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## ANTINOMIES OF MEMORIES

**Abstract.** Article written in 1997 on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the establishment of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum. It presents a public debate on ways to commemorate the victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp and to maintain the post-camp grounds, which took place in Poland in the post-war years. The paper quotes views, comments and initiatives of many people involved in keeping the memory of the Nazi genocide alive: former prisoners of KL Auschwitz, scientists and conservators of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, artists, writers, lawyers, architects, politicians and journalists.

**Key words:** Auschwitz, Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, commemoration, extermination camp, memorial place, cultural heritage

Anniversaries make us look back. The half-century existence of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum inclines us to recall the many initiatives which have accompanied discussions in various circles about the moral message of Auschwitz and about the ensuing imperatives for the present generation in the spheres of education, research, politics and community programs, as well as in practical conservation work. It is impossible not to observe that in this place, so stigmatized by history, a new value has been created over the last fifty-plus years by the voices of those present. Remembering the provisions of the legislation from July 2, 1947, which established the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, today one can confirm the unaltered correctness of the general provisions of that act, proven through experience, supplemented by the many voices of ex-prisoners, intellectuals, philosophers, artists, journalists, politicians and pilgrims. Opinions about Auschwitz over a half century have helped create the “cemetery”, the “museum”, the “monument”, the “document”, the “research center”, the “sanctuary”, the “historical reserve” - or have challenged the whole point of maintaining them. They have supported or found fault with “conservation”, “reconstruction” or “artistic memorialization” of this place of torment. Regardless of their sometimes very disparate views, the idea of passing on to our descendants a lasting trace of the memory of the Auschwitz-Birkenau victims has been dear to all those involved.

Already in 1944, when the chimneys of Birkenau were still pouring smoke, one of the Auschwitz prisoners, **Jerzy Adam Brandhuber**, made the first sketches of a future monument in Birkenau. After the war, Brandhuber recalled it this way: *“I made a design for a monument for after the war. I had an official, secret order from Col. Benek Świerczyna (of the resistance movement). I did it. It was gigantic.... All the land west of the camp in Brzezinka, west of the crematoria, was to be*

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leveled, like a colossal roll-call yard, kilometers, kilometers square. In the middle a chimney colossus, square in cross section - like in a crematorium - only X times bigger, 50-60 meters high. And stone symbols mounted on it, rough-hewn on four sides. Visible from far away - far away. Gas hooked up to it - like an eternal flame. Day and night. At night a glow, like it was back then. And around it, rows like blocks (of prisoners), when they stood for roll call, in formation, squared up in units like stones, like urns (not graves, because there were none), divisions in ten rows - like there in the camp - 500, 600 prisoners, five, six million stones. That is how they counted then. And between these groups, nothing, no grass, no trees. And only a row of posts with sections and lamps on the posts, so at night it would be pearls, a wire of light pearls - like it was then - kilometers, kilometers.<sup>2</sup>

After the liberation, the first priority before any memorial was the matter of properly protecting the remains of the camp as physical evidence of the crimes, which was understandable not only because of the ongoing Nazi war crimes trials but also in view of attempts to question the fact of the atrocities committed in Auschwitz-Birkenau<sup>3</sup>. "This huge death factory for millions of women, men and children was to proclaim what fascism had led to for all time" wrote **Ludwik Rajewski** in 1948<sup>4</sup>.

The need to preserve the authentic character of the grounds of the former camp was particularly strongly accented by all those who expressed an opinion in this matter. At a conference in Oświęcim on July 6-7, 1947, **Jan Sehn**, investigating magistrate of the Cracow District Commission for Investigation of German Crimes, said: "German fascism was not at all a political disease, only an ordinary crime. The results of the criminologists' work so far have proven... that the same methods used in modern criminology have to be applied to study the history of that period. In seeking to recreate the material facts, it treats a crime as a result of the action of forces, the effects of which are changes in the substance, conformation or location of material. These changes are the traces. The whole Auschwitz camp, among other things, is such a trace of the destructive force of the occupier". On another occasion Jan Sehn stated: "In all the trials before the Nuremberg Tribunal, the greatest weight was attached to all pieces of evidence connecting a given war criminal with Auschwitz... That is why from the first moment I defended the position that the Museum should occupy and appropriate the area of the entire so-called Interessengebiet<sup>5</sup>... - that in planning and implementing the Museum plan it is necessary to find and maintain the proper scale for the reserve, and finally, that the interior conformation of the Museum should be based above all on the documents."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, **Jalu Kurek** saw the

<sup>2</sup> Letter of Jerzy Brandhuber to Janina Jaworska, in: J.Jaworska: „Nie wszystkich umrę...”. Twórczość plastyczna Polaków w hitlerowskich więzieniach i obozach koncentracyjnych, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1975, p.50-51.

<sup>3</sup> S.Wilkanowicz: *Auschwitz problem Niemców, Polaków i Żydów*, in: ZNAK No 419-420 *Auschwitz po 50 latach. Czym był? Jakie ma dziś znaczenie?*, Kraków, 1990, pp.3-4.

<sup>4</sup> L.Rajewski: „Drażliwy problem” *po raz czwarty*, Wolni Ludzie No 22 (39), Warszawa, 15-30.11.1948, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Interessengebiet des KL Auschwitz* - the administrative and economic area of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp of 40 square kilometers (jmr).

<sup>6</sup> *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Ochrony i Komisji Fachowej*, APMO sygn.Mat/958, vol.56a, p.137.

nature of the Auschwitz Museum this way: *“Not only for Poland but for many, many nations in Europe, Auschwitz is something which cannot be forgotten. Because if we preserve the memory of it, we do it because it is a document and a warning. We preserve Auschwitz not in eternal remembrance of pain, but in perpetual remembrance of the thing, in eternal remembrance of infamy...”*<sup>7</sup>. On the pages of “Tygodnik Powszechny” journal, **Stanisław Stomma** summed it up as follows: *“Auschwitz needs no retouching and needs no designs aimed at creating atmospheres. It is enough to show people the truth. That is why Auschwitz has to be left as much as possible as it was. The realism of facts has the strongest voice. And the tragic pathos of facts does not have to be supplemented or reinforced by creating atmospheres through some kind of auxiliary designs. The best artistic ideas can only weaken and interfere with the expression of naked facts. There is no artistic genius who could equal the voice of reality. To search for effects in this way sows disharmony and can easily disturb the solemnity of the place.”*<sup>8</sup>

However, at the same time opinions were voiced that the authenticity of the camp was not enough. Parallel to the statements quoted above there were proposals to specifically commemorate the victims of the camp by erecting a mausoleum with a visual accent in the form of a chimney and to create a park/cemetery on the grounds of the camp. The mausoleum was to be built of bricks with the names of murder victims engraved on them, and the interior was to be a place for epitaphs dedicated to particular nations. Professor **Romuald Gutt** was charged with designing the memorial<sup>9</sup> Evaluating this project, Stanisław Stomma wrote: *“Such a design would be an extreme dissonance against the background of the whole camp, which is correctly conceived as a ‘reserve’. The mausoleum would be an attempt at some kind of symbolic ideological synthesis of the camps. In the face of the incomparable pathos of the naked facts, such an artificial ideological synthesis can only be a rather annoying false note, spoiling the style of the whole design. I would not hesitate to speak of profanation of the site through a lack of the necessary discretion and a tendency toward completely unnecessary effects of additional pathos.”*<sup>10</sup>

In the end the mausoleum project was not realized, but in the spring of 1955 a small urn containing soil from concentration camps and sites of mass murder all over Europe was erected in Birkenau. The matter of specifically memorializing this place of torture and martyrdom remained open.

Two years later, the International Auschwitz Committee launched an appeal to sculptors and architects around the world to take part in a competition for the construction of an International Monument in Birkenau. The competition rules called particular attention to the protected status of the grounds of the former death camp. There were 618 competition entrants from 31 countries, and 426 designs were submitted, but none of them met the organizers' expectations, so the three best teams were invited to make a new design based on the critical remarks expressed by the

<sup>7</sup> J.Kurek: *Centralny pomnik cierpienia. Każd oświęcimską pod pieczę Ministerstwa Kultury i Sztuki*, Dziennik Polski No 80/1946, p.5.

<sup>8</sup> S.Stomma: *Problem Oświęcimia*, Tygodnik Powszechny No 27, 1947 (R.3), p.3.

<sup>9</sup> *Historia Oświęcimia utrwalona na wieki*, Wolni Ludzie No 7, Warszawa 17.07.1947, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> S.Stomma, op.cit.

jury. A new project was made. Its main element was a wide stone road running diagonally through the camp, cutting through the barracks, streets, tracks and the ruins of Crematorium II. The jury accepted it. However, it violated the basic rule of the competition on the "inviolability of the camp structures".<sup>11</sup>

At the same time in the Polish press there was lively discussion of ways to memorialize the post-camp grounds. **Seweryna Szmaglewska** appealed for moderation and caution: "*The basic monument is the camp itself, and therefore the Museum along with the documents gathered in it, which constitute a huge indictment, and every piece of evidence of the truth preserved on the grounds of Auschwitz and Birkenau... Auschwitz is a book which, with the present state of knowledge of the subject, the visitor can read without commentary. It is all the more incumbent on us to tend to the state of the book, the state of Auschwitz and its secret annex which the Germans built in Birkenau... Auschwitz still remains an argument in a discussion which continues on the globe. That is why it cannot be compromised.*"<sup>12</sup> The famous English sculptor **Henry Moore**, the jury chairman, asked, "*Is it really possible to create a work of art which expresses the emotion Auschwitz evokes? In my opinion, a great sculptor - a new Michelangelo or a new Rodin - could perform this task. The chance of finding such a design among the huge number of models presented was minimal. No one has succeeded in solving this problem.*"<sup>13</sup>

Because of the many doubts expressed about the selected monument design, its team of authors presented a new design incorporating the principle of the inviolability of the post-camp remains. One of the three variants submitted in February 1962 was approved and built. In a booklet published on the occasion of the monument's unveiling on April 16, 1967, **Helena Blum** explained the choice of the implemented design: "*The competition jury eliminated most of the designs, stating that the guiding idea for the future monument had to be monumental simplicity. Maudlin, anecdotal designs could not be selected. Birkenau as a protected site, and therefore the parts of the Museum where the mass extermination of millions occurred, could not be allowed to be disturbed.*" A statement by the selected project's designers was instructive. Sculptor **Pietro Cascella** and architect **Giorgio Simoncini** put it this way: "*We attempted not to interfere with the great silence of Birkenau, which in itself is a monument of unsurpassed power. Our monument rejects loudness and vehemence, it attempts to be only an accent on the camp landscape, a materialization of the memory of those who were murdered, it is an homage to their solidarity and dignity. It is humble, human in proportions and dimensions...*"<sup>14</sup>

As a backdrop to the problems of memorializing the victims of genocide and the question of selecting the most fitting design for the monument in Birkenau, ceaseless discussion of Auschwitz subjects went on. In the early 1970's, Cracow's ZNAK journal published a collection of reflections and statements from people particularly close to the subject of Auschwitz, in order to fulfil, as the

<sup>11</sup> I.Szymańska: *Historia powstawania Międzynarodowego Pomnika Ofiar Faszyzmu w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince* (unpublished), 13.11.1990, PMO; K.Nowak: *Historia jednego pomnika*, Pro Memoria No 3, 1995; comp. I.Grzesiuk-Olszewska: *Dzieje „Pomnika-Drogi” w Oświęcimiu*, Życie Literackie No 3, 17.01.1988.

<sup>12</sup> S.Szmaglewska: *Zapalmy znicz nad Oświęcimiem*, Życie Literackie No 6, 8.02.1959.

<sup>13</sup> J.Zachwatowicz: *Międzynarodowy Pomnik w Oświęcimiu*, Polska No 11 (123) 1964.

<sup>14</sup> *O Oświęcimiu mówią*, Polska No 7 (155), 1967.

editors declared in their preface, *“the desire to reveal as if anew, from the perspective of the distance of years and generations, the enduring message of the most tragic monument of human history...”* The participants considered which shape or means of expression would prove most enduring: would Auschwitz someday be a monument, a historical institute, a mausoleum, or a kind of sanctuary for humanity? Opinions were expressed that art, rather than other means, even means employing the most scrupulously and realistically presented factual material, would convey the human issues of Auschwitz on a mass scale. The idea was entertained that *“perhaps even these places would have a deeper effect through... the mediation of art rather than through direct means”*, in view of the definite influence of the memorial sites on the output of artists born after the war. Father **Władystaw de Grohs**, a former Auschwitz prisoner, proposed the erection of an ecumenical place of worship in Oświęcim, with chapels for the different faiths, as a sign of memory of the victims and at the same time a sign of the unity among people of good will which had existed in the years of terror and which should always persist in every battle against the degradation of humanity<sup>15</sup>. **Stanisław Rodziński** pointed out that the form which the Auschwitz Museum takes as the years passed would change, and that, when its last witnesses passed on, it would be possible to understand the crime of Auschwitz-Birkenau only through images of the destruction of the individual and through protest against it, since, as he concluded, *“the wooden barracks and posts, despite the most careful conservation measures, will someday lose the documentary character which they still have today.”*<sup>16</sup>

**Aleksander Małachowski** perceived another aspect of the problem. *“Despite all the efforts to preserve the meaning of this place, even here there is the threat of a 'historical circus' - the unavoidable pressure of the curious tourist crowd, ever less able to see it properly. The monument in Birkenau does not fulfil its role: 'Contemporary art has turned out to be completely impotent in the face of the deaths of millions... This monument is part of Europe's tourist complex, and we people of the war still want to see the place where millions of our brothers were tortured to death.’”*

*“Apparently we will not think up anything new here, nothing more profound than the centuries of human culture which have created cemeteries. The only places where there is no shouting and no display of empty show, where the atmosphere itself protects the memory and the presence of the dead”* “Tygodnik Powszechny” journal commented upon Małachowski's reflections<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, **Maciej Szumowski** saw the contemporary face of the Museum in this way: *“Greenery, the intense greenery of Birkenau, a myriad of wildflowers, the birds and their song. A pigeon, not shy of people, sitting on a branch right next to a crematorium. No - this is not a symbol. This is not just a museum of death. This piece of our globe is alive. In this juxtapositioning of life and death there is something which is more eloquent than thousands of documentary photographs...”*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> A.Morawska: *Rozmowa o Oświęcimiu*, ZNAK No 195 (9) Kraków, 1970, pp.1089-1097.

<sup>16</sup> S.Rodziński: *Myśli o oświęcimskim Muzeum*, ZNAK No 195, op.cit., p.1103.

<sup>17</sup> *Na co dzień i od święta*, Tygodnik Powszechny No 19, 8.05.1977.

<sup>18</sup> M.Szumowski: *W pół słowa... Tam gdzie zieleń*, Gazeta Południowa No 122, 13.06.1979.

At the same time, far from the discussion-filled media, humbly and without fanfare, the staff of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum scrupulously carried out their assigned tasks. The mission legally entrusted to this handful of people by Polish legislation in 1947 was being steadily carried out.<sup>19</sup> The fundamental purposes of the Museum then established - to care for the post-camp grounds, to conserve, exhibit and provide access to the objects, documents and evidence of Nazi crimes there, to initiate research, to educate and provide cultural activities, to run the Museum - presented unending challenges to the Museum staff through all those years. **Jadwiga Bezwińska**, summing up more than twenty years of Museum operations, recalled that *“up to then there was no model for this type of museum, and in the course of strenuous organizational work its essential framework had to be created from the ground up, the proper profile of activity had to be decided, and in the hierarchy of its needs and tasks the ones most urgent and brooking no delay had to be distinguished from those which could be deferred for a later time. The work began in difficult financial circumstances.”*<sup>20</sup> As the Museum went about its practical work, many different problems arose: problems of ideology, research, conservation, urban planning and technology. *“Everything here is frighteningly real and at the same time as if impossible, unreal. And elevated, like in church, where one doesn’t speak publicly about repairing the monstrosity. But the problems are prosaic and devoid of metaphysics. Like this one: how to conserve two tons of human hair?... How to extend the life of more than 40,000 pairs of shoes, hundreds of barracks, or artificial limbs?”* pondered an anxious journalist in *“Tak i Nie”*<sup>21</sup>.

Years later, **Kazimierz Smoleń**, long-time director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, recalled an issue extraordinarily important in the work of this institution: *“There emerged... a singularly important question: how far should the Museum’s intervention go in fulfilling the obligation to conserve the historic structures and relics of the camp? Should their appearance and placement be maintained according to their state at the moment of the camp’s liberation (1945) or the Museum’s establishment (1947)? The point was, could and should these turning-points be reflected, should objects no longer existing or destroyed be reconstructed?... The principle of not restoring the original appearance of these objects (and many others), adopted by the Museum, proved to be particularly sound during several site inspections on the grounds of the former camp by the jury from Frankfurt am Main... The consistent application of this principle, among other things, was critical to UNESCO’s decision to enter the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum on the World Heritage List.”*<sup>22</sup>

**Tadeusz Kinowski**, Museum conservator at the time, wrote the following in reference to the World Heritage Committee’s decision<sup>23</sup>: *“Besides preserving the objects, the Museum performs*

<sup>19</sup> Act of 2 July 1947 on commemoration of the martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim, Journal of Laws (Dz.U.) No 52, item 265.

<sup>20</sup> J. Bezwińska: *Funkcje Muzeum Oświęcimskiego*, ZNAK No 195, op.cit., p.1082.

<sup>21</sup> L. Michalski: *Sumienie świata i półtora cieśli*, *Tak i Nie* No 15, 12.04.1985, p.8.

<sup>22</sup> K. Smoleń: *Państwowe Muzeum w Oświęcimiu-Brzezince*, in: *Auschwitz, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa, 1990, pp.258-259.*

<sup>23</sup> M.Parent: *Rapport du rapporteur de la troisième session du Comité du patrimoine mondial*, File: CC79/CONF.003/13, pnt.XII 46, No 31, p.11, Paris, 30.11.1979 (PMO Preservation Dept.).

many functions and, having adopted the principle of not altering the exterior appearance and character of the buildings, and not erecting new buildings, has had to use many interiors for permanent and temporary exhibitions, Polish and other national exhibitions, archives, storage of the collections, offices and workshops. Birkenau is under strict protection - there the changes are minimal, resulting only from renovation imperatives...<sup>24</sup>

In the mid-1980's there were proposals from Auschwitz ex-prisoner circles aimed at imparting a more emphatic symbolic expression to the Museum grounds - architectural/sculptural, artistic and spatial. *"The real elements of the former Birkenau camp, the greatest shame of Nazism... were almost completely removed by the occupier, and nature is doing the rest... This martyrdom of millions of people is not calling for a gigantic monument against the backdrop of the monumentalized landscape - it is screaming for it"* - warned a report of the Technical Experts' Commission of the **Auschwitz Preservation Society**<sup>25</sup>. *"Through the years, the vegetation... has grown excessively and, in a way that was not planned, unnecessarily detracts from the authentic climate of life in the camp in those days... The vision of the former Auschwitz camp as it was, is being effaced... There is a need to create the kind of atmosphere that would help the young visitors to form an image of the enormity of the experiences and the sufferings of their mothers, fathers or grandparents... Verbal means, numbers, speeches, explanations by guides, publications, can serve as a message to the descendants only to a small extent. We live in a world flooded with such media. Strong visual means are essential for full effects"* - it was argued.<sup>26</sup> The authors of the report also recommended reconstruction of one of the crematoria together with its gas chamber, as an exposition.

In January 1986 the Town Chapter of the Auschwitz Preservation Society in Katowice made its "Auschwitz Appeal" to Polish society and the world. Former Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoners demanded that this unique cemetery which is the death camp should not only be a fearful monument designated exclusively for visiting and that it should be surrounded with special remembrance and homage. *"We want a mausoleum to arise in this place, as a temple of unification and peace, constituting, together with the cemetery, a sanctuary for the memory of nations. A mausoleum built to last for centuries!"* - said the authors of the Appeal.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, the former prisoners appealed to the Minister of Culture and the Arts to appoint an Organizing Committee for Construction of a Mausoleum of the Martyrdom of Nations on the grounds of the Museum in Birkenau, with due regard for the state of preservation of the grounds of the former camp, which according to the applicants *"... has undergone visible and rapid deterioration, raising justified fears in our society that in the not-distant future the specific character of that place will disappear entirely."*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> T.Kinowski: *Oświęcim na liście światowego dziedzictwa*, Muzea Walki No 19, 1986, p.94.

<sup>25</sup> *Problematyka zabezpieczenia potrzeb konserwatorskich i funkcjonalnych terenów i obiektów Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka* (unpublished), Executive Board of the Auschwitz Preservation Society, Technical Experts' Commission, Warszawa 1983, pnt.4.3, p.14 (ZG TOnO).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 13, 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Apel oświęcimski. W sprawie powstania Mauzoleum-Świątyni Pojednania i Pokoju*, Słowo Powszechne No 186, 25.09.1986.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of 21 February 1986 No: L.dz. 17/86 from the Town Chapter of the Auschwitz Preservation Society in Katowice to Professor Kazimierz Żygulski, the Minister of Culture and the Arts (ZG TOnO).

After inspecting the grounds of the former camp, the ministry authorities did not substantiate significant changes in its historical substance, but recommended that more effective counter-measures be taken against the invasion of plants, particularly in the area of the incineration pits, and that the area be properly cleaned up. It was recalled that from the moment the Museum was established all actions had been directed toward permanent maintenance of the authenticity of the former camp and the remains situated on its grounds. In conclusion they noted that in view of the need to keep to the principle of the inviolability of the Museum area there was no possibility of appointing an Organization Committee for Construction of a Mausoleum and that this position also represented the view of the Council for Protection of Monuments of Struggle and Martyrdom.<sup>29</sup>

The press took up the subject eagerly. **Ewa Owsiany** of "Przegląd Tygodniowy" journal came to Oświęcim. "... Birkenau? In fact only the monument can be seen, because left of the ramp there is no entry, everything is lying in ruins there, the ground is sodden, nothing has been touched for forty years. The crematorium is overgrown, somebody has started to dismantle the chimneys on the right for the bricks, and the barracks for the wood"- revealed the journalist, not sparing the readers sensationalism. Professor **Józef Bogusz** was supposed to have said in answer to questions that "Auschwitz-Birkenau is a very neglected sanctuary." Asked for a statement, **Władysław Terlecki** of the Łazienki Artists' Group said: "Everything should be done (...) to preserve the physical traces on which our memory rests. Because it is clear to everyone that the monument does not tell us much, whereas the bunk, the real one, where dozens of women slept dreaming night after night of the homes to which not all returned, says it all."<sup>30</sup>

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum stood on the position of preserving the authenticity of the post-camp relics. Director Kazimierz Smoleń, in a 1987 letter to the Council for Protection of Monuments of Struggle and Martyrdom, pointed out that: "... essential technical improvements related to infrastructure cannot violate the existing layout of the former camp. Similarly, new monuments, mausoleums, etc., should not be built (within a defined zone). Only supplementation with historical information is permissible, in the form of small visual objects (signs, documentary photographs, technical equipment for giving information about historical events)."<sup>31</sup>

A convergent position was presented by a 1987 research report prepared within the framework of a study on conservation and urban planning problems of Auschwitz-Birkenau, undertaken at the Department of Urban and Spatial Planning of the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice. In the course of analyses it was observed that the unquestioned need to preserve the authentic substance of the former death camp was leading to an antinomy in the collision with the changing aspect of the post-camp grounds, which was changing as a result of both natural processes and the emerging tendency to adapt the Museum for new functions - museum expositions,

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<sup>29</sup> Letter of 20 May 1986 No: ZMOZ-XIIc/1603/7/86 from the Ministry of Culture and the Arts to the Town Chapter of the Auschwitz Preservation Society in Katowice (ZG TOnO).

<sup>30</sup> E.Owsiany: *Ratowanie pamięci*, Przegląd Tygodniowy No 31, 31.07.1986.

<sup>31</sup> Letter of 4 August 1987 from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum to the Council for Protection of Monuments of Struggle and Martyrdom (PMO Preservation Dept.).

educational and conservation work, research - and also because of the need to commemorate the uncounted victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was stated in the report that the antinomy, a lasting, immanent characteristic of the post-camp complex, should be accepted on the basis of understanding and respect for all processes occurring in its present structure, because to disturb the balance and to have one of the functions dominate could negate the many-stranded and reflection-inspiring character of that distinctive place. For example, attempts to restore the 1940-1945 status quo (the reconstruction of structures that no longer exist, the complete elimination of vegetation) could in consequence turn the former death camp into a theatrical exercise. Intensive interventions by conservators (replacement of worn or time-ravaged elements of historical objects) were inevitably turning Birkenau into a mock-up, but in view of the impermanence of the camp construction there was no other way; thus, here authenticity was realized not so much by maintaining the original material of the objects as by preserving their form, technology of construction, and location<sup>32</sup>. The potential domination of the exhibition function in the future, the introduction of modern audiovisual techniques, the erection of monumental new statues or mausoleums, or other artistic acts carried out on the spatial "material" of the former death camp, however, could ruin the character of this place as a cemetery and at the same time as physical evidence of the crime. *"Barriers should be made for these activities. But this may prove impossible,"* warned the report. *"The function of the Great Cemetery is waning, and the function of the Great Symbol is emerging. This process enormously widens the boundaries of intervention. Artistic work inappropriate to the Cemetery could turn to be fitting and desirable for the Symbol... Despite its deep connections with the history, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum belongs to contemporary times, and its character will match future public expectations."*<sup>33</sup>

A new aspect, not seen earlier, was brought into the Auschwitz debate by the conflict over the Carmelites. The 1984 siting of a Carmelite convent on the UNESCO-protected post-camp grounds of Auschwitz I (the "main camp") and the placing of a cross in the former gravel-pit sparked protests from Jewish circles<sup>34</sup>. In the flood of complaints and accusations there formed a clear sense that heretofore the particular role which Auschwitz-Birkenau - the place where more than a million members of the Jewish nation had been murdered, where *Die Endlösung der Judenfrage* began and where in the Nazi conception it was to have ended - plays in the collective awareness of Jews had not been taken into account. The growing dispute stirred the enormous layers of ignorance of the very different Jewish perception of the former death camp. Invited to act as narrator for Maciej Szumowski's film *Czy w Oświęcimiu Bóg jest jeden? (Is There One God in Auschwitz?)*, **Konstanty Gebert** said: *"Auschwitz is our cemetery, our largest cemetery... We honor our dead differently than Christians do. There cannot be a permanent place of worship, a chapel, a synagogue, at a cemetery. Prayers by the grave are said in a hurry and quickly. We*

<sup>32</sup> comp. O.Czerner: *Wartość autentyzmu w zabytkach*, Ochrona Zabytków No 3, 1974, pp.180-183.

<sup>33</sup> M.Rawecki: *Strefa ochronna Państwowego Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, Część pierwsza - zagadnienia ogólne* (unpublished), Department of Urban and Spatial Planning of the Faculty of Architecture of the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice, October 1987 (WAPŚI).

<sup>34</sup> comp. W.Chrostowski: *Spór wokół klasztoru w Oświęcimiu*, Znak No 419-420, op.cit., pp.123-143.

*pray before the entrance to the cemetery, after leaving it, and later in the synagogue. Because the cemetery, though it is sometimes called a bet chaim in Hebrew, a house of life, is a house of death. Our faith is a faith in life. We distinguish these two spheres very precisely, very carefully. At a cemetery it is not permitted to reside... to eat, to take meals, because that is to mix life and death - which Jews are not allowed to do."*

Poland's changed political situation in the 1990's allowed broader circles of interested people to confront their knowledge and emotions with the reality of the authentic place. In 1990 **Jonathan Webber**, lecturer at Oxford University, submitted his *Memorandum* to the International Auschwitz Council, containing many constructive remarks about the Museum's exhibitions and the ways in which the mass murder of Jews was presented. Writing of the Museum in Birkenau, he referred to ideas expressed years before: *"I subscribe to the view that the visual impact of Birkenau should be interfered with as little as possible. Naturally a balance has to be struck between the needs of visitors to be informed about the place and their need to feel that the site contains dignified memorials..."*

An international symposium organized in Oświęcim in 1993, entitled *The Future of Auschwitz: Should the Relicts be Preserved?* brought many, sometimes mutually exclusive, opinions and ideas. For example, a group of American architects and historians including **Robert J. van Pelt**, **Debórah Dwork**, **Paul Backewich** and **Peter Gallagher** proposed the complete transformation of the relict character of "Canada"<sup>35</sup> and "Mexico"<sup>36</sup> on the grounds of the former Birkenau camp. They designed a large exposition room under reconstructed „Canada” barracks, and at "Mexico" a huge "Reflecting Pool", monumentalizing this part of the former Death Camp and in this way visualizing *"... the megalomaniac ambition of the Germans with Birkenau."*<sup>37</sup> Other voices called for the Auschwitz-Birkenau vestiges to be allowed to "age with dignity"; still others called for a ceremonial burial of the victims' hair, which up to then had been shown in a museum exhibition. Professor **Bohdan Rymaszewski** calmed the extreme voices in his address: *"I believe that the general guideline for conservation work should be conservation of the existing, present state..."* Speaking of the post-camp legacy, Professor Rymaszewski noted that: *"it is not... a site for reconstruction, but only, to the extent we are able, for preservation work."*<sup>38</sup>

Thus the new view of Auschwitz did not fundamentally affect the previous trend of initiatives aimed at a more suggestive commemoration of the death camp victims. Despite the intensification of all kinds of conservation work in the early 1990's, carried out with significant commitment of

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<sup>35</sup> Separated complex of barracks in KL Birkenau - warehouses of personal belongings stolen from Jews, victims of genocide. The name given by the Polish prisoners according to the pre-war ideas about mythical richness of Canada (*Przewodnik po Brzezince*, Pro Memoria No 6, 1997, cover).

<sup>36</sup> Third, unfinished Building Section of KL Birkenau. Depressing image of this part of the camp made the prisoners called it as "Mexico", in their minds the epitome of poverty (*Przewodnik po Brzezince*, op.cit.).

<sup>37</sup> Materials from the symposium: *The Future of Auschwitz: Should the Relicts Be Preserved?*, Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, 23-28.08.1993: R.J.Pelt, D.Debórah, P.Backewich, P.Gallagher, pp.15, 17, 19-22.

<sup>38</sup> Materials from the symposium, op.cit., B.Rymaszewski: *Przyszłość pozostałości po KL Auschwitz-Birkenau* (unpublished, PMO).

funds and supported by the experts' theoretical considerations<sup>39</sup>, concern for the state of preservation of the post-camp relics shone through all the concepts for memorialization which flowed in from the outside, a concern which questioned the chance of keeping these relics as moving evidence of the crime and as a warning to future generations. According to the authors of these conceptions, strong efforts had to be undertaken to resist these inevitable processes.

**Józef Szajna**, an artist and ex-prisoner of Auschwitz, made an appeal in October 1994: *"For me and for many others the site of the former camp is first and foremost a place of remembrance worthy of preserving and passing to the generations in the name of the idea of freedom and a dignified life lived in peace. That is why the raising of a memorial mound to the victims should become a place of cleansing - catharsis and uniting of the nations. I summon all visitors to a joint effort to raise a mound which will last longer than the vestiges of the camp, which will be an answer - a protest by people of good will - all of us - against resurgent fascism and intolerance."*<sup>40</sup>

In a landscape design proposal for the former Auschwitz-Birkenau in November 1994, Professor **Edward Bartman**, landscape architect from the Main School of Rural Economy in Warszawa, stated that: *"time is working against the preservation of the historical substance"* and in light of this he proposed not only: *"faithful reconstruction of the infrastructure"* but also: *"the use of various natural and cultural objects of great symbolic power."*<sup>41</sup>

In 1996 the Auschwitz Preservation Society considered another variant for memorializing Birkenau. **Bogumił Trętko** of Katowice, initiator of a project to build a Sanctuary/Mausoleum, shared this concern for the original state of the post-camp material: *"Looking at the present pace of destruction, the camp will cease to be an authentic, historical object sooner or later. The scale and extent of this object will not permit it to endure without any loss.... Fairly indistinct ruins... will remain. Human memory could also begin to fade,"* he observed<sup>42</sup>. Thus he proposed that, for the fifty- or hundred-year perspective, the idea of constructing a Sanctuary/Mausoleum on the grounds of the Museum in Birkenau be considered, integrating all world religions in shared homage to the death camp victims and in protest against all atrocities and depravity.

The direction of undertakings made for many years to permanently memorialize the former death camp has not always presented the overriding, universal value of this place, nor has it always reflected what has been preserved at the cost of great effort through the almost fifty years of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum's existence, while many meetings, discussions and

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<sup>39</sup> see J.Wróblewski: *Spółeczny ruch ludzi dobrej woli*, Pro Memoria No 1, 1994, pp.21-24; W.Smrek: *Konserwatorskie znaki zapytania*, Pro Memoria No 3, 1995, pp.58-60; *Z notatnika konserwatora*, Pro Memoria No 4, 1996, pp.64-65. Materials from the symposium, op.cit., J.Dujardin: *Kilka refleksji na temat konserwacji Auschwitz-Birkenau* (unpublished, PMO, 8.08.1993); W.Smrek: *„Referat na międzynarodową konferencję konserwatorską"* (unpublished, PMO Preservation Dept.).

<sup>40</sup> Pro Memoria No 2, 1995, p.41.

<sup>41</sup> E.Bartman: *Oferta opracowania projektu aranżacji systemu terenów zieleni byłych obozów koncentracyjnych w Oświęcimiu i w Brzezince wraz z krajobrazem ich najbliższego otoczenia* (unpublished), Warszawa 21.11.1994 (PMO).

<sup>42</sup> Letter of 16 September 1996 from the Executive Board of the Auschwitz Preservation Society to Jadwiga Rawecka and Marek Rawecki, with a description of the concept of a Sanctuary/Mausoleum by B.Trętko, Katowice, June 1996.

even conflicts and disputes were going on, preserved through laborious research and conservation work, the individual and collective activity of many generations of people for whom Auschwitz was not a pretext for undertaking spectacular propaganda, political or artistic campaigns, for whom Auschwitz represented above all a singular duty to the victims and a moral signpost for the future, a place which was to unite us in deep reflection on the nature of man, and not divide us in attempts to dominate with one's point of view, one idea, or one artistic notion.

**Günter Grass** said: *“Auschwitz was not some mystery which had to be pondered with awed trepidation and with the appropriate inner distance. It was real, thus the work of people, the work that can be researched (...) Auschwitz must be understood as the historical past, must be recognizable in the here and now, and it must not be ignorantly detached from future perspectives. Auschwitz does not lie only behind us...”*<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> G.Grass: *Jak mówić o Oświęcimiu dzieciom* (transl. A.Morawska), ZNAK No 9, op.cit., pp.1113, 1115.

## Abbreviations

APMO	- Archive of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oświęcim
jmr	- Jadwiga Rawecka and Marek Rawecki
KL	- <i>Konzentrationslager</i>
PMO	- Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum
SS	- <i>Schutzstaffel</i> (Protection Squadron, 1925-1945)
TOnO	- Auschwitz Preservation Society
UNESCO	- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WAPŚI	- Department of Urban and Spatial Planning of the Faculty of Architecture of the Silesian University of Technology
ZG	- Executive Board

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