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Towards a Friendly Museum

1.

Malbork Castle Museum is located in a spectacular Gothic castle complex dating from the late Middle Ages. The castle was raised by the Teutonic Knights – a German order of knighthood – and served them as the capital of their monastic state in Prussia. In 1997 this magnificent treasure of European architecture was inscribed on the UNESCO List of World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

The castle is one of the main tourist attractions in Poland. Last year the site was visited by more than 600 thousand people, including 142 thousand foreigners, mainly from Germany, Russia, Spain, Lithuania and France. Last year we had 915 visitors from Finland.

2.

Like many other cultural organisations in Poland, since 1989 the Castle Museum has dealt with two sorts of heritage. The first is the great history of the past centuries. The second is the sad history of the 1940s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s. The first epoch has left us its splendid architecture and works of art. The second one, that is the time of communism in Poland, has left us – among many other terrible things – tremendous problems with peoples' attitudes towards their own work and towards other people.

The taste of daily life in totalitarian states is rather impossible to imagine by individuals who were born and have lived their lives in free democratic countries. The only chance to understand or rather feel something is a personal experience, gained for instance during a visit to a country of this kind. The look

and behaviour of police officers, incompetence of officials, bad smells in staircases and restaurants, bumpy roads, lack of smiles on human faces, grey shades of life almost everywhere; each and all of those impressions can say much more about life under communism than scientific analyses or books.

One who stays in a communist country longer may also discover the left-handed charm of its institutions. He or she can learn that the institutions in totalitarian states are not *for* human beings but somehow *against* them. Instead of serving and assisting men and women, they persecute and humiliate them, in a much stronger way than the offices and law courts in Kafka's novels.

The communist system has developed a specific new type of human being, called by a Russian intellectual Alexander Zinoviev *homo sovieticus*. This creature is a master of survival in the totalitarian state's conditions. He or she has many different faces, but the most important is that he is entirely submissive to the oppressive state's powers, and at the same time he shows his frustration to each individual whom he considers to be weaker than himself. *Homo sovieticus* is similar to a dog that fawns on his master and bites all smaller dogs and cats. He is filled with never-ending fear, and treats all other people as a threat to his life and well-being.

This results in terrible relations between people. Under communism people fight for ridiculous privileges, like the right to buy a piece of cheese without standing in a long queue or to receive permission to get a passport. Instead of collaboration and solidarity *homo sovieticus* cultivates never-ending combat. It is no wonder that the freedom movement that was born in Poland in 1980 was named 'Solidarity'.

Certainly this kind of sick situation in totalitarian societies is perfectly visible in the field of work, particularly services. Under communism the shop assistants, drivers, policemen, teachers, clerks and all other functionaries are angry, irritated, arrogant and always tired. And all of them have sullen, grey

faces. If there is someone who smiles, it means that he or she is insane, or he or she is an angel who has fallen down on the earth.

3.

After the political change in Poland in the late 1980s and early 90s it was easy to see that the previous dreadful system had ruined the ethos of labour. It turned out that it was much easier to change the political and economic system than the social and individual mentality. That is why after our country regained its independence and rejected communism, the new political and social leaders referred to the idea **"the work on work",** created by a contemporary Polish philosopher Jozef Tischner. "To work on work" means: to develop and improve our attitude towards daily tasks and towards the people we are serving by means of our labour. This idea founded large-scale social actions, like 'A Hospital with a Human Face', 'A Friendly Office', 'The First Class School' and others. In the 1990s some museum personnel in our country initiated their own programme, 'A Friendly Museum'.

4.

Those of us, who were engaged in the programme 'A Friendly Museum', did know that a museum or a historic site was not only a building plus some collections displayed there. It was also **a care for visitors**, apart from the proper information, interpretation, education, etc. And this care for visitors was definitely the weakest point in Polish museums, including Malbork Castle Museum, infected with the virus of Soviet-like approach towards their customers.

So the question was (and still is): how to make our institutions – public friendly? How to change them into places where an individual is not seen as a registration number or a plague, but as a human-being who is our Guest, according to the old Polish phrase: 'Guest at home – God at home'.

We knew that the problem particularly related to the work and attitude of employees in direct customer contact. When visiting the heritage institutions guests usually do not see any senior management members. So, those are the guards, ticket sellers, guides, exhibition attendants etc. who give the human face to a public-serving organization.

Even if the museum is filled with the best possible exhibitions and facilities, so, **even if it is public friendly in terms of its infrastructure**, the visit there may turn out to be a disaster, when a visitor experiences an inhuman or unprofessional behaviour of the staff members. That is why the human morals and skills seem to be so important. Those morals and skills are simply indispensable in making a certain site well-functioning and friendly.

5.

So, how to cope with this sort of problem? Should we start to punish our staff members for misbehaviors? Should a director shout at them or fire employees in case of complaints from our visitors? Should we add a new oppression to the old one?

We suggested that instead of punishing our colleagues we should help them. We should help them first – and then we could expect proper behaviors from them!

Our employees in direct customer contact have never had and still they do not have any specific professional nor educational background. There are no schools nor colleges for exhibition attendants or museum ticket sellers. Our employees come from all other fields of work or just straight from comprehensive schools, and they usually have no idea how to work at a museum, what is the social role of museums, what is a modern customer service or care for disabled visitors. Usually they learn all of that from their senior colleagues. Unfortunately those older colleagues may be very incompetent or

even spoiled. That way this kind of professional education leads to a disaster, and then we have a new generation of incompetent and spoiled employees.

The only way to stop this fatal process of professional and moral corruption is to provide our employees with the proper professional training. They must be helped, they must be given the solid information, competent instructions and examples of good practices. So, the main answer to the question "How to make our museums public friendly?" was: to run vocational trainings for employees.

In the result we needed a professional training programme for the staff. We tried to develop this programme ourselves, and at the same time we were looking for patterns and good practices in other countries. For some reason we were not able to find too much there! It seemed that in the Western World there were thousands of trainings for museums managers, scientists and educators, but we could not find anything like that just for the museum first-line workers. [I still believe, there must have been trainings like that somewhere – perhaps in Scandinavia, perhaps in the States or in Britain – but simply we could not find them.]

Instead we found something else. It was an international project aiming at development of training materials and procedures for museum employees in direct contact with visitors. The name of the project was Echocast. So we did not find any ready-made materials, but we found a chance to develop them in co-operation with professionals from other European countries, that is from Britain, Austria, Germany and Italy. The project Echocast was run by the following partners:

Lancaster University (UK) – a leading partner

Historic Royal Palaces (UK)

Historic Scotland (UK)

Civita Associazione, Roma (Italy)

Servizi didattici e scientifici per l'Univerita di Firenze (Italy)

Schloss Schönbrunn, Wien (Austria)

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Germany)

International Cultural Centre in Krakow (Poland)

Malbork Castle Museum (Poland).

The project was funded by the European Union Leonardo programme and lasted for three years time (2003 – 2006).

As I said before, the ECHOCAST objectives were to develop a training programme, modules and materials for the staff working in European cultural heritage organisations – mainly museums – who are in direct visitor contact.

We have developed the following eight detailed training materials:

Introduction to Customer Service

Delivering Service Excellence

Handling Difficult Situations

Visitor Needs

Confident Guiding 1, 2, 3

Health, Safety and Security

In the ideal world the above modules should be supplemented with the following ones:

Organisational Awareness

Selling and Merchandising

History and Context

Technical Information (IT and Equipment)

Exhibition Presentation and Maintenance

Internal Relationships

Welcoming Foreign Visitors

Malbork Castle Museum has served in the project as a so called delivery partner. It means that we were particularly responsible for running the piloting trainings, based on written materials prepared within the project's framework. It was like testing new vaccinations or new bridge constructions.

6.

Apart from conducting the series of piloting trainings at Malbork Castle Museum, then, over the years I have run trainings based on Echocast materials in a number of other Polish museums, as well. Please, let me share with you with some pieces of basic experience gained by me at that work.

* Usually before the workshops quite many employees, especially the exhibition attendants and cleaners, do not consider any vocational training to be useful or appropriate. So in the morning, when we begin the training, I always start with a precise explanation why we do what we do, and I particularly emphasis the word “help” – the practical help for colleagues in difficult situations at work.

* The possible reason why so many employees are quite reluctant to enter the workshop is probably connected to a fear that training might cost a great deal of extra time and effort, and – moreover – might end with exams, which are seen as a threat to individual positions at the museum.

* At least two major areas of training needs are identified by all job groups: to improve speaking of foreign languages, and learning of basic information on the site and the museum collections. Certainly, both categories are highly relevant in all aspects to jobs on the heritage site.

* After the training, the trainees are usually glad from what we did together, and are full of new energy. Usually they appreciate the fact that they had a chance to discuss and find solutions to the daily problems they meet at their museum. They also are eager to share with their complaints, observations and suggestion how to improve work at the museum.

* It seems that the training of that kind is most appropriate not only for colleagues in direct contact with customers but also for curators, because they do have contact with visitors as well and sometimes they have to cope with difficult situations.

* It also seems that one training session is not enough. The workshops should be repeated, let's say – annually, because we cool down quite quickly, and tend to lose our enthusiasm. Soldiers do not train their skills just once in their life, do they?

7.

Can we see the trainings based on the Echocast materials as a magical rod that changes people and organisations into ideal ones? No, of course, we can't. Sometimes the trainings work quite well, sometimes – not so well. It is just an instrument, not perfect, although quite helpful. As a matter of fact there are no vocational trainings that make angels from human beings, however they set clear standards of good work. We and our colleagues may still behave wrong, but we cannot say that we did not know it was wrong. At least.

And the last remark, please: To us the work on making a friendly museum, even though it is a very small-scale thing, and not tremendously successful, is also an attempt to change a part of the psychological landscape of Poland. It is a small stone on the long road from the grey, sullen face of *homo sovieticus* to the smile of a free human-being. It is another attempt to escape from the heritage of totalitarianism.

Thank you.