening the national community<sup>13</sup>.

Poland's economic development meant that there was more public money to spend on culture, and after joining the European Union in May 2004, European funds (including a special programme for museums) facilitated decisions by local and central authorities to invest in museums. According to the Central Statistical

<sup>9</sup> J. Klaś, *Historical Museums: Between Collective Memory and Politics of Historical Memory*, [in:] *Cultural Heritage: Management, Identity and Potential*, eds. Ł. Gawel, E. Kocój, Kraków 2015, pp. 118–119. On the debate about the historical policy in Poland, see R. Stobiecki, *Historians Facing Politics of History*, [in:] *Past in the Making: Historical Revisionism in Central Europe after 1989*, ed. M. Kopeček, Budapest–New York 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Collective memory is selective and contextual; it cleanses the past of inconvenient impurities. "Memories shape the salient group identity". See J.K. Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures*, [in:] *The Collective Memory Reader*, eds. J.K. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi, D. Levy, Oxford–New York 2011, p. 226.

<sup>11</sup> Heritage and collective memory are closely related concepts. According to Laurajane Smith (*Uses of Heritage*, London–New York 2006, pp. 3–4), "heritage is heritage because it is subjected to the management and preservation/conservation process, not because it simply 'is'. (...) It is itself a constitutive cultural process that identifies those things and places that can be given meaning and value as 'heritage', reflecting contemporary cultural and social values, debates and aspirations".

<sup>12</sup> Nostalgia, according to Svetlana Boym's classic work (*The Future of Nostalgia*, New York 2001, pp. 3–18), is not a mental disorder caused by displacement, as first defined, but a historical emotion produced by modernity. It is no longer a matter of painful grief for a lost homeland, but a sigh for the wonderful years of one's own past. On the extension of Boym's work in the literary and artistic field, see C. Raudvere (ed.), *Nostalgia, Loss and Creativity in South-East Europe: Political and Cultural Representations of the Past*, Cham 2018. About the music as one of the most powerful triggers of nostalgia, see S. Garrido, J.W. Davidson (eds.), *Music, Nostalgia and Memory: Historical and Psychological Perspectives*, Cham 2019.

<sup>13</sup> In Prague, on August 24, 2022, the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) approved the proposal for the new museum definition: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing". See ICOM, *Museum Definition*, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition> (access: 27.04.2023). On museums as not neutral and uninvolved institutions, see R. Starn, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–71.

Office of Poland (CSO) 2021, state budget expenditure on museums accounted for almost 30% of total expenditure in the area of culture and national heritage<sup>14</sup>.

Modern Polish museology is largely based on historical museums. The prototype of a new type of museum offering a complete, finished narrative of the past was the Museum of the Jews in Washington, D.C., and in Poland, the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising, opened on 31 July 2004, whose huge attendance success demonstrated to the authorities that it was worth investing in such ventures<sup>15</sup>. The last 20 years have seen the successive completion of such spectacular museum projects as the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, and the Museum of the Second World War, also in Gdańsk.

In this paper, my primary interest lies in the inquiry into the purpose and significance of commemorating rock music in Poland. What is the goal of the museum narrative in memorializing rock music? Is it about the structured history of music in a traditional object-based history museum, where the perspective of the viewer should be the same as that of the curator-creator of the exhibition and as neutral as possible?<sup>16</sup> Is rock music presented as integral to the broader narrative of Polish history – the heroism of a nation fighting to overthrow the communist regime? Is rock music a significant component of the collective memory that attracts people to museums? What role do rock music museums play in the host cities? These questions define the main research problem of this article, which is to examine how Polish rock music is represented and commemorated in museum narratives and what functions these representations perform in constructing cultural memory and identity.

I will focus on three museums and one temporary exhibition. The first two museums were chosen for a self-evident reason: they are the only two in Poland with a permanent rock music exhibition: The Granary of Polish Rock in Jarocin (Spichlerz Polskiego Rocka w Jarocinie) – which is a part of the Regional Museum in Jarocin and deals with the history of rock music with a special focus on the Jarocin Rock Music Festival (Festiwal Muzyki Rockowej w Jarocinie); and the Museum of Polish Song in Opole (Muzeum Polskiej Piosenki w Opolu) – a museum of popular song, including rock. Both venues have in common the

<sup>14</sup> Główny Urząd Statystyczny, *Kultura i dziedzictwo narodowe w 2021 r.*, <https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/kultura-turystyka-sport/kultura/kultura-i-dziedzictwo-narodowe-w-2021-r-2,19.html#> (access: 25.09.2023).

<sup>15</sup> D. Stola, P. Cywiński, P. Machcewicz, A. Ziębińska-Witek, T. Snyder, *Historians in the Museum: A Conversation with Polish Historians*, "American Historical Review" 2022, vol. 127, no. 4, p. 1892 (statement by Anna Ziębińska-Witek).

<sup>16</sup> A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Polskie muzea historyczne w XX i XXI w. – modele reprezentacji*, [in:] *Muzeum XXI wieku. W 100-lecie I Zjazdu Muzeów Polskich w Poznaniu*, ed. M. Gołęb, Poznań 2022, pp. 275–276.

fact that they directly link the past with the present, as both are located in a town that still hosts events respectively: Jarocin Rock Music Festival and the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole (Krajowy Festiwal Polskiej Piosenki w Opolu). In addition, I will look at the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk (Europejskie Centrum Solidarności w Gdańsku), which is an interesting example of how Polish rock music was embedded in the narrative of the heroism of a nation fighting for freedom for the whole of Europe in the Soviet sphere of influence after the Second World War.

All the museums mentioned have in common that they were established during a similar period (2014–2016), aided by public funding (central and local) and funding from the European Union, and they present a narrative that is desirable from the state's perspective. I also decided to consider one temporary exhibition, "Jarocin – Freedom Station" ("Jarocin – Stacja Wolność"), which took place in Warsaw from 4 June to 12 September 2021 at the Palace of Culture and Science, because it represented a different group of interests – private initiative, associations that operate commercially.

The selection of these institutions was deliberate and aimed at illustrating different models of representing rock heritage in Poland: local, national, and ideological. Together they provide a representative overview of the institutional approaches to rock music commemoration in contemporary Poland.

## ROCK MUSIC AS A HERITAGE IN A MUSEUM

Exhibitions at music-related museums feature tangible exhibits in three dimensions: instruments, stage costumes, posters, records, recording and sound reproduction equipment, personal memorabilia of figures associated with the stage such as awards, statuettes and diplomas, as well as music made available to visitors in headsets or at multi-media stations, where archive concerts, music videos and documentaries appear on screens at the touch of a finger. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, established in 1995, went a step further and, in a combination of museum and mausoleum functions, displays on a glass-lined niche in the wall the urn containing the ashes of Alan Freed, the presenter who first used the name "rock and roll" on his radio show in 1951<sup>17</sup>.

In the case of Poland, culturally rooted in the Catholic tradition, such an exhibition would be difficult to imagine. Instead, it is more common to present rock music "seriously" – in history museums as "music of freedom" woven into a narrative about the struggle against the communist system. In the interviews

<sup>17</sup> S. Schmidt Horning, *The Architects of Rock and Roll: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Cleveland, "Technology and Culture"* 2011, vol. 52, p. 600.

I conducted with curators of permanent and temporary exhibitions for this article, a recurring opinion was that the most important aim of an exhibition is to commemorate the unique atmosphere of the place and time in which rock was created and functioned. Not the music itself. Even at the Museum of Polish Song in Opole (Muzeum Polskiej Piosenki w Opolu), which has a primarily entertainment profile, staff stated that such examples of rock music that “in some way changed the world” were chosen for the exhibition<sup>18</sup>.

Despite the fact that museum employees compared them to each other and pointed to great museums, e.g. “The Beatles” in Liverpool or “Abba” in Stockholm, as a source of inspiration<sup>19</sup>, Polish museums (or Polish temporary exhibitions, compared to well-known exhibitions, e.g. “David Bowie is”)<sup>20</sup> are as similar as Elvis Presley’s Graceland is to Czesław Niemen’s Club-museum<sup>21</sup> – a small cottage in Starye Vasilishki (Stare Wasiliszki) in present-day Belarus, where Niemen was born and grew up, filled with family photos and modest objects of daily use of the Wydrzycki family<sup>22</sup>. But it is not only the scale, which is absolutely understandable, that differentiates these places, but also the way they approach the issue of commemorating heroes and idols from the past. This is due, I believe, to the way in which the “cult of celebrity” functioned in entertainment in the socialist state, which prohibited the elevation of any individual rock and popular song performer to iconic status. Building monuments to performers therefore does not fit with the whole aura of the past that is now being recreated in museum narratives. Rather, commemoration correlates with a specific role played by a band or figure not only in the music scene but also in society.

### GRANARY OF POLISH ROCK IN JAROCIN

Established in 2014, the Granary of Polish Rock in Jarocin (with funds from the European Union, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the municipality) is unique in Poland, a museum entirely devoted to Polish rock music, with a particular focus on the Regional Rhythms of the Young (Wielkopolskie Rytmie Młodych; 1970–1979), a rock festival held there since 1970, known mainly in Jarocin and its surroundings, and a decade later the

<sup>18</sup> Mateusz Torzewski, interview by the author, Opole, 28 July 2021.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*; Kinga Krajewska, interview by the author, Opole, 28 July 2021.

<sup>20</sup> London’s Victoria & Albers museum organised the “David Bowie Is” exhibition in 2013, featuring almost five hundred stage costumes. In five years, the exhibition toured the world and visited twelve metropolises. More than two million admission tickets were sold.

<sup>21</sup> The museum was opened on February 20, 2011. It also performs cultural functions: meetings, concerts, promotion of Polish culture.

<sup>22</sup> This is the proper surname of Czesław Niemen, who in the mid-1960s adopted the nickname Niemen – after the river that flows through the local town where he went to secondary school.

Festival of Rock Music (1980–1994)<sup>23</sup>, already enjoying nationwide fame. The Jarocin Festival functioned as a unique semi-official cultural event within the socialist state, attracting thousands of young people and providing a controlled yet authentic expression of cultural expression. Its symbolic role in shaping the memory of Polish rock exceeds its actual scale, making it a central reference point in contemporary heritage narratives.

The Granary is a part of the Regional Museum in Jarocin, housed in a building that used to be a grain granary, located in a historic zone in the town centre. A permanent exhibition has been organised there, displaying the museum's collection on Polish rock music<sup>24</sup>. The Granary is also a venue for various cultural projects: meetings, concerts and temporary exhibitions. The ground floor of the building has been adapted as a club café, where both young bands and well-known artists can showcase themselves.

In justifying the need for the museum, the organisers stated that “Although Jarocin is identified with the festival, tourists visiting the town and rock fans coming for the successive editions of the festival could not find a place where they could learn about the history of the event which had an undeniable influence on the development of Polish rock music. The Granary fills this gap, becoming a magnet that attracts rock music fans to Jarocin all year round, not just during the festival”<sup>25</sup>.

The quoted assumption shows what role the Granary of Polish Rock in a small town in central Poland was to fulfil and eventually did fulfil, despite many difficulties in its realisation<sup>26</sup>. Thanks to it, “The town of Jarocin and the history of the Jarocin festivals once again entered the pages of Polish history. Fans of rock music can reminisce about past editions of the festival, as well as rebuild interpersonal contacts with other festival-goers”<sup>27</sup>.

Julia Talarczyk, one of the people who created the Granary from scratch, confirms that the legend of the festival feeds and determines the place. Visitors are drawn to the Granary by the sentiment associated with the festival, especially after

<sup>23</sup> The first three editions from 1980 to 1982 were called the National Young Generation Music Review (Ogólnopolski Przegląd Muzyki Młodej Generacji).

<sup>24</sup> Part of the collection is also regularly loaned out for exhibitions across the country.

<sup>25</sup> Spichlerz Polskiego Rocka Jarocin, <https://spichlerzpolskiegorocka.pl/o-nas> (access: 5.10.2023).

<sup>26</sup> A medium-sized town in central Poland with a population of about 25,000. The district town lies about 70 kilometres south-east of Poznań. Julia Talarczyk recalled the difficulties that accompanied the creation of the Granary: the great enthusiasm that crashed against reality. Although the exhibition was created finally, but the idea of a research institute and a radio station, which were also in the plans, failed. See Julia Talarczyk, interview by the author, Jarocin, July 21, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Spichlerz Polskiego Rocka Jarocin, *op. cit.*

its reactivation in 2005 (with the first attempt in 2000)<sup>28</sup>. The audience coming to both the festival and the Granary are often parents with children, grandparents with grandchildren, who want to show their youth to their offspring<sup>29</sup>.

Thus, on the one hand, the exhibition at the Granary of Polish Rock is sentimental, nostalgic – the visitor (a nostalgic adult) can recall his or her youth, the best period of his or her life. On the other hand, the exhibition and the activities of the Granary realise the contemporary objectives of raising the significance of a small town on the map of Poland due to its importance in the country's cultural past. In the Granary we learn, among other things, that the Jarocin Festival was “a unique festival in the entire Eastern Bloc”<sup>30</sup>. The education provided by the Granary outside the “festival season” also plays a very important role.

Upon entering the Granary, you immediately feel the rock atmosphere. Semi-darkness, wooden ceiling beams, and industrial lamps create the atmosphere of the building's interior. Two narrative paths have been prepared for visitors: a chronological one, focusing on the most important events in the history of Polish rock music, and a thematic one, where the emphasis is placed on various phenomena weighing on the development of this music, such as the underground and the role of women in Polish rock<sup>31</sup>. The chronological and thematic narrative allows visitors to view the exhibition in a traditional manner (“from wall to wall”) or by moving freely through the exhibition halls. The journey through the Granary of Polish Rock begins with a mural entitled “Satisfaction”, illustrating a song by

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<sup>28</sup> In August 2000, a concert (not a festival) was organised in Jarocin. It was attended by 3,000 people, which was at odds with the great organisational momentum. One could see an almost empty campsite and a huge stage with a tiny audience. The next festival, announced for 2001, did not take place, even though there was information about it and the sale of passes had started. In 2005, the so-called Jarocin PRL (Polish People's Republic) festival was organised, combined with a photo exhibition organised by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) and the promotion of the book *Jarocin w obiektywie Bezpieki* (*Jarocin in the Lens of the Polish Secret Police*), edited by Paweł Perzyna, Krzysztof Lesiakowski, and Tomasz Toborek (Łódź 2004). The festival was attended by 10,000 fans. Legendary Polish rock bands: Dżem, Dezerter, TSA, and Armia performed. The festival has been continued annually since then. See: A. Idzikowska-Czubaj, *Rock w PRL-u. O paradoksach współistnienia*, Poznań 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Talarczyk, interview.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> Robert Jarosz, the author of the exhibition's script, emphasised that the issue – “women in rock” – was particularly important to him, because rock'n'roll had been a male pastime since the early 1950s, but the important breakthroughs on the Polish scene that dated from the early 1960s (Helena Majdaniec, Ada Rusowicz, Katarzyna Sobczyk) to the early 1980s (Olga “Kora” Jackowska and Izabela Trojanowska) came about thanks to women, who filled a gap in mass culture with a completely new quality and were the forerunners of Polish rock. See Robert Jarosz, interview by the author, Warsaw, 2 August, 2021.

The Rolling Stones with the same title, which was considered by the exhibition's creators to be the anthem of rock music<sup>32</sup>.

The exhibition occupies approximately 600 square metres and has a multimedia character with elements of object display<sup>33</sup>. Visitors can see extensive photographic documentation taken during the successive editions of the festival by professional photographers as well as amateur festival participants and Security Service officers. There are original music recordings and contemporary documentary films presenting successive editions of the festival. Also on display are original posters, festival folders, passes and entry tickets, commemorative T-shirts, publicity stamps, various leaflets, press articles, prizes awarded at the festival (Golden Chameleon)<sup>34</sup>, instruments and equipment used to play music, costumes, including the most characteristic symbol of the punk subculture: "bovver" boots.

The curator and author of the exhibition scenario, Robert Jarosz, said that he wanted to fill the Granary with authentic artefacts, as technological novelties are quickly overtaken. Rather than equipping the visitor with knowledge, he saw it as his mission to leave the visitor with specific, iconic images in their memory, in other words, to focus on the experience created by real artefacts combined with a specific narrative about them<sup>35</sup>. Objects thus play a special role here – they hold a huge sentimental charge. Some of them could even be described as relics, such as a fragment of a "beam from the old amphitheatre", or a part of the old railway footbridge, which festival participants arriving by train used to cross into the city from the railway station, together with the old station sign of the city. A visit to the Granary is largely based on the viewer's real contact with the guide (there are no audio guides), who triggers emotions (especially among those with autobiographical memory), seduces, enchants and builds in the visitor a sense of importance and agency in the events presented in the exhibition<sup>36</sup>.

At the exhibition, visitors (former festival participants) can find their own cassettes sent 40 years ago to the Young Talent Competition (Konkurs Młodych Talentów), they can find themselves in archival photographs, they can compare the T-shirts they own with those in the display cases, they can look at the old tape recorder at which they spent many of the best hours of their youth. The exhibition was created in large part from artefacts brought or sent to the Granary by participants in Jarocin festivals, both listeners and artists. Also included in the exhibition were documents from Jarocin festivals of the 1980s and early

<sup>32</sup> Jarosz, interview.

<sup>33</sup> Attractive visualisations were prepared by the same company that prepared the exhibitions of the Warsaw Rising Museum.

<sup>34</sup> Golden only by name – it is a figurine carved in wood.

<sup>35</sup> Jarosz, interview.

<sup>36</sup> Talarczyk, interview.

1990s found in January 2011 in the Jarocin Cultural Centre (Jarociński Ośrodek Kultury). The organisers of the exhibition considered the most valuable of these to be folders with the lyrics of bands performing in 1984 (including T. Love, *Siekiera*, Moscow) with traces of censorship interference on some of them. They can now be found on display at many exhibitions in Poland, not only in Jarocin<sup>37</sup>.

“Punk-rock” heritage of Jarocin can be seen not only inside the museum building. The exhibition goes out into the town space, where there is a statue of a “bovver” boot and every year large-format murals are painted referring to the history of Polish rock<sup>38</sup>. In addition, the town’s entrance sign features a Mohawk – that is, the iconic hairstyle of a participant in the punk subculture – and the local brewery is, of course, the “Rock Brewery”, producing, among other things, “Punk Pils” beer. The town of Jarocin is building its recognition in this way. And it must be said with success, because in Poland it does not take long to explain what the town is famous for – the name itself evokes the right associations: Jarocin is a city of rock music, punk subculture and an oasis of freedom in the communist desert of the Polish People’s Republic. The Granary of Polish Rock had a huge part in cementing this image.

### MUSEUM OF POLISH SONG IN OPOLE

Two years after the opening of the Granary of Polish Rock, the Museum of Polish Song in Opole (2016) started its activities, which was established with funds from the European Union, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and local funds. It is located in the Millennium Amphitheatre in Opole, where the National Festival of Polish Song has been held continuously since 1963<sup>39</sup>. Initially, it was to be a museum dedicated only to the festival, but it was eventually decided that it would have a broader profile and take care of Polish song as an “intangible cultural heritage”. Mateusz Torzewski, head of the museum’s collections department, emphasised that the museum’s mission is to care for song, which is seen here as cultural heritage and not as an element of the entertainment industry<sup>40</sup>.

The beginning of the museum’s activities was the first nationwide collection of memorabilia conducted under the slogan “Song has its stories”, which was

<sup>37</sup> Also, e.g., in the European Solidarity Centre.

<sup>38</sup> Spichlerz Polskiego Rocka Jarocin, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> The festival did not take place in 1982, because of the martial law. For example, see K. Korzeniewska, *The National Festival of Polish Song in Opole: The Transformation of Legal, Economic, and Political Circumstances over Fifty Years of the Polish Music Industry*, [in:] *Eastern European Music Industries and Policies after the Fall of Communism: From State Control to Free Market*, London–New York 2021, pp. 107–126. Around 30,000 visitors visit the museum every year. See Torzewski, interview.

<sup>40</sup> Torzewski, interview.

organised in 2009. Exhibits were acquired from private donors and artists who shared their prizes, instruments, records, costumes and photographs documenting festival life, both on stage and behind the scenes. The Society of Friends of Opole donated to the museum the famous Ed Seiler piano from 1919, which the public may remember from the first editions of the National Festivals of Polish Song. Manuscripts of the lyrics of the greatest Polish hits are also an attraction<sup>41</sup>. Thus, the method of acquiring artefacts was similar to that of the Granary – the community that had previously created the festival now jointly created the museum. This gave the exhibition a nostalgic touch. Together, a space was created in which gadgets, posters, tape recorders, and musical backdrops transported a significant proportion of visitors to the land of their youth<sup>42</sup>.

Moreover, many duplicates from the Granary of Polish Rock were donated to the Museum of Polish Song, which resulted in the fact that the Rock Music Festival in Jarocin occupies a significant part of the exhibition<sup>43</sup>. In selecting the bands and rock songs that made it to the permanent exhibition, the criterion used was popularity and the “real impact” they had on the “surrounding reality”<sup>44</sup>.

The museum exhibition outlines the history of Polish song from the 1920s to the present day. A special place in it is given to the National Festival of Polish Song. Audio guides have been prepared for visitors, and on the museum’s website, the organisers guarantee visitors “a large portion of knowledge about Polish music, and at the same time great fun”<sup>45</sup>. The institution in Opole is the most “entertaining” of all those discussed here, as exemplified by the recording booths where each visitor can sing and record their own version of a well-known Polish song, then email it to themselves as a souvenir. A similar idea was intended for the Granary of Polish Rock, but funding was lacking<sup>46</sup>. Another example is the so-called “costume wardrobe”, where the visitors can see the stage costumes of the stars and a virtual mirror in which they can change into them. After being supplied with a headset, the visitor enters the exhibition to ear-splitting applause, accompanied by the flashing spotlights in the hall. This is also part of the history of the festival, which is proud of “the best audience in the country”. In turn,

<sup>41</sup> For example, “Jezu, jak się cieszę” by Lech Janerka, “Piosenka księżycka” by Anita Lipnicka, “Korowód” by Leszek A. Moculski and “Ten wasz świat” by Krzysztof Jaryczewski.

<sup>42</sup> A large percentage of the 30,000 annual visitors to the museum come here as part of organised tours for senior citizens. See Torzewski, interview.

<sup>43</sup> Also important is the fact that the author of the exhibition’s script, Marcin Ostaszuk, comes from Poznań, a town near Jarocin.

<sup>44</sup> Torzewski, interview.

<sup>45</sup> Muzeum Piosenki Polskiej w Opolu, <https://muzeumpiosenki.pl/wystawy/stala.html> (access: 7.10.2023).

<sup>46</sup> Talarczyk, interview.

the visitor can feel like a real guest, or rather a star – long awaited and warmly welcomed.

The museum's permanent exhibition is mainly multimedia in nature, combined with the presentation of the aforementioned material objects. Touchscreen monitors have been placed on the “music walls”, where visitors can view archive concerts, music videos, TV programmes, reports, and interviews with artists. In addition to the monitors, there are also lenses through which visitors can peep into the historical background of a given period, as if through a keyhole (short films depicting Polish history, taken from the Polish Film Chronicles, are placed there). Tablets have been strategically placed at designated stations within the exhibition hall to enable visitors to gain insight into the band's past. This arrangement also makes it easy to see where the largest concentrations of people form, indicating the level of popularity of a particular band. As the museum staff noted, an example of such a place is the tablet, which presents the history of the band “Kult”<sup>47</sup>. This is probably influenced by the fact that the band has been on the Polish scene almost continuously from the early 1980s to the present day, so it still has active fans among both the older and younger generations. Also part of the exhibition is a cinema room where the film “Good evening, Opole! Festival-Legend” is screened. Fans of popular music can watch reports and concert excerpts in solitude in special suspended spheres (tiny rooms).

The museum also goes out into the town and presents temporary and open-air exhibitions, e.g. the aforementioned excellent “Opole audience” had its exhibition at the Old Town Market Square, where festival-goers were presented in large-format photographs, and the organisers encouraged visitors to find themselves in the pictures. Thanks to the National Festival of Polish Song, which has existed for sixty years, and the Museum of Polish Song, which functions alongside it, Opole, like Jarocin, is successfully building its contemporary position as the capital of Polish song.

### EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CENTRE IN GDAŃSK

Compared to the Granary of Polish Rock and the Museum of Polish Song, the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) in Gdańsk is a gigantic institution – one of the most important on the cultural map of Poland. It was established in 2007 with funds from the local government of the City of Gdańsk and the Pomeranian Voivodeship, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity” (NSZZ “Solidarność”), and the Solidarity Centre Foundation. In 2008, the first collection of memorabilia for the ECS archive was arranged, which continues to the present day. Over the past 10 years,

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<sup>47</sup> Polish band, playing mainly alternative rock, formed in 1982, Warsaw.

160 linear metres of files, 65,000 photographs, 5,000 musealia, and 441 art objects have been collected<sup>48</sup>. The core of the collection consists of second-circulation magazines, posters, leaflets, drawings, photographs, everyday objects, technical equipment of the shipyard.

On the 34<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gdańsk Agreement<sup>49</sup>, a permanent exhibition dedicated to the recent history of Poland and Europe was opened on 30 August 2014, with a special focus and emphasis on the role of the “Solidarity” – as one of the largest peace movements in the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – instrumental in the process of the collapse of the Soviet bloc.

The mission of the museum became to commemorate the past, to fill the deficits in the European culture of remembrance about all anti-communist movements in post-war Europe and to create a contemporary “agora” and laboratory of democratic civic culture<sup>50</sup>. According to ECS director Basil Kerski: “by combining the narrative of Polish history with the narrative of the anti-communist experience of Europeans, we have managed to create an institution with which not only Poles but also foreigners can identify”<sup>51</sup>. The Museum has been honoured with many international awards, including the Council of Europe Museum Award<sup>52</sup>.

The museum building is located in the city centre on the site of the former Gdańsk Shipyard (formerly the Lenin Shipyard), where most of the events presented inside the museum took place. Its shape and façade are reminiscent of shipyards and ships and reflect the industrial character of its surroundings. The building’s form resembles a ship’s hull, and its façade is made of a special type of steel (Cor-ten by Ruukki) that appears to be coated with rust. Inside, there are seven rooms presenting the history of the Gdańsk Shipyard strikes in chronological and thematic order. Each room is appropriately titled: “The Birth of Solidarity”, “The Power of the Powerless”, “Solidarity and Hope”, “The War Against Society”, “The Road to Democracy”, “The Triumph of Freedom”, “The Culture of Peaceful Change”. The strike at the Gdańsk shipyard in August 1980 was presented as a watershed event, the foundation and founding myth of not only “Solidarity” and a free Poland, but of the whole of Europe.

The exhibition has a distinctive narrative and identity character – the most emphatic of any presented here. The message is clear, explicit, unidirectional,

<sup>48</sup> K. Żelazek (ed.), *Europejskie Centrum Solidarności. Portret zbiorów*, Gdańsk 2017, p. 4. The museum prints donor lists in its free publications.

<sup>49</sup> An accord was reached between the government and the striking shipyard workers in Gdańsk, Poland, signed in August 1980. It led to the creation of the Solidarity Trade Union and was an important milestone in Polish history.

<sup>50</sup> B. Kerski, *Solidarity Museum and an Institution Supporting Civic Culture*, [in:] *European Solidarity Centre Permanent Exhibition Catalogue*, eds. B. Kerski, K. Knoch, Gdańsk 2021, p. 257.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.

<sup>52</sup> ECS, *Nagrody*, <https://ecs.gda.pl/ecs/nagrody/> (access: 21.10.2023).

and conveyed in a very convincing way, and although the authors of the script stated that it was a “pluralistic story”, it is difficult to pick up any nuances<sup>53</sup>. The romantic desire for freedom was identified as a key component of Polish national identity. The tension-building narrative is based on selected political events and presents a binary picture of the past. It emphasises the growing strength of the opposition, which it identifies with the whole of society. The enemy here is the communist system, presented in a general and anonymous way, except for a few figures emblematic of state power, such as General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the leader who imposed martial law in 1981<sup>54</sup>.

The exhibition combines a display of real artefacts with a state-of-the-art multimedia show, and, according to the exhibition curators, an “appropriate language” has been chosen for each room. The first room, dedicated to the August strike at the shipyard, is filled with historical artefacts from the shipyard, including an icon of the strike – the original boards with the 21 demands that the strikers engraved on wooden plywood in August 1980 and then placed on the shipyard’s Gate 2 (the museum’s second most important artefact, located outside the building). The imagery of a community that took up arms against the system is served by the ceiling, to which the helmets of the shipyard workers are attached. Dozens of them side by side. Individual dramas are represented by police photographs of those arrested, often with traces of beatings, and the shot-through black leather jacket of a 20-year-old shipyard worker killed in the street, with the bullet entry marked. In the room dedicated to the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, the burden of the story rested on multimedia<sup>55</sup>.

Rock music was incorporated into the narrative in two rooms: “Solidarity and Hope” and “The War Against Society” – dedicated to the introduction of martial law in Poland. This room is the highlight of the exhibition – extremely spectacular and emotional. As visitors enter the “The War Against Society” room – they pass a militia car and a row of shields lined up, they cross the broken gate<sup>56</sup>, from the depths emerges a very moving installation commemorating the miners killed on 16 December 1981 in the “Uncle” (“Wujek”) mine, made up of working clothes, boots, helmets and placards with names, surnames, dates of birth and death (most of them were about 20 years old), and from a nearby screen entitled: “Youth music under martial law” at the touch of a hand, angry punk rock reverberates. All of

<sup>53</sup> J. Szymański, B. Szymańska, *The Creation of the Permanent Exhibition*, [in:] European Solidarity Centre..., 267.

<sup>54</sup> See A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Muzealizacja komunizmu...*, p. 53.

<sup>55</sup> B. Kerski, *op. cit.*, pp. 257–258.

<sup>56</sup> Following the model of archival photographs of Gate No. 2 of the Lenin Gdańsk Shipyard destroyed by tanks on December 16, 1981, Dorota Nieznalska created an art installation recreating the appearance of Gate No. 2 from the period of martial law. See B. Kerski, K. Knoch (eds.), *European Solidarity Centre...*, pp. 136–137.

this together takes visitors into a completely different dimension. Nowhere else can one see how the emotional colour of Polish rock music matched the times in which it was created. Rock music plays a dual role here - as an artifact from the past and at the same time as a contemporary means of intensifying the exhibition's message, tugging at the visitor's emotions.

And this is the role that the creators of the exhibition narrative at the ECS primarily envisaged for rock music. The narrative about it is politicised and revolves around issues: "How rock music contributed to the collapse of the communist system". In both "The War Against Society" and the "Solidarity and Hope" room that preceded it, the music is presented in multimedia screens and large-format photographs captioned: "Music of bands such as TSA, Dżem, Perfect, Kasa Chorych and Ogród Wyobraźni created an atmosphere of freedom in Jarocin"<sup>57</sup>. No real objects were presented there, because the history of music in itself is not important, what is important is what musicians and journalists will say about rock music and the Jarocin festival, in the context of the museum's freedom narrative. Films were made for the exhibition: "Music of Martial Law" ("Muzyka stanu wojennego") and "Jarocin '81", in which musicians of bands known in the 1980s such as TSA (Marek Piekarczyk), T. Love (Zygmunt Staszczuk), Perfect (Grzegorz Markowski), Kult (Kazimierz Staszewski) asserts that "rock is a force that the communists did not foresee", "Jarocin was an enclave of freedom", "Maybe we did not overthrow the communist system, but we made a small hole in the wall"<sup>58</sup>.

On one of the screens in the "The War Against Society" room, you can browse a slideshow titled "Youth music of martial law" ("Muzyka młodzieżowa stanu wojennego"), which showcases materials found in 2011 in Jarocin and which are displayed in the Granary of Polish Rock – censored lyrics of songs prepared for the Jarocin festival in 1984, including Zygmunt Staszczuk's "Education" ("Wychowanie"), where the entire refrain of the song was crossed out, including the words: "The homeland must be loved and respected / Don't trample on the flag and don't spit on the emblem"<sup>59</sup> (the censor probably saw a hidden mockery in them), or "Beer for the Troops" ("Piwko dla wojska") by the punk rock band Siekiera, where the word "beer" was crossed out in the entire text. Such material certainly impresses visitors, but here it is clear that historical accuracy is less important than the story prepared for the viewer. The censorship stamp is dated 30

<sup>57</sup> Inscription on the board "Festival in Jarocin" at the European Solidarity Centre. Cf. *Festival in Jarocin*, [in:] *Permanent Exhibition of the European Solidarity Centre. Catalogue*, eds. B. Kerski, K. Knoch, Gdańsk 2019, pp. 114–115.

<sup>58</sup> *Music of Martial Law* and *Jarocin 81*, both realised by Tomasz Radziemski in 2013.

<sup>59</sup> In Polish: "Ojczynę kochać trzeba i szanować / Nie deptać flagi i nie pluć na godło". Cf. A. Idzikowska-Czubaj, *op. cit.*, appendix with photos, no pagination.

July 1984 and is not an example of martial law censorship, as this was abolished in Poland on 22 July 1983.

On leaving the European Solidarity Centre, visitors, instead of signing the guest book, can hang a red or white sheet of paper on a large wall made up of many such pages, which form a red inscription: “Solidarity” on a white background. Traces of rock music can also be found here. Visitors use fragments of song lyrics to express their feelings after visiting the museum, such as: “Freedom I love and understand, freedom I can’t give away”<sup>60</sup>.

TEMPORARY EXHIBITION: “JAROCIN – FREEDOM STATION”.  
WARSAW 4 JUNE – 12 SEPTEMBER 2021

The exhibition “Jarocin – Stacja Wolność” (“Jarocin – Freedom Station”) was prepared by the private company “Cały ten Rock sp. z o.o.”, which stated on its website that the exhibition “does not pretend to be an encyclopedic collection of facts and dates”, but wants to “recall the atmosphere, climate and above all the music”, which “will allow older viewers to revisit, and younger ones to get to know – the unique atmosphere of the event, which four decades ago was for Poland what Woodstock was for America”<sup>61</sup>. The organisers promised visitors: “We will take you on a journey full of reflection and sentiment to the legendary festival in Jarocin. A festival where freedom pulsated, the aspiration of the 80s generation to change the status quo and to fight for normality, which today is taken for granted. It was a brilliant festival, brilliant artists, with strength, with the power of their art they killed all their opponents”<sup>62</sup>.

The exhibition, like its incongruously emotional description, was primarily intended to assault the visitors’ senses. Immediately upon entering, they were greeted by an installation entitled “Monument to the Iron Hand”, commemorating the participants of the Jarocin festivals who recorded songs during concerts with tape recorders held in their outstretched hands. Thanks to them, many fleeting sounds were recorded. Additionally the place where the exhibition was organised – the Palace of Culture and Science – built in honour of Joseph Stalin and opened two years after his death (1955), which to this day is the most characteristic building in Warsaw – an unwanted monument to socialist realism and the communist past served to strengthen and heighten the emotional impact as did the

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<sup>60</sup> In Polish: “Wolność kocham i rozumiem, wolności oddać nie umiem”. The song “Wolność” (“Freedom”) by the band Chłopcy z Placu Broni.

<sup>61</sup> Pałac Kultury i Nauki, *Wystawa „Jarocin – Stacja Wolność!”*, <https://pkin.pl/aktualnosci-i-wydarzenia/7571> (access: 6.04.2023).

<sup>62</sup> UM Warszawa, <https://kultura.um.warszawa.pl/-/jarocin-stacja-wolnosc-pkin> (access: 6.04.2023).

date of the opening – 4 June, i.e. the first “free” (so-called contractual) elections to the parliament.

According to Piotr Metz, a journalist and curator of the exhibition, the aim of the exhibition was to commemorate an extraordinary event in the history of Poland, which was the festival in Jarocin, and to allow visitors to remember this important moment in their biography with its unique atmosphere. People who were not in daily contact with each other in Jarocin were able to meet and realise for the first time that there were several thousand people similar to them<sup>63</sup>. According to the organisers of the exhibition, the Jarocin Rock Music Festival was a special case of a social phenomenon that went beyond music and this very fact deserves to be commemorated. In pursuit of this premise, the exhibition’s creators paid particular attention to the festival’s audience and Jarocin’s inhabitants. A large part of the exhibition was taken up by a fourteen-metre wall with photographs of the audience and Jarocin residents taken by Chris Niedenthal<sup>64</sup> and Hanna and Ryszard Gajewski<sup>65</sup>, reflecting the intimate atmosphere of the place. Visitors were encouraged to find themselves in the photographs<sup>66</sup>.

Commemorating rock, according to Piotr Metz, should not be done deadly seriously. A sense of humour, playing with convention and winking at visitors should protect against unnecessary pathos, against “talking about rock music as if it were World War II”<sup>67</sup>. The exhibition featured familiar elements, for example, from the Museum of Polish Songs: a cinema room where documentary films about Jarocin were screened, as well as a documentary archive and a phonoteque. Photos and documents were displayed on the walls, including, as Piotr Metz pointed out, “the most important document at the exhibition” – the censored text of the song “Education” by the band T. Love – displayed both in the Granary of Polish Rock and in the European Solidarity Centre with equal attention. At stands shaped like telephone booths, visitors could browse through the festival’s organisational documents and press articles, made available in digital form, and listen to unique recordings of concerts in special booths.

The exhibition was mainly based on staging. Few real artefacts were presented, and those that were there served more of a representational role – as an exemplar of one of the many similar items found at the festival and associated with the punk subculture. For instance, a “representation” of a typical punk menu at the festival, i.e. kefir and a Kaiser roll; a typical hairstyle “fixer”, i.e. sugar; an obligatory piece of clothing, i.e. “bovver” boots; and “illustrative” examples of mud from under

<sup>63</sup> Piotr Metz, interview by the author, Warsaw, 2 August 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Chris Niedenthal, actually Christopher Jan Niedenthal (born 1950), British-Polish photographer.

<sup>65</sup> Photographs taken at the Festival in Jarocin in 1983–1984.

<sup>66</sup> Metz, interview.

<sup>67</sup> Metz, interview.

the festival stage, displayed in bottles that looked like message bottles fished out of the water after many years. They were described in great detail as “Mud – vintage 1983 (campsite)”, “Mud – vintage 1987 (big stage)”. Commemorating the atmosphere of the place and the festival audience was, a pitched tent, symbolic of a campsite, as well as a visualisation of a rock concert and the archival voice of the festival’s radio station resounding above it.

The exhibition did not offer a coherent, multidimensional story. On the one hand, there were a lot of archival documents, newspaper articles and electronic recordings that would have required visitors to spend a long time studying them, while at the same time no iconic objects from the past were presented allowing former festival participants (the exhibition target audience) to re-engage with their own lived experience. There were unlikely to be enough of them in Warsaw as to ensure the exhibition’s attendance success.

## CONCLUSIONS

Museums bring from the past into the present those facts and exhibits that, in the judgment of contemporaries, are worth commemorating. It is not only objects, such as an old tape recorder and a guitar, that are displayed, but also a story about the past that visitors want to see, receive, and experience.

All of the above exhibitions share the desire to commemorate rock music with a particular moment when Poland was under Soviet domination, and rock was a social phenomenon that went far beyond music. At each venue, there was a strong emphasis on honouring former rock festival participants and now museum audiences. Rock music enclosed in the showcase recreates crucial, even mythical, moments in the individual and generational biographies of those who come to see the exhibition.

The curators of exhibitions, both public and private, temporary and permanent, agreed that the primary goal should be to commemorate the unique atmosphere of the time when Polish rock music flourished. Not the music itself. Every one of them tends to highlight the significance of the community music has created.

In the case of the Granary of Polish Rock in Jarocin and the Museum of Polish Song in Opole, a crucial factor is that these places provide each town with recognition and contemporary position on the Polish cultural map. European Solidarity Centre uses Polish rock music in a dual sense – as an artifact from the past, instrumentally woven into the narrative about the struggle against the communist system, and as a means of intensifying the exhibition message.

The last but not least conclusion is that rock music, even in a museum, unites generations because the average audience of rock exhibitions consists of parents and their children.

Taken together, these examples show how Polish rock music has entered the field of institutional memory and how museums actively participate in shaping this process. Their narratives, while emotionally engaging and community-oriented, reveal selective mechanisms of remembrance that privilege certain aesthetics and political meanings. Reflecting on these curatorial strategies allows for a better understanding of how post-socialist societies construct their popular music heritage and translate lived experience into the language of collective memory.

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## ABSTRAKT

Artykuł dotyczy upamiętniania polskiej muzyki rockowej w muzeach. Jego celem jest przedstawienie zadań narracji muzealnej upamiętniającej muzykę rockową, w której historia i dziedzictwo przeplatają się z pamięcią zbiorową i nostalgią. W pracy wyróżniono różne konteksty narracji: historyczny, artystyczny, polityczny, społeczny i komercyjny, omówiono także znaczenie tych muzeów dla miast, w których się znajdują.

**Słowa kluczowe:** muzyka rockowa; PRL; muzea; Spichlerz Polskiego Rocka; Muzeum Piosenki Polskiej w Opolu; Europejskie Centrum Solidarności w Gdańsku