

TOWARDS A EUROPE OF CULTURES

Changes in Eastern Europe and their impact on museum work

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"THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'" (Bob Dylan)

Yesterday, today and tomorrow - Museum of Noneuropean Cultures in Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

In this apocalyptic hours, when the people of Croatia, lots of them my colleagues and good friends, are hiding in air-raid shelters and the cultural institutions where they work (but not only them) are being bombed I feel it a bit absurd to write about a museum - The Museum of Noneuropean Cultures where I started to work a year ago. On the other hand just this gives me the right to speak about an institution which is humanistic in its basis and which aim is to develop and spread understanding of different cultures, of different ways of thinking, of different ways of acting, of different cultural identities and accepting and tolerating all this.

I borrowed the title for this paper from the famous Bob Dylan's song The times they are a-changin' which in my opinion suites very well into the frame of the general theme of our Conference "Towards a Europe of Cultures - Changes in Eastern Europe and their impact on museum work". Like the song which was released in 1964 and anticipated the tremendous changes in the western way of thinking in the 60-is, but is in fact timeless dialogue between those restrained by old ways and those daring something new, and it also warned about the "future shock" - (change will be too rapid to assimilate), the things in the "East" go very similar, especially in the ex-Yugoslavia.

One would think that Culture - this noble union of human(istic) activities, will be eluded from the most barbaric deeds which happen in my country and ex-country in the last months and didn't happen in Europe in the last decades, but the recent events deny it. In fact Culture represents the cradle and at the same time the most essential part of the civilisation and the nations identity, and the most efficient thing to destroy one nation or a way of thinking (ideology) which doesn't suite to the patterns of the powerful is to eliminate its Culture. Until the 9th of October this year the Yugo-army ruined and destroyed 305 monuments, churches, museums, galleries, libraries, graveyards, castles etc. in Croatia which is a total unrespecting of the Haag convention and is a war crime.

Since the fall of the Berlin wall we are witnesses of different manifestations all over East Europe of the last convulsive efforts of the communist system to maintain itself and preserve the privileges of a small group of people. They don't choose the means.

Even the manipulation with nationalistic emotions serves them very well. In my opinion the most radical sustaining of the old system happens in ex-Yugoslavia.

YESTERDAY

We know that museums are cultural ambassadors, yet particular anthropological /ethnographical/ ethnological (I use all this terms in the same sense) museums. They deal with the broadest subject - that means with the way of life of different peoples. Ideally they should serve as mediators of different Cultures and should explain and translate different cultural patterns into its own Culture. They should be politically engaged. One very obvious thing in the ex-socialist countries was to oppress any individual political thinking and even more engaging. Naturally the people became very apolitical. I don't like generalising, but in my country with few exceptions the people didn't care much about politics until the 80-is. It seems that the development of recovering political consciousness takes decades, especially in "rigid" institutions like museums.



Vidmarjeva iz Šenčurja (foto M. Fister 1962)

The museums in my country rose up relatively soon (at that time it was still the Austro-Hungarian Empire). So the "Krain homeland museum, called The Rudolphinum", situated in Ljubljana (Laibach) rose up in 1821. But this were just collections of items put together without any deeper idea, just to show them the audience - at that time mostly rich bourgeois. It is interesting that the earliest

collections of this museum were collections (which we would call today ethnographical collections) who brought some missionaries from America and Africa. So we could say without too much exaggeration that the foundation of the museums on the territory of today's Slovenia formed besides the items collected on Slovenian territory also the Noneuropean museum items. Which is quite strange considering that Austro-Hungarian Empire didn't play an important part in the colonial policy which was the basement of the big Museums of Noneuropean Cultures in Europe. It couldn't cope with the "big ones", but if you visit today The Museum für Völkerkunde in Vienna or The Naprajzi Museum in Budapest or The Naprstkovo Museum Asijskych, Afritskych, Ameritskych Kultur in Prague they don't remain behind The Museum of Mankind or Musee de l'Homme...

In 1923 they established The royal ethnographical museum, which parted from the original The Rudolphinum, and the latter National museum. It was primarily oriented to collect and save ethnographical museum items from Slovenian ethnic territory. The collecting of items from Noneuropean countries was secondary, without a real concept - mostly brought to the museum just by coincidence. There was a number of Slovenian missionaries, diplomats, merchants, sailors, and travellers who collected items just by chance and occasionally brought or sanded them home and either donated them or sold them to the museum.

After the second world war when the socialist system was established in Yugoslavia most of the valuable artistic and museum items which was in private and church hands was confiscated, put and mixed up in the so called "Federal collecting centres", from where the authorities distributed them all over the country (without any data, which unfortunately got lost forever). So also the Ethnographical museum (no more royal of course) received quite a few. Some of them originated from Africa, China etc. Even today it is magic to define all the necessary data (place of origin, datation...).

After the second world war Slovenia (which changed its political borders) had quite a few museums. Some of the older ones were The National, Ethnographical and Natural history which parted from the same ancestor - The Rudolphinum in Ljubljana, but there were also the National Gallery, The Municipal museum of Ljubljana etc. and of course the so called "Homeland museums" in smaller Slovenian towns like Ptuj, Maribor, Celje, Kranj, Koper... which had mainly archeological, ethnographical, historical collections and exhibitions. The professions which defined the work of the museums were the so called motherly sciences with strong seats in the University and the Academy of Science. The interinstitutional work was quite successful. I am more familiar with the work of the Ethnographical museum which after the second world war (until 1963 when the director Dr. Orel died and Dr. Kuhar overtook) organised every year field work on the Slovenian ethnic territory with groups of scientists. The field work was organised collectively but only on the Slovenian ethnic territory. The Noneuropean collections still grow, but just by coincidence through donations or selling by people who travelled out of Europe. The biggest collection was donated by Tsuneko Kondo Kawese - married Marija Skušek a Japanese lady who married a Slovene Captain who was captured during

the first world war in Beijing and bought a number of objects from The forbidden city on the black market. She joined him back to Europe, to Ljubljana in the early 20-is. She was one of the first Japanese women who came to Europe and stayed here the rest of her life. After his death she inherited the whole collection (it consists of a lot of beautiful furniture, dresses etc.) and soon before her death (1964) she donated most of it to the Slovenski Etnografski muzej. But The Slovenian ethnographical museum housed in the same building as The National museum and the Natural history museum and had a chronic shortage of place (as it is still today). And fortunately it received from the state an old baroque castle named Goričane in the vicinity of Ljubljana. So it decided to open a special Museum of Noneuropean Cultures as a division of the Slovenian ethnographical museum. 1964 was the birth date of our Museum of Noneuropean cultures and it kept collections from all noneuropean continents. The work in the museum took over Dr. Pavla Štrukelj who stayed there as a curator and leader of the museum for nearly 30 years. During the 60-is and 70-is the museum politics was set outwards, that means that the most important museum work were exhibitions. Mostly they didn't care about correct documentation, correct keeping of the objects etc. So in the same way Dr. Štrukelj did in less then 30 years over 80 exhibitions (I don't want to discuss about the quality). Contemporary with the Yugoslav Non-alignment policy (and we know that most of the third world countries belong to this movement) the museum exhibited the Cultures of those countries. So it was political very favourable to do something like this. But unfortunately even that they had to asphalt overnight the place round the castle for a Tito's visit in the 60-is, they didn't use all this advantage. The lady stayed alone in the castle (no young manpower was wished), and the castle slowly fell apart. In the 80-is it came so far that in 1988 broke a ceiling and this was a signal loud enough that the responsible reacted with giving some small amount to repair the castle.

TODAY

So it started with the breaking of the ceiling, in a way similar to the breaking of the Berlin wall. Two years latter my forerunner got retired and not only her, but also the old system. The breaking times started in micro and macro cosmos. They started to rebuild the castle and a museological space concept was done for a new, modern userfriendly museum which made account also of the handicapped (which is in our country still a rareness). We are trying to get more specialists therefore we made a necessary manpower concept. And we are working on a complex museological content concept. With the proceeding to the market economy we confront also a lot of problems of the museum survival. The Museum of Noneuropean Cultures has a very undefined status. On one hand it is formally a division of The Slovenian Ethnographical museum (but who acts with it more like with a stepson), but on the other hand in the number of museum objects, in the square meters of the buildings and of course in the matter of content it is a museum for itself. Here we have to make a short explanation of the so called "museum policy". In the decades after the second world war most of the museums who didn't exist before were founded with the recommendation of the politicians (read: communists). So also an socialist

museological invention were numerous museums of national liberation. Nearly every smaller town has it. But there was no global concept of the museum policy in Slovenia. There were some attempts to establish a museum network but it never became real. So even now (October 1991) we still don't have a good museum policy -concept (we don't know which museums should be established or become independent which not etc.). The sad thing is that with the overcome of the old system, the new system received a very bad mortgage. Lots of debts, undefined relation with the Yugoslav federation... It is naturally that all cultural institutions had a shortage of money. This became even more extreme after the July'91 war in Slovenia.

Another weakness represents our Minister of Culture. Instead of fighting for Culture he resigned to faith. He is by profession a University professor, but we would need a good manager. So the general problem for all Slovenian museums is a chronic shortage of money. Usually all the discussions start and end at the same topic: money. It is sad that the energy for constructive things disappears. As we know many museums in the West are sponsored by big firms or corporations, but the whole economy in our country is so bad that it is completely impossible to find any sponsor. Maybe they still find some money to sponsor sports but surely not culture. And here the magic wheel starts (with no culture you can't educate or make broadminded the population, and if they are not broadminded for sure they won't pay the culture because they don't need it.) Another problem is our tax policy. The firms who would invest into Culture are exempted for such a low amount of taxes that they are not interested at all. So the picture of the present situation is quite dark. If I return to the Museum of Noneuropean Cultures it is the same old story. But we won't give it up. We were thinking also about foreign investors. Why not investing into culture if into economy. But unless the political situation will stabilise, it is an illusion. But on the other hand this means also a very subtle problem. It could happen a very cheap sale of a nations Culture. At the time being the museum is under reconstruction, still with the last years funds, but it looks like the money will stop for a while.

TOMORROW

I see a beautiful baroque castle with a reconstructed baroque park with some fountains in it and peacocks walking around. In the corner there is a small wooden tea house from China where they serve tea from all parts of the world. Walking up the stairs towards the castle you can hear some undefined music, a few moments later you know that this are the tunes from a hundred years old Japanese Shakuhachi made out of a rare bamboo root. You walk a few steps forward and you enter the castle courtyard. Now you can see much clearer the group of musicians, but in the backyard there is another one, o yes a whole Gamelan orchestra from Java. You walk further and see a group of children making small Gamelans out of wood in the Museum pedagogic workshop. But in the Museum shop there is a group of retired tourists, who is with great interest looking for Chinese Kites. In the restaurant two visitors are lively discussing about the newest issues in Korea Daily

eating the Chinese morning Dimsum, and smoking the Turkish Nargil. Close to the entrance there is a board with lots of small papers on it - notices about cheap travels to Africa, Asia etc.

On the other side there is a small carpet shop and the hospitable owner is just serving tea (čaj) to a customer. In front of the elevator there is a handicapped young man on a wheelchair and his wife with a baby in baby-carriage. In the chapel there is just a wedding going on. In the first floor there is a permanent exhibition (but that means not permanent forever but just for a few years) about the Slovenian contacts with the Noneuropean peoples and the influence (feed back) to homeland in different aspects. There are numerous interesting objects, but in the room which shows the contacts with India you can see also garbage in a small reconstructed bazaar road. And it smells awful. In the garret there is temporary exhibition about Mongolia. You can lay down and stretch yourself in the Yurta, or look at the slide and video show. In the next room there is a lecture on Tibetan herbal medicine for students of the Medical faculty in Ljubljana. A Tibetan herbal doctor came to visit us for a few weeks. After two or three hours you became hungry, so you walk in the nearby restaurant where they serve this week Mongolian food. You order a Mongolian pot with superb soup in it and when you finished the last spoon you realise that all this was just a dream - it wasn't Mongolian pot but just an ordinary Hot dog, there isn't any museum but just a ruin, there isn't any park, but just bushes and weeds.

Things which are very normal and obvious in many countries in the world are still the world of fantasy in most of Eastern Europe, so the fantasy has the biggest impact on museum work.

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