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**Taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by change –
how we in Gdańsk are coping with uncertainty.**

At the ICMC conference in Philadelphia in 1996 I gave a talk about maritime museums in eastern Europe. Later, at Helsingør in 2000, nine years after the collapse of the communist system in Poland, I spoke about the cooperation between our museum and foreign ones after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Today, a further nine years on from that talk, again in Denmark, it is with great satisfaction that I would like to develop the theme of this year's conference – UNDERSTANDING CHANGE – COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY, that is, by telling you how we at the Polish Maritime Museum understand the changes taking place both in Poland and in the rest of the world, and how we are coping with the uncertainties arising out of the risks inherent in our actions.

The mass social movement initiated in Poland in 1980, known as SOLDARITY, laid the foundations for the bloodless revolution of 1989, as a result of which Poland became a democratic state. Similar transformations soon took place in the other countries of central and eastern Europe. Out of these political changes arose the need to reform the economy, which was beginning to be ruled by the laws of capitalism. This forced our society to look at everyday matters in a different light. It has to be admitted, however, that even today, twenty years down the road from those momentous events, many people are still only slowly coming to terms with the capitalist economy and look back with nostalgia to the days when the state, albeit a poor one, took care of everything. In contrast, most young and middle-aged people embraced the new reality with relish and set about to build a better future. I think that in Poland we can count the people involved with museums among those who look on our further development with optimism. The staff of the Polish Maritime Museum is certainly part of this company: mindful of their responsibilities but also with determination, they are striving to make the most of the opportunities that have arisen. They are thus actively involved in the development of our Museum, acquiring valuable personal experiences in the process.

The foundations for the good start into the new future were laid by the Polish Maritime Museum's staff already before 1989. Then, thanks to the assistance and generosity of our colleagues from western museums, we were able to travel the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Scandinavia and the Federal Republic of Germany, where we saw how modern

maritime museums function. Later, in Poland, we presented our observations, including the significance of having maritime museums and the need for their on-going development, to the authorities. Although our efforts were not always successful, I have to acknowledge the very considerable assistance of the Ministry of Culture. After 1989, the new political parties, struggling with the reformation of the country's economy and under pressure from liberal circles, twice attempted to reorganise the cultural sector. One of the premises of the reforms was the decentralisation of cultural institutions, which the Ministry of Culture planned to hand over to local government. Nevertheless, in both campaigns, in 1998 and 2002, the Polish Maritime Museum managed to dissuade the Ministry from taking such measures. Today this may seem a deliberate undermining of the Ministry's plans, but in the case of our Museum, which is a national institution, there was no guarantee that such changes were going to work out. Our opposition to a change in the subordination of our Museum arose out of a fear, even of a prediction, of failure, since not every change is necessarily for the better. We still believe that we took the right course, and that the interests of a national maritime museum, such as we are, and also the fulfilment of our mission, are best served by remaining within the ministerial administration. By doing so we have been able to create far more avenues of development than if we had become subject to local government.

The Museum's daily routine has basically been imposed by the reorganisation of the economy, which has affected all the companies with connections to the sea. These firms, which are sadly approaching the end of their effective production (the results of which, as we now know, were less than spectacular), have required our assistance to help them with the preservation of artefacts and documents of historical significance. Very often, however, it has been the ministries and the managements of these closed or restructured firms that have failed to comprehend the need to preserve the resources of historical significance produced and accumulated there. Moreover, many of the collections in company museums, such as paintings and models of the ships they produced, have, despite the best efforts of the staff of these mini-museums, become dispersed and appropriated. This lack of interest on the part of management and regional/state authorities in keeping these collections intact is unfortunately the upshot of their failure to understand both the transformations the country has been going through and the need to preserve the heritage of these companies. This problem is still an acute one, in view of the ongoing takeover and privatisation of the land and historic buildings of the former shipyards by developers, whose sole interests there are undertakings of a commercial nature.

Ever since 2001, when I became Director of the Polish Maritime Museum, I have been striving to modernise its existing departments and branches, and to create new ones, for example, a museum of shipyard technology. I have suggested setting up just such a museum on some of the land belonging to the historic, but now defunct Gdańsk Shipyard. So far, however, the local authorities have shown no interest. But despite these difficulties I have not abandoned my plan.

Some aspects of the modernisation and expansion of the Museum have already been completed, or are still in progress. One such achievement has been the thorough reconstruction and adaptation for museum purposes of the former factory building in Tczew, in which the PMM opened its Museum of the Vistula back in 1984. At that time, the set of buildings that we took over from the closed factory were adapted to their new function only in a rather makeshift way, since we didn't have the funds necessary to do a more thoroughgoing job. The main building was used for the display rooms, and the other buildings served as stores, conservation workshops and offices. Since there was no other museum in Tczew, ours began to collect all sorts of objects of historical value associated with the town and to organise exhibitions with a regional flavour, so departing somewhat from aspects relating to the river Vistula and from the Maritime Museum's statutory tasks. In addition, local social organisations were given accommodation in part of a former small office building. The main problem was that in the light of the existing law, the municipal authorities in Tczew were not permitted to finance the activities of a state institution. So in 2001 I began negotiations with those authorities regarding the future of the Polish Maritime Museum's branch in Tczew. The talking was hard and lasted many months, but we eventually found a solution. Reaching an agreement was much helped by the political changes in Poland, which brought EU subsidies to the country, among other things, for the development of cultural institutions. According to the regulations governing these subsidies, applications from local authorities were to be given priority. In view of the impossibility of receiving direct funding from the Ministry of Culture, I accepted the proposition of the President of Tczew. This meant handing over to the town part of the land with the large ex-factory building and the small office building, which the municipality, in consultation with us and with the aid of EU funding, would then renovate and adapt for the purposes of our Museum and for the creation of a Regional Centre of Culture. In 2007 the adaptation work was complete and we received half of a modern complex that we can use for free. The other half houses a municipal cultural institution, and a Town Museum is soon to be opened there as well. The decision to cooperate with the town enabled us to solve a number of problems, but a certain element of risk was also involved. The PMM had to

suspend its activities in Tczew for over two years, and had to give up land and two buildings. But we have gained a building beautifully adapted for museum purposes without having had to dig into our pockets. Moreover, the modernisation has enabled us to reduce our administrative costs, while the municipal authorities have had the opportunity to create their own cultural institution and to house social organisations in their building.

This is not the end of the changes in Tczew. Besides the loaned exhibition building, we still own a sizeable plot of land and a few small, temporarily adapted buildings that accommodate the conservation workshops and stores. On this land we intend to erect a building, which apart from the conservation workshops, will house a store and study room. The relevant documents are ready, and we have planning permission, but unfortunately, our two applications to the Ministry of Culture for the necessary funding have been turned down. But we shall not be put off.

New displays of underwater archaeology, technical equipment, yachting and folk boatbuilding are another aspect of our plans for expansion. Indeed, these coincided with an invitation from the commune of Sztutowo to set up a Museum of the Vistula Lagoon in former boatbuilding workshops loaned to us by the commune. Of course, we did not hesitate to take up this unexpected offer, and the inaugural exhibition, devoted largely to folk boatbuilding, opened there already in the summer of 2002. Located near the fishing port and yacht marina, our Museum has facilities for winching boats out of the water, which will enable us to undertake some boatbuilding ourselves. This museum already has the status of a Branch of the PMM and will be expanded. Financial assistance from the Sztutowo commune has enabled us to produce the designs for a new building, and to begin our boatbuilding activities, once the former workshops have been modernised.

Our very positive experiences with the commune of Sztutowo have encouraged us to seek similar agreements in other regions where we could set up branches of the PMM in order to house our underwater archaeology and yachting collections. One such place is Władysławowo, which boasts a large fishing port and whose beaches and shopping centres are visited by up to 100 thousand people each day in the summer season. We put before the town's authorities a proposal to jointly set up a museum of Baltic fishery and maritime archaeology. A society for the protection of fishery heritage has also come into being there, with which we chose a site for the future museum, at the base of the breakwater-cum-pier. Unfortunately, however, this proposal did not meet with the mayor's approval, who suggested a more central site, some distance from the port. Since no agreement has been reached on the localisation of the museum, we have suspended proceedings for the time being and have

turned our attention to other matters. A very important one, to which we have not yet given due consideration, is the organisation of a permanent exhibition focused on yachting. To house the yachts, however, we would need a suitably large building, so we have been looking for a possible site and a sponsor. In this case, the omens are looking good – in the second quarter of this year talks about opening such a museum were held with the authorities in Gdynia and Jastarnia, both of whom expressed an interest in this venture. So while we can rest easy as far as the money is concerned, we still have to decide which site will be the better one.

Our greatest achievement as regards finding financial support for our projects is the extension of our Museum in Gdańsk, which is now well under way. We began this project in earnest in 2005 by setting down guidelines for an architectural competition for the design of a Centre of Maritime Culture, to be erected on the site of a former power station. This was built in 1959, and then adapted for museum purposes in the 1970s; it has just recently been demolished. Our plans also include making use of the vacant plot of land next door. The project for the Centre of Maritime Culture as a branch of our Museum received the approval of the Ministry of Culture, which provided funds for the architectural competition. The daring design, support from the Ministry and also from our Norwegian colleagues enabled us to make a successful application for special funds. Once we had all the documentation together, we were able to begin last year. The existing building was taken down, the uncovered site was explored archaeologically, and now we are in the process of selecting the chief contractor for the new building. This new investment is fraught with uncertainty, however: the deadlines to be met, the rather widely fluctuating rate of exchange between the Polish currency and the Euro, the complicated tendering procedures that have to be waded through, not to mention the great piles of paperwork produced every day, only add to the uncertainty. The overriding question is therefore, 'Will we finish the project on time?' Personally, I am quite sure that in two years' time we shall be savouring the appearance and functionality of the new building.

Our Museum does not only need suitable buildings for its further development. There are other pressing needs, such as those concerning our floating museums. These historic ships, the hundred-year-old *Dar Pomorza* and the sixty-year-old cargo steamship *Sotdek*, have been on our books since the early 1980s. As they are moored in port waters, however, they are subject to separate regulations. This means that their underwater sections have to be inspected every few years. We have to pay the shipyard for this service, and each time we have to go cap in hand to the Ministry of Culture for special funding. Independently of this regular

servicing, however, the Museum's staff has drawn up a programme of restoration and conservation of the *Dar Pomorze* and *Soldek*. We have sent in the relevant applications and taken numerous other steps to obtain funding for this purpose, but to date we have received nothing. Here, the situation is serious, especially as the proposed restoration programme allows for regular inspections of the underwater hull sections of both vessels. I am happy to relate that last autumn we did finally manage to get a subsidy for docking the *Dar Pomorza* and carrying out essential repairs. What does the future hold for these ships? Again there is uncertainty, which is not being assuaged by the recent crisis that has hit the Polish economy; moreover, people are arguing for the preservation of a number of other historically important vessels.

It is perfectly clear that a museum's infrastructure can only develop in line with the expansion of its collections and the increasing knowledge and competence of its expert staff. Our Museum gives them every encouragement to raise their qualifications, many of whom have done so within the framework of international programmes financed by the EU, such as NAVIS, MarMuCommerce, Lagomar, Emarcon and Machu, to name but a few. This has enabled quite a sizeable group of our museum people to work closely with specialists from foreign maritime museums, to participate in conferences and to carry through joint programmes, including virtual exhibitions and scientific research.

For the PMM to function successfully in the new Polish reality, changes to the employment structure have had to be made. In the last dozen or so years new departments have come into being, like marketing and promotion, economic analyses, computer servicing, structural and aid programmes, and investments.

The new economic reality has forced the Museum's staff to see visitors in a new light. To increase the number of visitors and the income from ticket sales we organise more than 20 temporary exhibitions each year at the Museum's headquarters and its branches. We have no objection to presenting parts of our collection abroad. The last time we did so was in 2008, when we exhibited a set of paintings depicting port life at the Port Museum in Bremen. We also have other ways of encouraging more visitors to come – in the summer season the Museum is open every day and for longer than usual, that is, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

One aspect of our activities that we treat very seriously is our relationship with maritime enthusiasts. Almost uniquely, the PMM has as many as three 'Societies of Friends' – that of the Museum itself, of the *Dar Pomorza*, and of the *Soldek* museum ship. We also have good contacts with other societies like the Cape Horn Brotherhood, the Association of Shipbuilding Engineers and the Association of Ships' Captains.

As a sign of our concern for the development of aquatic museology in Poland, the PMM organises – alone or jointly – biannual conferences of maritime and riverine museology. The ninth one was held in Gdańsk and Gdynia in 2008, and the next one will take place in Kołobrzeg in 2010. As a result of these meetings, a number of new museums devoted to rivers and one maritime museum have already sprung up.

Just before concluding, I would like to tell you that next year our Museum will be celebrating its golden jubilee. It was founded by the Society of Friends of the Maritime Museum. That this was located in Gdańsk was due not only to the determination of the Society's members, but also to the atmosphere of expectation, that something very worthwhile – the pride of the region – was about to come into being. And it has become just that. Fifty years ago we started out with nothing. Now we can boast a collection of nearly 50 thousand items, not counting the books and other items in the library collection or the scientific documentation.

And now to end with, I would like to say that we at the Polish Maritime Museum in Gdańsk have taken full advantage of the new political and economic climate in Poland. If we had not taken certain risks, the possible consequences of which we were fully aware of, we would not have achieved the results that are there for all to see. All our contacts, both old and new, with foreign museums have enabled us to gather together a highly competent, well-qualified team. As a result we have been able to take our place as equals in international research programmes. We are still availing ourselves of in-service training at foreign museums, where we are learning the well-trying ways of running a cultural institution in a market economy, particularly when it comes to administration, marketing and promotion. We are interested in educational activities and in how a museum's role in society is shaped. We observe new trends, which are often a stimulus for our own original ideas. We feel that the world of modern museology is open to us and that our knowledge is worth sharing with others.