

**Akademie der Künste – European Alliance of Academies**

**“They love to talk the talk, but what about walking the walk?”**

**For European commitment against nationalism**

**Basil Kerski**

**Grass-Chodowiecki. Art defends diversity of identities**

- The feeling of gratitude for the invitation is nurtured by the fact that the trip from Berlin to Gdansk always awakens emotions and associations for me; **personal** ones (born in Gdansk, Iraqi father, Polish mother, living in Iraq, fled from there via Poland to West Berlin; Berlin, my second home; optimal location due to its Polish connections and new German-Middle Eastern identities; spiritual home of my ancestors; Jewish Dubs family from Lemberg/Lviv, which was shaped by Moses Mendelssohn; also a difficult place due to the experience of German crimes)

- But as I travel from Gdansk to the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, I think above all of two Academy directors of the preceding organisations: **Daniel Chodowiecki** (born in 1726 in Gdansk), copper engraver, painter, Director of the Royal Prussian Academy Berlin from 1797 to 1801, son of a Polish Catholic nobleman and a Swiss Huguenot, successful in Berlin. I think of him, not because I am so familiar with the history of the Academy, no, but rather because Chodowiecki is a symbolic figure for today's democratic Gdansk. His graphic cycle dated 1773 about his trip to Gdansk and his two-month stay there is the most important document of a lost urban culture in Gdansk (predominantly Protestant German) in the Polish Republic of Nobles. At the time, Gdansk was the main port of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic of Nobles. German-Polish Gdansk fell victim to Prussian absolutism, Prussian and Russian “negative Polish politics” emerged, causing Poland to disappear. However, modern imperial politics developed on the basis of this. The climax of this „negative Polish policy“ came in 1939.

Chodowiecki's work is now revered in Gdansk, his biography and work serve as an antidote to nationalism, a cherished witness to a lost culture whose material testimonies were ultimately destroyed in 1945, Chodowiecki's multiculturalism is a projection screen; a culture of identification for a new civil society after 1989 that takes responsibility for the cultures destroyed by Nazism and nationalist real socialism (Gdansk Germans, Jews, Kashubians, Poles, etc.).

- Another famous Gdansk native and former Academy president referred to Chodowiecki: **Günter Grass**, Academy President from 1983 to 1986, founder of the Chodowiecki Foundation; as a graphic artist and writer living in West Berlin, as a Danzig native with Kashubian roots, as a cosmopolitan (living in Paris in the 1950s), Grass was fascinated by Chodowiecki.

Grass' work on the destruction of the city was an identity-building work for young, Polish post-war Gdansk natives, arousing empathy for the fate of the Germans, arousing curiosity, a bridge of reconciliation, in preparation for meeting the other; Grass' work warns of the seductive power of the totalitarian, which he also succumbed to as a member of the Waffen-SS; of racism, ethnic nationalism.

I am talking about Chodowiecki and Grass because the reception of their work in Gdansk in recent decades has highlighted an essential task of art/culture: creating a sense of cultural closeness, of the human community of destiny; of empathy; liberation from a totalitarian heritage. The emergence of cultural continuities where traditions have been destroyed, where murder, destruction and displacement have created deep fractures; and culture can build awareness of the dangers of ideologies.

For example, Gdansk writer Paweł Huelle referred to Chodowiecki to honour the wealth of identities (Poles, Danzig natives, Berlin natives, Huguenots, Catholics). The ideologies of nationalism, the old and the new, restrict our perception of the world, limit us, they limit our identities, lock us into one identity to fulfil the promise of security.

**Claudio Magris on identities:** "We should always talk about identities in the plural, because we have more than one. A Pole is not just a Pole. He can be religious or non-religious, have certain political views or not. I personally have more in common with a liberal from Uruguay than a fascist from Trieste. That goes without saying. In addition to this, there is a cultural identity. I feel naturally closer to those who share my world view. Identities cannot be photographed, only filmed, because they keep moving and evolving. We are who we were as adolescents, but we are not the same. We're not just what we used to be."

## 2.) Gdansk-Berlin: Historic bond, bond of values, cultural community

- Allow me to point to another important link that connects Berlin and Gdansk, that connects Europe:
  - When I make the trip from Gdansk to Berlin, I return from my native city to my home town of Berlin, two cities that are not only reflected in the biographies of Grass and Chodowiecki but also connected by a special historic bond: World War II (beginning, destruction); but above all, the revolutions that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reconstruction of Pariser Platz: 1980-1989-1990-1991
  - The Solidarność trade union was founded exactly 40 years ago: the beginning of a revolution that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Gdansk shipyard gate/Solidarność Square and Pariser Platz with the Brandenburg Gate are different places in terms of their aesthetics, but they have been changed by recent political upheavals.
  - Solidarność – Solidarity; 10 million people – language of rights not just interests – reconciliation, understanding; a critical view of history; a yearning for cultural diversity; for borders to open up, for cultural proximity

- They were non-violent – Gandhi-Luther King-Madela-Sakharov-Wałęsa.
- 2020 is a special year; not just the birth of Solidarność 40 years ago; 30 years of German unity (09/11/1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall, Kohl in Warsaw); 30 years of the German-Polish Border Treaty – Poland also enabled Germany reunification; reunification bolstered democracy in Poland.
- Protagonists of the revolutions are rarely politicians but rather artists; church people, civil rights activists, philosophers, writers; film makers; Central Europe as the “kidnapped West” (Milan Kundera).
- 1989, the beginning of a new order; impulse for a second phase of integration in the West too; 1993 Maastricht Treaty.

**2004 warning from experts: The EU should not just be a free trade community, a legal community and a community of nations:**

French political scientist Fabrice Larat: Not only do we need an **acquis communautaire** but also an **acquis historique**, not just an agreement on political and legal standards, but also a shared understanding of our European history and the processes that have led to European integration.

**European integration as a culture of shared understanding of anti-totalitarian values, EU enlargement as horizon expansion in both directions (Karl Schlägel)**

In order to create this **aquis historique**, the European Solidarity Centre (ECS) was created; ECS as a place of remembrance and promotion of civil society; 1989 as a European revolution – a place of non-violence – a reference point for universal human rights

Remembrance culture – often competition between individual narratives, polyphony of national perspectives, rarely dialogue

Karl Schlägel – expanding horizons; I understood it as such: it must go in both directions; creating European competences (this is not always done by publicly funded institutions; often only national perspectives or imperial and non-civil society)

Mission of the ECS: Memory must be value-related; universal human rights – non-violence – solidarity, universal not ethnic or nationalist

### **3.) Key challenges in Europe**

The work at the ECS is an opportunity to look at Europe:

- close solidarity; ethnic nationalism

- economic vision of Europe
- Europe simply as a fortress of 27 (Belarus, Ukraine, Western Balkans)
- Lack of horizon expansion in both directions; lack of *aquis historique*, European culture; consequence: retreat into the national
- one-dimensional political identities emerge (Europe versus nation); lack of imagination
- disappointment with (liberal) democracy because liberalism has not thought enough about social/collective responsibility (more about individuality, especially in the East); opening of borders in 1989/2004, accompanied by the double transformation (1989 beginning of the World Wide Web/Internet); globalisation and revolution of communication/artificial intelligence
- new attractiveness of authoritarian forms; “temptation of the totalitarian” (Ralf Dahrendorf); market economy without democracy; market economy without open society; we have authoritarian traditions throughout Europe (e.g. nationalist communism; GDR; Poland; or post-Russian imperialism of the Soviet Union; anti-Semitism)
- Rebirth of prejudices (used by populists)

#### **4.) Cultural Institutions: Who are we today? What contribution are we already making to the fight against nationalism?**

- Cathedrals of democracy: Areas of refuge for minorities (we are needed because even in light of authoritarian tendencies, resistance and civil society activity are growing);
- Creators of the European narrative; we are the European public / symbols of European networking (because we can only work as Europeans, as art mediators) .... and European solidarity?
- Show: the centre of Europe is no longer just in the East, Europe has many sources (“Europe starts here”),
- free space for new, complex identities (also seen dynamically); identities for times of glocalisation

Note: Cultural institutions can also be the opposite: counter-institutions, culture as entertainment, as a valve for narcissistic art; national institutions, or institutions that are not value-related and thus relativise values; as well as institutions of “counter-enlightenment”

## **5.) Conclusion “They love to talk the talk, but what about walking the walk?**

Adam Zagajewski in “Sinn und Form” 2011: Culture, especially culture of memory as a test of Europe’s credibility. Europeans boasted of having a memory from which they could draw self-critical lessons for the future. Europeans, however, often reminded him of a „literary society“ and not citizens taking specific action: They love to talk the talk, but what about walking the walk?

Europe’s cultural policy is weak and is being further weakened:

- Through anti-European narratives (the EU must die for Europe to live), AfD; authoritarian fear of the rule of law;
- lack of education and forgetting
- Fear (migration) – populists as stewards of our fear (Stasiuk)
- Through political actions at national level against European initiatives and stakeholders (Central European University in Budapest; media; City of Gdansk; ECS in Gdansk; Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk, POLIN museum – Prof. Darek Stola)
- Lack of (political) solidarity toward them
- Lack of awareness of Europe as a cultural community (history is understood nationally, not as a history of relations between nations; or as a European dynamic)
- The concept of centres and the periphery is inhibiting Europe
- Pandemic as a challenge; less revenue; development programme needed for culture; individual artists and institutions are at risk, their economic success ensured their independence

The development of a European cultural policy is not only about policy on financing it but also about linking finances and values to exert real pressure on the enemies of democracy/ rule of law and the representatives of nationalism:

Connecting the inflow of European funds with values/rule of law and also ensuring that they go directly to the stakeholders in the defence of democracy (cities, NGOs)

Cultural workers, cultural institutions and intellectuals are especially needed today, it is our time, if we can grasp this.

Our European mission (our Alliance) for the next while is as follows:

- to break down the boundaries that hinder the connections in people’s minds

- to try to link freedom and social justice,
- to promote empathy for the other
- to support civil society's resistance to nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia
- to form alliances between the defenders of universal human rights
- to uphold the idea of the diversity of identities; without this diversity there are no universal, supportive attitudes and pluralism (Magris)
- respect for people's fear of showing fear, preventing them being abused by the "stewards of fear"

Leszek Kołakowski (1977; Peace Prize of the German Book Trade): authoritarian systems/ cultures train hatred ("Managing our fear", Andrzej Stasiuk); our task is to ensure education that defends human dignity.

Education for democracy is education for dignity, and they both inextricably presuppose both the readiness to fight and freedom from hatred. Freedom from hatred that is not only achieved by fleeing from conflict but is an apparent virtue.

In a world filled with hatred, vengefulness and envy, which (...) seems narrower and narrower to us, hatred is one of those evils about which it is plausible to say it cannot be driven out by any institutional measures. In this case, we can assume without being ridiculous that each of us, by limiting this evil in ourselves, contributes to limiting it in society, thereby achieving an uncertain and fragile anticipation of a more tolerable life on our ship of fools.

Fabrice LARAT, *Presenting the Past: Political Narratives on European History and the Justification of EU Integration*, in: German Law Journal, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2005.

Adam ZAGAJEWSKI, Unser Europa, in: Sinn und Form, January–February 2011.