

THE MUSEUM OF KRAKOW. ON THE BOOK BY MICHAŁ NIEZABITOWSKI

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Michał Niezabitowski, *Muzeum Historyczne Miasta Krakowa 1899–1996–2019*, (Kraków: Muzeum Krakowa, Towarzystwo Miłośników Historii i Zabytków Krakowa, 2021), pp. 744 + numerous unnumbered figures in the text*

The Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, currently called the Museum of Krakow,¹ ranks among the largest museums in the city which cannot really complain about a scarce number of museums, although the demand in this respect has been continuously growing, similarly as throughout the whole of Poland. The Museum was first created in a slowly-paced process, initially not developing rapidly, with many challenges along the way, albeit quite consistently, reaching currently the status of a certain museum concern composed of 21 units. Its respective branches or departments (since various names are used) operate in separate buildings, the latter often boasting a value in themselves not only as seen by Krakow standards (the Town Hall tower, the Barbican, the Old Synagogue, to name merely the best-known ones), boasting different and specified themes (or differently profiled, to use this trendy concept). Therefore, they enjoy as if autonomous positions, obviously not in the structural dimension, yet at this point we are entering the management issues. From the perspective of a visitor to the underground of the Main Square or to Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory (namely Krakow from the time of the Nazi occupation together with the life story of the local, but not only local, Jews) they may seem separate museum institutions tackling the narrative about the past in a deepened and accessible manner, although attractive at the same time.

The Museum as well as its subsequent directors and staff achieved that position gradually, often with much effort.

Attentive reading of Michał Niezabitowski's book allows the reader to reconstruct this process, make realize the uneasy conditions for Museum's operations, and perceive the implementation challenges. All this should be borne in mind when judging today's Museum's organizational success.

The book literally inspires respect: with its volume (when in doubt, try to lift it up!) and its content, as a well-documented compendium of the Museum's history and its role, serving at the same time as a synthesis of this history with ample source annexes. It is to a great extent and in its core based on Niezabitowski's doctoral dissertation *The Historical Museum of the City of Krakow in 1945–1996*² he submitted in 2019. Boasting an actually not extremely convenient albeit voluminous A4 format, it features 744 pages printed on good-quality paper allowing a high-profile print, though owing to its weight not being extremely reader-friendly. Meanwhile the reading, if it were to be attentive, is quite challenging particularly for the amount of information it provides. Despite the Author referring to the study as a synthesis of the history of the Krakow Museum, its core value can be found in the extensive factual record it provides. The latter is indeed arranged, systemized, and bears evaluative and recapitulating elements, since more than a half of the study's volume is taken by various lists, annexes, and documents.

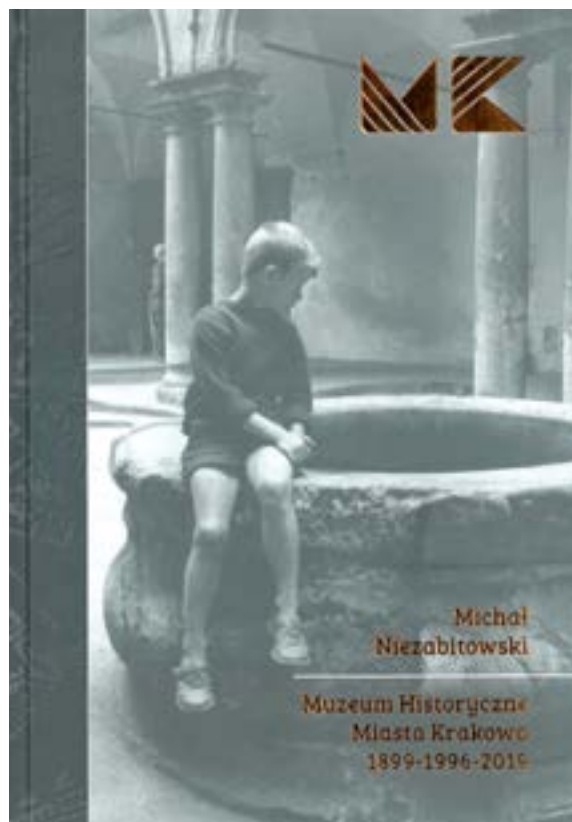
Not taking into account the occasional introductions, the very core text part of the book takes almost 300 pages (298 to be precise; adding them up is hindered by the [graphically

interesting] vacant pages separating chapters which cannot always be omitted; the given number obviously also includes illustrations constituting an essential complement to the book). Quite a high number of illustrations have been incorporated; despite their generally archival provenance, they usually boast good quality, some of them small-size, formatted within the text column, others occasionally full-page. It is quite challenging to count them, since they bear no figure numbers. This seems the main default, particularly in the context of possible referencing; if the latter needs to be done, the figures have to be referred to by quoting their respective page, which makes the process lengthy and unnecessarily complicated. Obviously this seems a minor problem, yet some other editorial defects can be pointed to as well, these to be tackled in due course.

The core of the book is composed of two many-chapter parts in which 263 pages in total present the Museum's history. The first of them (III. *Res gestae*. History), divided into six chapters, shows this history chronologically. The second part (IV. *Opera*. Works) is, according to the Author, dedicated to the issues related to operations of a museum as an institution.

These two major parts are preceded by substantially shorter sections bearing numbers I and II of an introductory character (similarly as in the above-mentioned dissertation) covering merely 17 pages together with the title ones and illustrations. They tackle respectively the state of studies and the historical outline of museology, with a particular focus on the character of city museums. The exceptionally concise part, filling in not fully six text pages is divided into as many as five brief sub-sections; unquestionably useful in the dissertation, in the discussed book it should have either been eliminated in general, or extended to avoid excessive simplifications and generalisations. After all the study is not planned as academic addressed to the general public (if only for the extensive source annexes), and can hardly be read at a café, on a train, or even during leisure at home or on the beach, both owing to its character, the display of the content, and the book's impressive dimensions.

In Part III, the one dedicated to the chronological presentation, respective chapters dealing with the Museum's operations in definite historical periods are contained. Their Latin titles given by the Author (identical as in the dissertation) boost the erudite quality of the text as well as the universal character of the discussed matter. The titles are as follows: *Origo*, *Pueritia*, *Libertas*, *Per aspera*, *Accrescere*, *Maturitas*, namely: difficult 'beginnings' leading to a tedious 'spread of the idea of establishing a municipal historical museum'; 'childhood' from 1899 to 1945 ('adolescence') when the Museum was merely a dependent part of the Archives of the Old Records: this being as if the time spent at home with the parents with all the positive and less fortunate circumstances entailed; 'liberty' in the understanding of the achieved independence, institutionalized autonomy, being an extremely brief period until the Museum's nationalizing in 1949; 'through hardships': the continuation of establishing the institution's bases until 1962; 'growth' after 1973; finally, 'maturity' covering over 20 subsequent years, up to 1996. Let us look at the Museum's current format if only in figures: 21 branches, 331 staff, 95,486 exhibit inventory items,³ turnout at 1,335,760 individuals, the budget (the



subsidy + the self-generated income) at PLN 42,899,641; these are the figures reflecting late 2019 quoted here after the Calendar at the book's end (p. 421). Back in 1997, the Museum boasted respectively: 8 branches, 212 staff, 84,446 exhibit inventory items, with the turnout at 132,063 individuals. Therefore, how should this rapid and continuous growth following 1996, following the 'maturity' (though regrettably not as impressive as far as the collection size is concerned) be called? The subsequent periods and dates would have to be compared to mythical lives, which I doubt was the Author's actual intention. Neither do I suspect that he was thinking of the old age and atrophy of his flourishing institution.

Part IV thematically discusses questions related to museum work divided into basic issues. They are as follows: educational activity ('Show Me So that I Could Learn'); collection-creating activity ('Taming Memory'); display activity ('History Well Told'); research and publishing activity ('Living Well Told'). It is true that the titles are both expressive and metaphorical, while to the point at the same time (possibly with the exception of the last one...). Interestingly (why so I will say in a moment), in the earlier version submitted as the doctoral dissertation defended by the Author briefly before the discussed book was edited, two chapters of Part IV: two and four are missing. Therefore the description and analysis of the Museum's accomplishments in the dissertation was concentrated on the educational and display activity, namely broadly-understood dissemination activity, on establishing relationship with the public, caring for the satisfaction of the visitor, this attitude removing the traditional museum function to the background.

After the extensive 'Calendar of Major Events Spanning 1996–2019' (part V on 127 pages) a brief chapter was placed (as Part VI, on seven pages, or actually nine if counting the title page) serving as a summary, and expressing certain observations looking into the future.

Finally, let us focus on the already-mentioned annexes: Bibliography (as Part VII), annexes with different data and lists of statistical quality: collection's systematics, list of staff (here two different lists can be found: of the former employees until 2019 and additionally the list of current ones as of 1 January 2020), an extensive impressive list of exhibitions, and equally impressive bibliography of Museum's own publications, list of turnout (by 2019), as well as the list of departments and branches together with the names of their respective heads in 1951–1996. The last ninth part of the book contains source annexes, including City Council resolutions, Mayor's orders, minutes of Museum's take over, and to conclude, as if in reference to Part VI *Pro Futuro*, the Director's address at the Krakow City Council session delivered on 11 December 2019. In this address he outlines the vision of the function of Man and a Museum in the future, anthropologically rooted, and based on the past experience. In total, the annexes cover 287 pages. The whole is concluded with the personal index (regrettably, only a partial one, since not covering the annexes and the source references), as well as the list of acronyms and abbreviations, essential in every academic study. The reviewer, however, is attached to all the remaining index types: subject and topographic ones, willingly resorting to them in order to find essential information; nonetheless, in this particular book their creation could have been quite arduous, yet they present undeniable value which cannot be overestimated.

The Author's chronological narrative has been divided into sections corresponding to respective periods in Museum's history, while their border dates are set by the events essentially impacting the Museum's operations, development opportunities, achievements, changes in operating formats, or the leading content. The narrative stops at 1996, while the Calendar goes as far as 2019 (these are two of the three limit dates specified in the book's subtitle), thus spanning also the years which are deprived of the Author's systemizing and evaluative narrative. This decision, essential for the scheme of this voluminous study, to introduce the internal caesura is, indeed, mentioned in the Introduction (p. 20); it, however, gets lost amidst the host of other pieces of information; after all, it applies to the key assumption in the book structure and the adopted method. The Author justly fears too big an influence of subjective assessment on the opinion related to the processes he directly impacted and managed, while also aware that his tale of the earlier times inevitably bears the undertone tinted with his emotional bond with the institution he has been associated with over his entire career. The fact that the author of the book about the Museum's history is at the same time its Director has unquestionably its advantage, however, also entailing limitations and threats. In 1996, Michał Niezabitowski was promoted, entering the group of the medium-management team, becoming head of one of the Museum's major departments: the one responsible for research and education; as of 1 January 2004 becoming the Museum's Director, the position he has maintained to this very day, this making him

one of the longest-serving directors of Polish museums. It was thus the personal reason that caused the narrative's interruption.

However, the Author accounts for his decision with the adoption of the Act of 21 November 1996 on Museums, to a great extent decisive for Polish museology. It came into effect only three months later, and its aftereffects could be actually felt even much later.⁴ When establishing the limits of the delineated historical periods also the earlier Act, that of 1962, was taken into account, though the direct impact of both acts on the Museum's operations was not that decisive. When establishing the periodization of the Museum's history it was the adoption of the new statutes in 1975 that was regarded as a breakthrough event, while the institution received on many occasions new or amended statutes whose awarding was not regarded by the editors as important, though their impact was essentially significant for the Museum's operations (such as the 1986 and 1995 statutes). The Museum's nationalization in December 1949 was justly considered a caesura, however, the taking over by the local administration (initially, only partial, and subsequently full, namely in the two-stage process) or a significant development of the local government's function after 1989 leading in effect to a full empowerment of the Museum as a municipal institution of Krakow was not reflected in this way.⁵

The delineated periods (the adopted borderline dates, divisions) do not overlap with the terms of office of respective Directors, generally holding their position for a longer period of time allowing them to imbue the profile of the institution they managed with their work style and their own personality. The Author himself, when characterizing respective Directors distinguishes between their work methods, preferences, as well as the results of the decisions they made. Importantly, he does this with style, thus adopting each time different criteria. Possibly, just as well, since various factors impacted the Museum's development process. Therefore, the Author is free to make his own decisions in this respect as long as the adopted criteria and evaluations can be intersubjectively verified. Furthermore, certain processes, such as the development of self-governance in the 1990s were long-lasting, and it would be difficult to pinpoint one clearly precepted definite moment in time for it. The same actually could be said about the 1996 Act on Museums whose importance was revealed only years later. It is, however, unsettling that precisely 1996 was chosen as a borderline year: it in a way stands as an objective fact, being in its essence essentially subjective.

Furthermore, what can be observed is no attempt at sketching out the role of opinion-forming individuals and institutions, of the city elites (apart from the earliest stage of the Museum's establishment), of the support from other institutions, of the establishment of the network of museums. The focus on the factual aspect has outweighed the outlining of the Museum's position within the cultural landscape of Krakow. At the same time, the Author, being an active museum curator, perceives much importance in the practical conditioning of Museum's operations, the latter quite often overlooked by academics. Importantly, in his approach neither does he forget the importance of administrative and political factors.

The sequence of chapters in Part IV *Opera*. Works may not be easily perceptible, but it is important for and

characteristic of the Author's attitude. He gives priority to the educational activity, and only later to 'collecting' activity, this followed by display activity and research; let us also bear in mind that in Niezabitowski's dissertation the issues of collection building and its studying were entirely omitted. The focus there and in the book is mainly on making the collection available to visitors and bonding with them, on the 'story' of Krakow (e.g., the 'edifice of the story of the city', p. 110). This focus can also be found in other chapters, if only when Jerzy Dobrzycki is characterized with a repeated emphasis on his tireless dissemination activity. It is also reflected in the slightly disregarding summing up of Sławomir Wojak's office as Director with his passion for collection building (such was at least my impression, possibly biased and oversensitive). Actually, Wojak was reproved; gently as it was formulated, it applied to his education as a historian of art, and not a 'proper' historian (pure-bred?). Which was said oblivious to the fact that the first is also a historian who works on material sources and beyond aesthetical judgments, more often dealing with heritage pieces, various artefacts, particularly in a historical-cultural museum.

A museum is a place where a story about the past is told; this narrative, however, is based on the objectively existing material sources. Therefore, their appropriate selection in a museum, their thorough identification, and penetrating studies are essential for the success of every other activity: display, publishing, dissemination. Indeed, a museum is an educational institution, albeit of a peculiar character. It is based on permanent and individual education, education rooted in choice, not pressure. It is the above-enumerated areas of activity, and these have to be added handling the collection together with all the procedures and care, conservatory interventions and activities, that constitute the essence of a museum; all together, in their entanglement, and not in separation, when one of them is exposed. It is true that the focus of every museum is the visitor, but also, as the departure point, or even first of all a museum exhibit, a thing: things around which a narrative is built.

Additionally, it has to be borne in mind that a public collection, a museum collection, serves as a resource of material sources for research; similarly a bit to the university whose activity is not exhausted in the didactic process; museums are also academic and scientific institutes, while their peculiarity and essential identity consist, briefly speaking, in the entanglement of these two spheres.

The issue of what purpose collections serve in museums is now heatedly debated. Obviously, the traditional position claiming that the collected heritage pieces are of a superior character, that they are available only in an elitist way for research and to the public of a relative rich prior knowledge, cannot be maintained much longer. However, also the attitude boiling down to the concentration on the visitor alone and around the visitor may weaken the activities targeted at completing the collection and creating new resources, both quantitatively and thematically. Thus, is it so that museums collect things, study them, preserve, and make available to the public, etc., in order to preserve the heritage resources and inform societies about the environment and civilizational achievements, or do museums focus on informing, collecting for this very purpose functionally subdued things?

Michał Niezabitowski quite willingly emphasizes the unique character of the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, very justly doing so. Yet, every museum is unique: each has a different profile, programme, collection, staff, each conducts different research, each cooperates differently with society, with visitors. At the same time I cannot let the Author's extremely important observation go unnoticed: the one about the importance of museums for historical sciences and for research into memory. Let me emphasize it even more strongly: memory is fallible, ephemeral, manipulation-prone, and can be easily driven away, as well as overinterpreted. Meanwhile museums have always worked and should continue working with objectively existing artefacts, with mementoes (remains from the past) as memory conveyors. This teaches humbleness, allows to adhere to sources.

Finally, let me return to one of the basic issues today. Should a museum amass a collection only or mainly in order to tell a story? Importantly, a museum should think about the future, while rooted in the past. We have been repeating this for over 200 years. Stories can differ, they can be told at a different time and in different situations, responding to various needs. Museum exhibits should not depend on a definite kind of a story. They should allow different forms and contents, this feasible only through creating relatively extensive collections, even if those are extremely sporadically used or can give an impression of being useless. I find it hard to be faced with such an alternative. Museum exhibits are not only for stories to be told, and vice versa: the public are not there only to contemplate artefacts taken out of their context.

Abstract: The Museum of Krakow, until recently the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow, ranks among the largest Polish museums, not only within the group of municipal museums. It boasts an exceptionally developed infrastructure and a high number of thematic branches, as well as multifaceted operations. The analysed monograph, authored by the Museum's current Director, presents a long and tedious, albeit systematic process of the Museum's development over the period of more than a hundred years within the context of

numerous external conditionings, with the emphasis on the Museum's role and importance for the city community and for its culture. Underlining the obvious advantages of the book and its sizeable factual value, as well as balanced opinions, the reviewer, however, observes its certain defaults and deficiencies, while also formulating a number of more general views going beyond the very matter of the book-related review. The extensive publication in question certainly encourages such an approach, this unquestionably adding another to its merits.

Keywords: Museum of Krakow, monograph, history and development of the Museum's operations and accomplishments, importance of a city museum.

References

- * I have published a much more extensive discussion of the book, also with polemical motifs, in *Acta Universitatis Nicolai Copernici. Zabytkoznawstwo i Konserwatorstwo* 53 (2022). Until recently, the series had been the journal of the Institute of Heritage and Conservation Studies; after the Institute had been dissolved, the journal has been publishing mainly texts on art, yet also certain research results in technology and art work conservation.
- ¹ He uses this very name as of 7 November 2018, while at the same time applying the old acronym MHK (standing in Polish for the Historical Museum of the City of Krakow)!
- ² Regrettably, this is not an issue the Author deals with directly; the dissertation was prepared at the Institute of History and Archival Studies at the Pedagogical University of Krakow under Associate Prof. Łukasz Sroka; in that version it covered 275 pages with source annexes limited to the period signalled in the title; in the printed version the latter reaching, however, 2019.
- ³ This figure, which all museum curators and people friendly with museum exhibits know perfectly well, does not signify the entire number of museum exhibits; the latter is in general higher, often substantially higher, in particular in the case of archaeological collections, owing to the fact that entire sets of heritage pieces and things are entered under one appropriately 'slashed' inventory number.
- ⁴ Its effectiveness was limited if only owing to the delay in introducing necessary orders, the latter delegated by the legislator to the Minister of Culture and National Heritage. The Act itself has also been frequently amended, sometimes essentially, albeit often also chaotically. This question, however, is a topic for a totally different analysis.
- ⁵ Despite the fact that the Author acknowledges the importance and impact of the events of 1989, of the years directly following the date, and their long-reaching results (p. 156).

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