

Our Castlemania

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A dozen or so years back when walking down the street of Camden Town in London I looked at the offers of a local real estate agency. To my surprise, I noticed that a tiny flat in London cost almost the same amount of money as a castle in Scotland, just like the castle as shown in Roman Polanski's film *Cul de sac*, which is set in the romantic scenery of the Scottish coastline. That castle is inhabited by George, a writer and, as we learn, also a war hero. He lives there with Theresa, a trophy wife of the old veteran and a lovely addition to the prestigious property. After a while we discover that the wife is cheating on her husband with a friend's son, while George, when confronted by an intruder in his house, turns out to be a coward and a conformist whose grotesque attitude is in clear contrast with the monumental property he's purchased.

When on the topic of proud and ridiculous inhabitants of castles who wish to fit in but do not, it is worth having a closer look at the scene described by Curzio Malaparte in *Kaputt*:

I was sitting at a table with Frank, the 'German king of Poland' at the Wawel Castle, the ancient castle of

Polish kings in Krakow. Frank was sitting opposite me in a chair with a very high and stiff backrest as if it were a throne of the Jagiellonian dynasty or the Sobieskis. He seemed to be truly convinced that he was the incarnation of the royal and knightly traditions of Poland. Naïve pride was glowing on his pale, full cheeks and the face where the aquiline nose signified vanity and insecurity. [...] ‘My only ambition,’ said Frank while resting his hands on the edge of the table and leaning backward, ‘is to raise the Polish nation to the honorable place in European civilization, make this nation with no culture...’¹

The governor’s offensive and false words about the nation with no culture do, however, find their target in the complexes that are present in Poland. We have culture, we keep repeating to ourselves, we have writers, musicians, films... In a recently made commercial to popularize our country, a bunch of celebrities such as Natalie Portman, Robert Duvall or Jean Michel Jarre paint a pretty historical and cultural picture of Poland.

I recall the reply Malaparte gave Hans Frank after Frank introduced himself as the “king” of Poland: “I have spoken to many kings and dined in their castles and palaces but never heard one say: I’m a king. [...] ‘You are right,’ Frank said. ‘A true king never says I’m a king. But I’m not a real one.’”²

¹ C. Malaparte, *Kaputt*, Warsaw 1962, p. 73.

² *Ibidem*, p. 69.

Hans Frank could say he wasn't a true king in a true castle. Today we've lived to see that castles too have ceased to be real.

There are many places like that in Poland. Torzym is a town near our western border. When driving from Germany one passes by a structure resembling a stocky Medieval castle. There are defensive walls, a small tower and a lake with an island. It's an inn called *Chrobry*. Its name, that is of the first Polish king, is to remind international clientele for whom it might be the first stop in Poland about our noble ancestry. Many years ago I used to have lunches there with other bus passengers, I was amused by the dish called *knight cutlet* which in fact was an ostrich cutlet. Did our ancestors take a liking to ostrich meat once they returned from the Crusades?

For over 20 years now there have been tourist buses, trucks and individuals coming to the restaurant at the border. Customer reviews of that place vary from embarrassment to sentiment. Here are two internet comments: "I've always been amazed by such buildings as the Chrobry Inn. One must allow their imagination to run wild or have plenty of courage to build this kind of defensive castle in the city center by a busy intersection. A castle building with a true defensive tower and walls. The whole thing made of blocks, possibly granite ones. The structure leaves one feel amazed. In the basement there is a restaurant which is just ordinary. The food falls short of average and the menu is not diversified. The service is average as

well. Everyone, both customers and staff are in a hurry because the place is frequented by visitors on the way to or from Germany. One can hear a mixture of Polish, Russian and sometimes German. The interior resembles the Medieval times. Guest rooms are upstairs. Overall, it is rather tacky and kitsch. It is only curiosity and hunger that can get people to pay a visit there. The area is very interesting from a tourist point of view. There are lakes, forests and mushrooms. From here it's only 30 kilometers to the soon-to-be-not German border.”

“When hitting the road I'm glad that 30 kilometers from the border I will eat hot borsch and my favorite croquet stuffed with cabbage and mushrooms. I wish I could do it more often. On the way back to Germany I take home a whole bucket of this delicacy. Next Sunday I'm going to travel to Poland and I'm already looking forward to having a break at the Chrobry Inn. It's nice that I can have a smoke there too as it's no longer that obvious for the addicts. Once we visited the place with our dog and she was spontaneously presented with a tasty piece of meat J The price and offer is real. I recommend this place.”³

What drives Poles at the turn of the 21st century to maniacally build fantastic and kitsch castles made of hollow and granite blocks? According to *Gazeta.pl*⁴: “Casimir the Great would be so proud of us! The tradition of resurrecting castles goes back to ancient times. Forts, after being

³ See *Gastronauci.pl*, <http://www.gastronauci.pl/3849-zajazd-chrobry-torzyn> (19.09.2011).

⁴ “Boom na średniowieczne zamki” *Bryła.pl* (*Gazeta.pl*), 24.01.2011, http://bryla.gazetadom.pl/bryla/1,85301,8947874,Boom_na_sredniowieczne_zamki.html (24.01.2011).

looted by enemy forces, were supposed to be brought back to their previous condition. Yet, many remained ruins for years and even centuries. Recently people have reminded themselves of them and took to renovating or even building them from scratch. The question remains, however, what is reliable reconstruction and what is merely a fantasy of an architect? It seems that Poland is undergoing yet another post-war castle boom. There is no rule regarding the region that is building, reconstructing or restoring most vigorously. For instance, castles have recently been erected in Mazovia (Gostynin), Podlasie (Tykocin) and the Kielce region [sic!] (Bobolice). Zagłębie (the lower castle in Będzin), Greater Poland (the fort on Przemysł Hill in Poznań) as well as Opolszczyzna (Chrzelice) will soon be added to the list which is getting longer and longer.”

Is this a manifestation of the resurrected Sarmatian spirit? Or perhaps it's a threat that makes us hide behind the fake walls of yet another Kamieniec or Zbaraż? A castle is a defensive building surrounded by an impassable wall. It is a fortress placed to guard the borders or to control trade routes. The castle is a fortress not only meant to defend people against an invasion from outside. Frequently, it is also a prison which keeps its inhabitants away from any contact with the outside world. It seems that football stadiums built for the Euro2012 Football Championship have become a contemporary reference to this castle syndrome. On the one hand, they tower over cities as symbols of power and wealth; on the other hand, their inaccessible walls, resembling fortress walls, are symbols of fight.

From these walls, just like in the times of a siege, the black tar of hatred is being poured down. Insults that used to be directed at enemy soldiers are now directed at players and fans of the other team. They are accompanied by the applause of the democratically elected authorities comfortable in their VIP lounges. There is spitting and kicking in the stands and bloody fights outside the stands. This is a performance that is the substitute for war.

The Polish Catholic Church often refers to the castle tradition. It's the tradition of "the bulwark", the state of a permanent war with dissenters. Both the liturgy and the language used by the Church replay the feudal relations for which the Medieval times were ideal. God is Lord and King; the faithful are his subjects, but often knights as well. "The knights of the Immaculate One." Every now and then we also get calls of the most radical catholic circles for proclaiming Christ as King of Poland, i.e. de facto restoring a monarchy in our country. In this case it would also be a very special case of theocracy that wasn't even practiced in the country ruled by the Crusaders. This idea is reflected in the famous monument of Christ the King in Świebodzin which resembles a statue of an ancient ruler from *The Lord of the Rings* rather than the Jesus we know from the Holy Gospel. It is no accident that the outer edges of pews in the Licheń basilica are designed to look like the Hussar wings. The faithful sitting in those pews are automatically transformed into an army. The Licheń basilica is the quintessence of Polish kitsch but there are more interesting examples too, for instance the Holy Roch

Church in Białystok. The building was designed in 1926 by Oskar Sosnowski and its form refers to a defensive borderland castle. The building is placed on a hill which clearly towers over the rest of the neighborhood. The church is surrounded by a wall with four corner towers resembling defensive fortified towers. In comparison with the dummies made of blocks, this reinforced concrete structure is not pretending to be anything else; yet, it refers quite successfully to the baggage of national myths and fantasies which might today be regarded as more or less harmful.

It can't be a coincidence that it was in this symbolic place that a plaque dedicated to the victims of the Smoleńsk catastrophe was unveiled in January 2011. Polish royal, knight and castle obsessions emerged to the fullest after the catastrophe when in the overall confusion the hurried decision was made to bury the presidential couple at the Wawel castle in order to make them equal to the divine chosen ones. Is this a reference to the knighthood traditions of our ancestors? According to professor Mikołajko: "We are a post-peasant society; most of us are descendants of serfs who lived like beasts burdened with loads far greater than they could bear. They hated their masters but it was only in the crude and cruel way that they could release that hatred."⁵

Does the hatred of masters show now in deforming their imaginary settlements? Or perhaps the vengeance lies in

⁵ Aleksandra Klich talks to Zbigniew Mikołajko, "Bóg z instrukcją obsługi Użyj i wyrzuć", Wyborcza.pl, 27.12.2010, http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,8863908,Bog_z_instrukcja_obsługi_Użyj_i_wyrzuc_.html?as=3&startsz=x (19.09.2011).

soaking idyllic inns and castle taverns with kitsch seasoning? Do the descendants of serfs feel historical satisfaction when they hold wedding receptions and First Communion parties in hotels posing as castles? We find shelter in the old; we feel safe there. Even big shopping centers, such as Manufaktura in Łódź or Stary Browar in Poznań dazzle with their quasi-vintage style.

“We are celebrating today because every nation needs its symbols,” said Ryszard Grobelny, the mayor of Poznań while standing on the town hall stairs. “Every nation needs its events, places, people; it needs something to refer to in history and in the present times.” The mayor believes that the national symbol should also become the royal castle which is currently being reconstructed in its Renaissance version on Przemysł Hill. “Poznań is a Piast city and we can’t forget about that. Poznań needs this kind of symbol in order to show that it once was the capital of the Polish Kingdom,” mayor added.⁶

How on earth is the violently protested and hideous Gargamel-style castle that has nothing to do with history going to become such a symbol? The mayor fails to explain. At the same time, in the center of Poznań while this monstrous monument of kitsch is being erected, the true cultural and historical heritage of the city, i.e. the post-industrial architectural complexes of Old Gasworks and the Slaughterhouse, are being neglected. It turns out that it

⁶ “3 Maja w Poznaniu. Gorące święto mimo zimna”, Gazeta.pl, 3.05.2011, http://poznan.gazeta.pl/poznan/1,36037,9532356,3_Maja_w_Poznaniu__Gorace_swieto_mimo_zimna.html (19.09.2011).

is much easier to refer to ancient history, the short rule of King Przemysław rather than the recent tradition known from the TV series titled *The longest war of contemporary Europe*. This preposterous example of intellectual laziness and lack of aesthetic awareness is, unfortunately, not isolated in our country.

We prefer putting up dummies that are to transcend, replace or even often cover up our true history and tradition. Is this the fantasy and moodiness that Gombrowicz toyed with in *Possessed* when outlining the worn-out cliché of a romantic novel with an indispensable castle?

“So, why did you come out?” asked Walczak all of a sudden. “You intended to see the castle, didn’t you,” he figured out suddenly. Following the professor’s gaze he saw marshes right behind the forest and then a few kilometers away an accumulated mass of walls and two corner towers in the shadow of the main castle structure with a tilted roof. More or less from the middle of the buildings sprung the tallest tower he had seen before on the way from the station. Now and then would he see black holes of narrow windows, chipped bare walls that were filled with haughty, still solitude. More closely, the castle looked even more powerful and somehow more fantastical...⁷

A castle as a moody, curiosity and fear-enticing decoration is also portrayed in *Pan Tadeusz*:

⁷ A. Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz, book II Castle*, v. 114–128, za: <http://www.pantadeusz.com/index.html>.

The galloping train was rushing towards the meadows, when the Count caught sight of the castle and checked his horse. It was the first time that he had seen the castle so early, and he could not believe that these were the same walls, so wonderful a freshness and beauty had the early morning imparted to the outlines of the building. The Count marveled at so new a sight. The tower seemed to him twice as high, for it rose up above the early mist; the tin roof was gilded by the sun, and beneath it shone in the sashes fragments of the broken panes, breaking the eastern beams into many-colored rainbows; the lower stories were wrapped in a mantle of mist that hid from the eye the cracks and huge nicks. The cries of the distant hunters, borne on the winds, echoed several times against the castle walls; you would have sworn that the cry came from the castle, that under the curtain of fog the walls had been restored and were again inhabited.”⁸

It is ironic then that the Horeszkos’ castle suffered the same fate as most castle ruins that remain to this day: “No one wished to take the castle, for a simple gentleman could hardly afford the cost of maintaining it.”

Has the “noble status” ended in Poland and therefore we show that we can afford to do what our ancestors couldn’t? What was in the mind of the creator of an extravagant building in the form of a gigantic castle ruin in the Kashubian village of Łapalice? Piotr Kazimierczak,

⁸ Ibidem, *book I Farm*, v. 276–277.

a furniture manufacturer from Gdańsk, once he obtained the permit for a 170–square-meter detached house in 1994 took to building a 5,000-square-metre castle! The castle has 12 fortified towers and is surrounded by a three-meter tall concrete defensive wall. Currently on maps and in tourist guides it is presented as a bizarre tourist attraction.

Poland's Castlemania is a topic that is both fascinating and problematic, mixing spirituality and materiality, history and modernity, social and individual categories, pathos, aiming for beauty and kitsch. The topic that some believe to be an invisible element of our everyday life is the cause of embarrassment and shame for others. This mixture of contradictions might be synthetically described as an eternal Polish struggle to find the adequate form for our lives. Before the war there were some attempts to create a national style based on the Zakopane fashion. At a later stage was an interesting incorporation of modernism. After the war, social-realism arrived with its doctrine of socialist content in the national form, crude multi-block modernism and a total misinterpretation of post-modernism which clashed with the trauma caused by regime transformation.

Due to its historical conditions, Poland is a country and Poles are a people in a permanent search for appropriate forms of social, philosophical and aesthetic life. All civilizational projects that have created these forms were usually brutally stopped, destroyed or degenerated. It re-

sulted in such trivial details as the shape of railway and road routes, urban and stylistic chaos in cities or the complexes of the civilizational and spiritual nature. It also, or perhaps mainly, refers to sacral buildings which have become the only area in architecture that is not bound by the requirements of panel building. The lack of style and form or, in other words, naïve exuberance, which is the result of low aesthetic awareness of both the ordering and performing party is yet another wound inflicted on our everyday landscape.

New Polish castles, while popping up like mushrooms, are monuments to our cultural indolence, a manifestation of our child-like Polishness, turned away from life and incapable of creating a modern form and content. Luckily, apart from building castles there is a different life in Poland too...

Translated by Justyna Chada