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The Town Hall in Szczytno (1936–1937)

The Town Hall in Szczytno is one of those buildings which, until recently, remained on the margin of interest of architecture historians and there were only a few who noticed its existence at all. The main reason for this was the very time the structure was created, which was connected with a the several-year-long rule of the Third Reich and that, in turn, automatically damped down any possible interests. Now that more than fifty years have elapsed from the end of the tragic days of World War II, more and more scientists – including Polish ones – are becoming interested in the works of those times. Past emotions and time distance allow us to take an objective and the same time critical look and to place the works of that epoch in a broader cultural context.

The very title of the present elaboration obliges us to present at least a sketchy description of this structure. The Town Hall in Szczytno (Ortelsburg) was erected in the years 1936–1937 according to the design of Kurt Frick, architect from Kaliningrad (Królewiec)¹. It was created at the time when many of the towns of East Prussia, destroyed during World War I, were rebuilt. New town halls were built not only in Szczytno but also in Olsztyn, Gabin, Wystruć, Biskupiec Reszelski, Alembork, Frydłąd, Nidzica, Olsztynek, Ełk, Gołdap, Ejdkuny, Gierdawy and Labiawa².

The Town Hall was erected on the plan of the old foot of the Teutonic Order castle from the 14th century

which was the seat of the district order administrator. The castle was situated by the lake Jezioro Duże Domowe and even today we can see its ruins which form a square opened to the town hall courtyard. The Town Hall itself consists of three wings surrounding a yard with a tall (46 metres high) tower built asymmetrically in the south-east corner. The tower is located in front of the elevations of the adjacent wings which emphasizes its massive character. In the south in the lower part it has three rows of small windows above which there are only narrow shooting windows providing some more light to the staircase. On the top floor there is a clock with four dials one on each elevation, inside there are two bells from the year 1937 which are driven by an electric mechanism striking every quarter of an hour as well as every hour. The tower is covered by a four-pitch roof. In the lower part of the tower's eastern elevation on the same level as the second storey of wings there is a large balcony belonging to a room that was supposed to be the mayor's office. The par-



Fig. 1. Town Hall in Szczytno, view from the east (photo: J. Salm)

Il. 1. Ratusz w Szczytnie, widok od wschodu (fot. J. Salm)

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¹At the turn of 2000/2001 there was an exhibition devoted to this architect: Kurt Frick. Architekt aus Ostpreußen. 11. November 2000–04. März 2001. Kulturzentrum Ostpreußen im Deutschordenschloß Ellingen. The exhibition was prepared by Eckart Frick. Quoted after: Jan Salm, *Kurt Frick i inni, czyli zapomniana architektura Prus Wschodnich*, „Borussia” 24/25, Olsztyn 2001, p. 89–100. I would like to express my gratitude to Jan Salm for lending me this publication and indicating other sources and materials for this topic.

² Jan Salm, *Ratusze Szczytina. Przyczynek do przeobrażeń przetrzynnych miasta w pierwszej połowie XX wieku*, „Rocznik Mazurski”, vol. IV/1999, Szczytno, p. 68.



Fig. 2. Town Hall in Szczytno, view from the south (photo: J. Salm)

Il. 2. Ratusz w Szczytnie, widok od południa (fot. J. Salm)

ticular wings have various body heights and sizes following examples of medieval structures and they are covered by two- or four-pitch roofs. The whole building is surrounded by a dry moat. The courtyard is approached through the northern wing.

Currently the Town Hall is the seat of the Municipal Authority Office in Szczytno and it serves its purpose perfectly as it had been planned for a town with a population of 25 000 although at the end of 1933 Szczytno together with the army had 13 500 residents and at the end of 1944 – 15 100³. At the moment the building has no typically known Nazi symbols, therefore, its architecture does not evoke any emotions or associations with the Third Reich period although its program perfectly met all the ideological requirements of that period. The factors such as the location of the building on the borderline with Poland, origins, history and even the name of the town together with the Teutonic Order castle were advantageous for its purpose – the fact often emphasized by mayor Armgardt in his diaries – and it constituted a visible manifestation of the Nazi ideology. The very architecture of the town hall was supposed to ‘constitute the symbol of historical existence of the German civilization in East

³ The information is taken from the typescript of Ms. Monika Ostaszewska, custodian and director of the Masurian Museum in Szczytno which is situated in the building of the Town Hall. The author based her elaboration on the accounts by Bruno Armgardt, the mayor in the years 1933–1935, included in the monograph of Kreis Ortelsberg, published in Germany in 1957, edited by Max Meyhoefer.



Fig. 3. Ruins of the castle, view from the lake (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 3. Ruiny zamku, widok od strony jeziora (fot. J. Dobesz)



Fig. 4. View from the town hall tower on the ruins of the Teutonic Order Castel and the lake (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 4. Widok z wieży ratusza na ruiny zamku krzyżackiego i jezioro (fot. J. Dobesz)

Prussia’⁴. Thus, the town hall was erected on the ruins of the Teutonic Order castle which, especially from the perspective of today, was a specific kind of barbaric intervention and destruction of the historical structure of the original construction. At the same time this place was historically the town centre. Situated on a peninsula between two lakes, it was the beginning of the east-west axis along which the town developed starting from a market settlement of a street-like character which was located between the castle and a trade route. At first, the settlement was the main street of the town, i.e. the former market place and next to it was Market Street (Marktstrasse) – now the name of the street is Odrodzenia Street.

The possibility of integrating the new architecture of the town hall with relics of the Teutonic Order castle was a great advantage. At that time, the architecture of ‘cloister castles’ was also used in the case of very important and prestige buildings – three huge elite schools for the young staff of NSDAP: ‘Vogelsang’ in Eifel (1936–1938, project by Clemens Klotz from

⁴ *Ibidem*.



Fig. 5. Balcony of the town hall tower (photo: J. Salm)

Il. 5. Balkon wieży ratuszowej (fot. J. Salm)

Köln)⁵, Ordensburg in Budowa (Crössinsee) near Złocień in the Pomorze District (1936–1939, project also by Clemens Klotz) and the school in Sonthofen in the territory of Allgäu (1936–1937, Hermann Giesler)⁶. A graduate from the ‘academic’ college in one of those ‘cloister castles’ was supposed to crown his studies by the stay in real Ordensburg in Malbork for six months, which was to be rebuilt for this purpose by Clemens Klotz⁷. All those three centers were, similarly to the town hall in Szczytno, based on the late-Gothic foundations which consisted of – according to the pattern of old castles – several building complexes situated around a tower dominating over the whole area.

Ornaments and details which were used by Frick in his town hall are also very interesting. Apparently, they seem to serve only as ornaments, but in fact, they represent characteristic elements of the Nazi architecture.

The tower balcony seems to refer to the Gothic Italian tradition of town hall balcony-like pulpits which are called *arengo* or *arengario* from where authorities addressed their speeches to people or sentences were pronounced.

In Rome the most famous fascist *arengario* was the balcony of the 15th-century Palazzo Venezia from where Mussolini himself made his bombastic speeches. Also from this place on October 2, 1935 Duce ordered a general mobilization before making an assault on Abisynia⁸.

⁵ M.G. Davidson, *Kunst in Deutschland 1933–1945. Eine wissenschaftliche Enzyklopädie der Kunst im Dritten Reich*, Bd. 3/1, Architektur, Tübingen 1995, Bd. 3/1, p. 508–509, figs 356–365.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 487, figs 231–242.

⁷ Cf. Helmut Weihsmann, *HJ- und BDM-Heime, Schulungs- und Ordensburg. Bauten zur Erziehung und zur Herstellung einer „rasenreinen“ Volksgemeinschaft*, [in:] H. Weihsmann, *Bauen unterm Hakenkreuz. Architektur des Untergangs*, Wien 1998, p. 82–83.

⁸ Tim Benton, *Reden ohne Adjektive. Architektur im Dienst des Totalitarismus*, [in:] *Kunst und Macht im Europa der Diktatoren 1930 bis 1945*, Kat. zur XXIII. Kunstausstellung des Europarates, London–Barcelona–Berlin 1996, p. 36–37.



Fig. 6. Wooden bay window in the southern elevation of the southern wing (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 6. Drewniany wykusz ratusza w południowej elewacji południowego skrzydła (fot. J. Dobesz)

Equipping the town hall tower in Szczytno with the balcony would not have been worth paying attention to if it had not been for Hitler’s particular passion for delivering speeches on ‘tribunes’ of this kind. In 1935 Speer built a big balcony – just for this purpose – in the elevation of a new part (Eduard Jobst-Siedler, Robert Kisch, 1928–1930) of the Reich Office which was situated in Palais Borsig (1875)⁹.

None of the above mentioned examples can be compared with two twin buildings from München – which are called ‘Führerbau’ – built in the years 1933–1937 according to the design by Paul Ludwig Troost¹⁰. Each of these

⁹ In Süddeutscher Verlag, Bilderdienst there is a photograph of Hitler on this balcony who is greeting the crowds gathered below. The photograph is published in the book by Dieter Bartetzko *Illusionen in Stein. Stimmungsarchitektur im deutschen Faschismus. Ihre Vorgeschichte in Theater- und Film-Bauten*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1985, p. 48.

¹⁰ Paul Ludwig Troost (1878–1934) was an architect who was extremely valued by Hitler. At Hitler’s request he carried out only the objects designed for the party, mainly in Munich. After his death, his wife Gerdy Troost carried out the works which he had not completed. She was also preoccupied with her own successful career, but she greatly contributed to the creation of his legend although he was only a mediocre architect; cf. M.G. Davidson, o.c., Bd. 3/1, p. 572.



Fig. 7. Corner bay window in the northern wing (photo: J. Dobesz)
 Il. 7. Narożny wykusz-okno w skrzydle północnym (fot. J. Dobesz)

objects received eight 'Führer balconies' which were situated even between toilets in order not to disturb the harmonious symmetry of the elevation¹¹.

Quotations from historical German architecture, references to 'heimatstil' and the usage of wood as a 'Nordic' material constitute other elements of the town hall which connected it with the trend of the Third Reich architecture. The whole building has a modern construction made of reinforced concrete; town hall cellars also performed the function of shelters and the elevations were covered with carefully made texture plaster in the colour of ochre, which resembles the Renaissance or Baroque plaster. The balustrade of the tower balcony, a bay window in the southern elevation of the southern wing, a corner bay window in the northern wing and the entrance porch to the southern wing (to the mayor's flat) from the courtyard side all constitute the elements made of wood. The forms of bay windows and the porch are explicitly archaized. In the inner part of the southern wing there is a session

¹¹ W. Nerdinger, *Baustile im Nationalsozialismus: zwischen Klassizismus und Regionalismus*, [in:] *Kunst und Macht...*, p. 324. The author proves Troost's incompetency as an architect. He was unable to solve the problem of the staircases which were too extended and the problem of interior disposition. The stairs lead to a blind wall and visitors who intended to reach Hitler's audience room were forced to perform a few complicated turns before they could find their way there.

chamber which comprises two floors and which is connected with the mayor's office situated on the first floor of the tower. Originally, the room was decorated with wood-panelling made of grey spruce. In the northern part of the room there is a gallery which is open to the interior by means of three arches and it is available from the second floor of the wing; the gallery serves as a place for meetings and sessions or for the orchestra as well as for the choir. The arrangement of the interior of the room along with the gallery resembles historical solutions from the Middle Ages period or modern times. The door from the hall on the first floor – in the form of a portal made of grey marble with a lintel with features of simplified classicism – leads to this room. Double doors are made of spruce wood and each wing of the door is ornamented with three bas-relief panels which show scenes connected with fishery, hunting, beekeeping, farming and forestry.

The entrance to the courtyard is closed by means of a two-wing gate with bars made of wrought iron and adapted to the mediaeval style. Above the entrance there is a coat of arms of the city made of stone and two lanterns made of wrought iron.

The main entrance to the town hall, which leads from the courtyard, was situated asymmetrically in the eastern wing. It is preceded by a shallow terrace with a balustrade made of wrought iron and lanterns also made of iron. The jambs – which are covered with a very flat arch of the entrance – are framed with stone blocks inserted into the wall. Above, there is a coat of arms of the city with elements made of iron. There are visible remnants of removed elements which probably referred to the Nazi symbols. Very deep jambs and the vault of the entrance are ornamented with graffiti – German motives of stylized leaves of oak. Double glass doors are adorned with bars made of wrought iron.

The staircase, which leads to the two higher floors, was provided with more light by means of a huge window, circa 4.5 m wide extending from the pedestal up to the cornice of the elevation. The window consists of 24 rectangular parts with wooden frames; each window has a pane with dimensions of 1.8 × 1.1 m. Twelve panes are ornamented with heraldic representations and symbols of various crafts and trades forming a circle 70 cm in diam-



Fig. 8. Main entrance to the town hall (photo: J. Dobesz)
 Il. 8. Główne wejście do ratusza (fot. J. Dobesz)

eter. The image of the circle is achieved by means of a pressed concave relief; the image of the area was created partly as a powder metallurgy compact mixed with engraving. Asymmetrical arrangement of ornamented areas suggests that originally all panes had decorations, but some of them could have been removed because of their Nazi references.

Nowadays, the Town Hall in Szczytno does not arouse any negative emotions and it is no longer associated with the period of the Third Reich. There is a legend connected with the Teutonic Order castle; however, not with its real and actual functioning but with the role ascribed to it by Henryk Sienkiewicz in his famous novel *Krzyżacy* (*Teutonic Knights*). It was in this castle that a famous Polish knight Jurand from Spychów fought bravely with the Teutonic knights and also here his daughter Danusia was kept as a prisoner. These novel characters were animated in 1960 by Aleksander Ford in his film entitled *Krzyżacy* which was the first wide-screen movie in Poland to be watched by as many as 30 million people. The whole subject was mythologized mainly due to the talents of Sienkiewicz and Ford; the novel is still an obligatory school book and the film is watched by young people until today. The legend of the Middle Ages combined with historical facts and the remains of the castle architecture is much stronger – and also more attractive – than the history of the Third Reich, especially from



Fig. 10. Staircase window pane (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 10. Kwaterna okna klatki schodowej (fot. J. Dobesz)



Fig. 9. Staircase glasswork (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 9. Przeszklenie klatki schodowej (fot. J. Dobesz)

before the war and therefore, the Town Hall architecture in the public awareness constitutes only an ‘addition’ to the ruins of the castle. In the Masurian Museum, which is located in the former mayor’s flat and on the town hall’s ground floor, there is an exhibition of props, costumes and set designs for the famous Ford film – the exhibition has been extremely popular with visitors until today. In a similar way, there are other Teutonic Order castles which are even better preserved, especially the renovated castle in Malbork. It is perceived by the public through the novels written by Henryk Sienkiewicz. The same applies to the Grunwald field which is situated several kilometers from Szczytno. In 1960 a perfectly designed spatial monument of the great battle was erected there – it constitutes not only a meaningful proof of the victory of King Jagiełło and Prince Witold over the army of the Teutonic Order knights under the leadership of the Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen but it is also the last – hopefully – stage in the fight of Polish monuments with German monuments. This victorious battle was of great significance – although different – for both the Polish and German nations. The 19th century saw the reconstruction of the destroyed castle in Malbork which since then has often been a venue of various national festivals, among which a particularly popular one was the procession in historic clothes and costumes in 1902. As early as at the end of the 19th century in Germany the Teutonic Order



Fig. 11. Staircase window pane (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 11. Kwaterna okna klatki schodowej (fot. J. Dobesz)

started to be perceived in a much more positive reevaluated light while Polish people quite the contrary – these two perceptions prevailed in the subsequent years and were adopted by the National Socialism¹².

As far as the monuments connected with the battle are concerned, the first one was created as early as in 1411 on the initiative of Heinrich von Plauen, the successor of the Grand Master. It was built as a commemorative chapel that was opened on 12 March 1413. A year later the chapel was pulled down, in 1416 it was re-built and then destroyed again during the years of the Swedish invasion 1656–1657. At the end of the 1910s people in Poland started collecting money for redemption of the Grunwald estate in order to erect a commemorative church there. In response to that, ‘Deutschen Ostmarkenverein’ decided to build Bismarck’s¹³ tower on a hill situated 2 km away. Neither of these two projects was completed but on the day of the 500th anniversary of the battle a statue was unveiled in Cracow – it was funded by Ignacy Paderewski and designed by Antoni Wiwulski. At the turn of 1939 the statue was pulled down by the Germans and in 1976 it was rebuilt according to the reconstruction project by Marian Konieczny. In the

same year the surviving stone fragments of the statue were transported to the Grunwald battle field where they were arranged into the so called ‘monument feature’, which, in turn, became a partial fulfillment of Paderewski’s wish: he wanted the statue which he had founded to be put on the fields of Grunwald, which at the time of partitions was impossible¹⁴.

The Germans responded in 1926 by erecting a huge mausoleum in Sztymbark (Tannenberg) at the place where the field marshal Paul von Hindenburg had fought a victorious battle with the Russian Narew army in 1914. In reality there was only a small skirmish at that place, while the major victorious fights took place many kilometers away to the south; however, history required some mystification. Thanks to the new myth, they wanted to balance the defeat which took place 500 hundred years ago with the present victory. The fact that Hindenburg defeated the Russians and not Polish people did not matter much although it must be admitted that there were few Russians who also took part in the Grunwald battle. However, the Polish and Russian people were treated in the same way as the Slavonic nations¹⁵.

On August 7, 1934 Hitler made a speech there in memory of the field marshal’s death and on October 2, 1935 there was a ceremony of putting the sarcophagus with the body of Hindenburg and his wife in the previously prepared crypt whose entrance was flanked by stone monuments of huge soldiers (4 m tall) made by Paul Bronisch¹⁶ who were supposed to be ‘on eternal guard’. The project of the sarcophagus and the extension of the foundation were also made by Krüger brothers. Starting from 1935 Tannenberg became Reich-sehnenmahl¹⁷.

The structure was shaped as a huge octagonal stronghold with eight tremendous towers in the middle of the particular segments of the wall. It started a series of other creations – already in the times of the Third Reich. Stylistically, they referred to the traditions of defensive knightly castles and medieval fortresses such as the town wall in Visby (Gotland) or Castel del Monte in Apulia¹⁸. Ideologically, monuments-mausoleums followed the example of Neue Wache by Schinkler in Berlin, which was later reconstructed by Heinrich Tessenow (1930–1931) into the Monument of the Dead¹⁹.

In January 1945 the sarcophagus with the body of Hindenburg and his wife was transported to Potsdam and then it was hidden in a salt-mine near Bernterode in

¹⁴ Jan Adamczewski, *Mala encyklopedia Krakowa*, Kraków 1997, p. 405–406.

¹⁵ J. Tietz, o.c., p. 14.

¹⁶ Paul Bronisch (born 1904) after 1923 studied Sculpture in Wrocław Academy under the supervision of Theodor von Gosen. In 1943 he was commissioned by Speer to elaborate sculptures at Wilhelm Square in Poznań; see: M.G. Davidson, o.c., Bd. 1, p. 435.

¹⁷ M.G. Davidson, o.c., Bd. 3/1, p. 516, figs 414–427.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Eva and Helmut Börsch-Supan, Günther Kühne, Hella Reelfs, *Berlin. Kunstdenkmäler und Museen (Reclams Kunstführer. Deutschland, Bd. VII)*, Stuttgart 1977, p. 107–108; Marco De Michelis, *Heinrich Tessenow: 1876–1950; das architektonische Gesamtwerk*, Stuttgart 1991, p. 303–309.

¹² Jürgen Tietz, *Das Tannenberg-Nationaldenkmal: Architektur, Geschichte*, Kontext Berlin 1999, p. 14.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

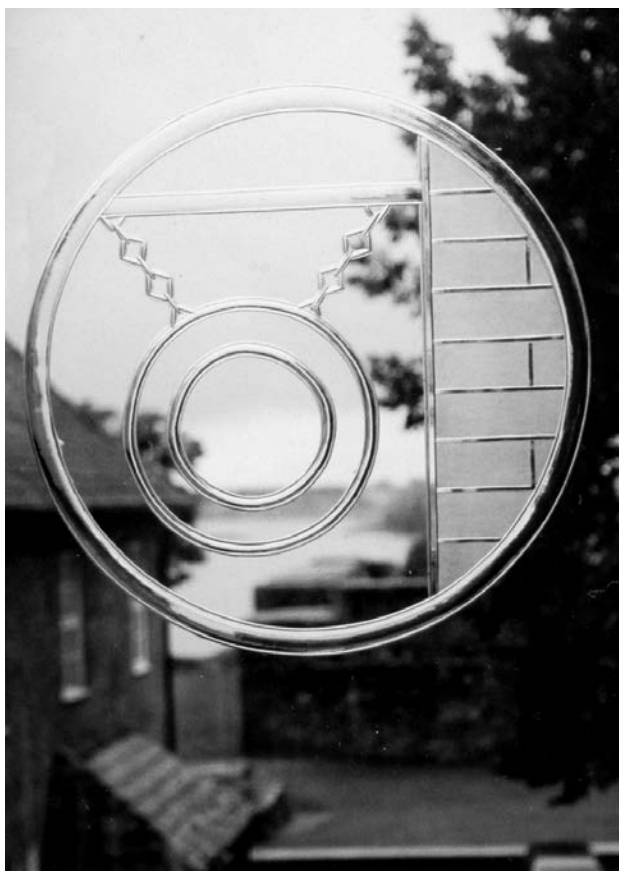


Fig. 12. Staircase window pane (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 12. Kwaterna okna klatki schodowej (fot. J. Dobesz)

Thuringia, from where a year later it was taken to Marburg and on 25 August 1946 it was put in St. Elizabeth's church²⁰.

In 1945 the Tannenberg Mausoleum was partially damaged by the retreating German army, namely the entrance tower and the main tower above the Hindenburg tomb were blown up. The mausoleum bricks were later used in the reconstruction works of the destroyed houses in neighbouring towns while the granite plates from the courtyard and tomb were used in 1949 in the construction works of the seat of KC PZPR (Main Committee of Polish Communist Party) as well as for the building of the Red Army Gratitude Monument in Olsztyn²¹.

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Nowadays social acceptance for the works of art, including architecture, comprises the whole of the cultural heritage of the present Polish lands. Regardless of the fact that the works were created by the representatives of cultures that were strange or hostile towards Poland, whether they came into existence hundreds of years ago or only several years ago – they are now accepted, restored and admired. It is so in the case of the Grand Master castle in Molbork and many other fortresses of

²⁰ J. Tietz, o.c., p. 201.

²¹ Tomasz Darmochwał, Marek Jacek Rumiński, *Warmia, Mazury. Przewodnik*, Białystok 1998, p. 35.

this dangerous order – they are eagerly visited by tourists and constitute the subject of interest of scientists. We can now observe a similar phenomenon in the case of works erected by the Third Reich architects – they do not evoke any hostile emotions or fears and are simply treated as works of architecture.

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Architecture of the Town Hall in Szczytno designed by Kurt Frick is an example of a work of art which is free from ideological connotations such as national emblems or banners and as such it functions in the public awareness exclusively as a building that is usable, serves its purpose and does not evoke any political emotions. Emotions of this kind are possible in the case of objects which were places of mass execution or strong cult such as concentration camps, monuments or mausoleums. Immediately after the war these emotions were so strong that people took revenge on them and destroyed them. Today we feel sorry for them because they constituted interesting forms and could be objects of tourist interest, for instance, old fortifications or Hitler's bunkers.

Some objects-symbols did manage to survive the war, although they were damaged to some extent, for example the building of the Reichstag. It was not pulled down, probably thanks to the fact that it was situated beyond the Russian occupation sector of Berlin, which was later made the capital of the German Democratic

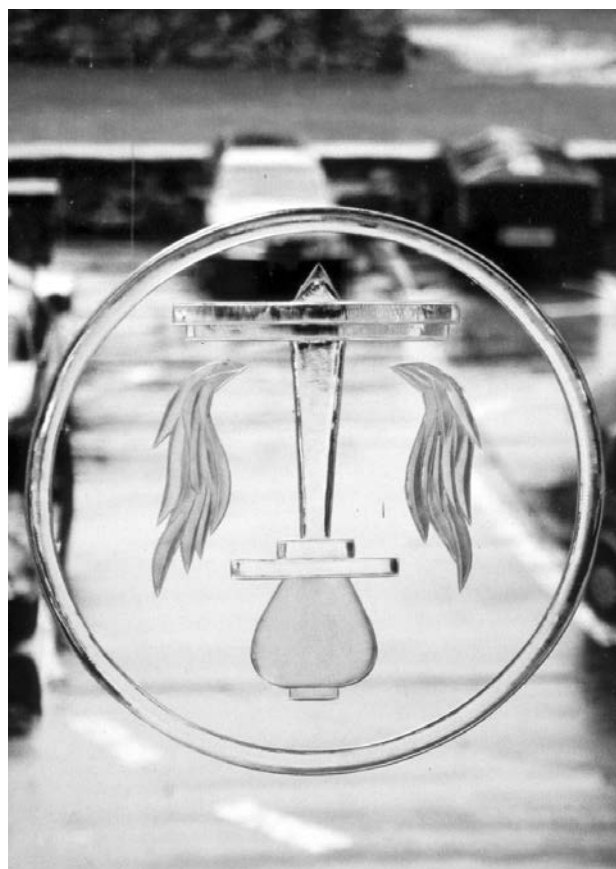


Fig. 13. Staircase window pane (photo: J. Dobesz)

Il. 13. Kwaterna okna klatki schodowej (fot. J. Dobesz)

Republic. The authorities of West Berlin rebuilt this object and after Germany was united they gave their permission to Christo 'to cover it', for which the artist had waited for about 25 years; subsequently, the building was given an extraordinary dome designed by Norman Foster and it now attracts crowds of tourists. In this way, the Reichstag – the old ominous symbol of Prussia – was turned into an object that is friendly and

attractive constituting another element of a colourful mosaic of European history.

The Town Hall in Szczytno presents interesting forms and its architecture has become an indispensable element of the city landscape constituting its historical part which nobody is going to pull down. On the top of the tower we can see the red-white and green flag of Szczytno which replaced the old flag featuring the swastika.

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Ratusz w Szczytnie (1936–1937)

Ratusz w Szczytnie, wzniesiony w pobliżu ruin krzyżackiego zamku, powstał w okresie III Rzeszy. Składa się z trzech skrzydeł otaczających dziedziniec i wieży, a jego architektura stanowiła demonstrację germańskiej siły, adresowaną do państwa polskiego, leżącego za pobliską granicą. Dziś te konotacje straciły swą siłę, choć nie tak daleko znajduje się pole bitwy pod Grunwaldem oraz miejsce po niemieckim mauzoleum Tannenberg, budowli będącej w swoim czasie historycznym kontrapunktem dla grunwaldzkiej klęski, rozebranej

przez Polaków po II wojnie światowej. Obecnie ratusz stanowi wygodną siedzibę lokalnych władz, a w jego podziemiach gości wystawa związana z filmem „Krzyżacy”. Podobnie stało się w Berlinie – tamtejszy Reichstag, dawniej groźny symbol pruskiego państwa, zwieńczony przed kilku laty niezwykłą kopułą Normana Fostera, stał się obiektem przyjaznym i atrakcyjnym, przyciągającym tłumy turystów, kolejnym kamykiem w barwnej mozaice historii Europy.

Key words: Town Hall, monument, preservation

Słowa kluczowe: ratusz, zabytek, konserwacja