

## **Solidarity and Identity in Memorial Crosses in Gdańsk**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to draw attention to small and monumental crosses erected in in Gdansk, the cradle of Solidarity. The crosses, standing usually by the roads or on the hills, can be perceived as the sign of solidarity with the dead and alive as well as with the idea of freedom. They are also a visible sign of Christian identity. The inspiration for such interpretation of memorial crosses has been drawn from the analysis of polarized opinions of the portal Trojmiasto.pl users on memeorial crosses standing by roads and streets. The article also shows, giving an example of a northern Polish city, the process of sacralization of public spaces in Poland which has been taking place for three decades.

**Keywords:** solidarity, identity, memorials, crosses, Gdańsk, Poland, sacralization

### **Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to draw attention to various crosses erected in recent years in Gdansk, the cradle of Solidarity. Memorial crosses are common in many Christian countries. Apart from traditional wayside crosses erected in crossroads in the countryside there are crosses standing in front of Catholic churches commemorating „Holy mission” held every 10 years in parishes. Cemeteries in Christian countries have always been filled with symbols of Jesus`s Crucifixion. These three uses of the cross will not be considered. In contemporary cityscape there can also be distinguished two other unique kinds of the religious symbols in public space in Poland. Firstly, there are lots of small crosses expressing pain after the death of the beloved killed in road accidents and secondly, monumental crosses built in the „Solidarity years” of 1980-1981 and after the end of the communism era. Those crosses, standing usually by the roads or on the hills, can be perceived as the sign of solidarity with the dead and alive as well as with the idea of freedom. They are also the visible sign of Christian identity of Polish society.

The inpiration for such interpretation of memorial crosses has been drawn from the analysis of polarized opinions of the portal Trojmiasto.pl users on memeorial crosses standing by roads and streets. In 2011 municipal authorities decided to check the opinions and the mood of the public by the means of Internet survey before they put forward their decision to remove illegal crosses from the surrounding areas of the traffic lanes in Gdańsk. The collected opinions on spontaneous memorial crosses express both disagreement and tolerance on presence of religious symbols in public spaces. One can read 614 comments of the Internet users on this issue which sometimes change into a multithreaded discussion. The paper focuses on two themes called solidarity and identity.

The article also shows, giving an example of a northern Polish city, the process of sacralization of public spaces in Poland which has been taking place for three decades<sup>1</sup>. Numerous symbols of crosses observed in Gdańsk prove one of three assumed kinds of sacralization i. e. the visual one leading to sacralised landscape characterised by many objects in the city- and townscapes as well as rural landscapes originated from Catholicism<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> I distinguish nominative sacralization observed in the growth of patronage of schools, cities and streets and temporal sacralization seen in rites at public places and pilgrim ways, too. Contemporary changes of Polish cultural landscape also

At the beginning of the article the symbolism of the cross is presented followed by a historical outline of Gdansk and Poland helping to understand the determinants of erecting crosses in the city. Then the ideas of solidarity and identity are shown in the presentation of both monumental crosses and the phenomenon of roadside crosses. Conclusions close the paper.

### **Symbolism and tradition of erecting crosses**

In ancient times the cross was a tool to execute a death sentence in a humiliating way. The condemned were put on the cross standing on the hills or in the roads leading to towns in order to frighten passers-by out of committing a crime. The same happened to Jesus Christ as it is written in the Bible. That is why the first Christians did not use the cross but the sign of fish. The following historical events made the cross popular: the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, the discovery of the original Cross by his Empress-mother, St. Helena and the outbreak of the Crusades (Tyack, 1896, p. 3).

In the beginning in western Europe as well as in the Slavic world crosses were used as a symbol of a new victorious religion. The first cross is said to have been raised in the Kingdom of Northumbria by St. Oswald, the King and Martyr, on the eve of the battle of Hevenfelth in 635. Originally a sign of the cause for which Oswald sought to reclaim his realm, the cross became a memorial of the Christian victory (Tyack, 1896, p. 37). As the time went by the tradition to erect symbols of faith was accepted in other spheres of public and private life in towns and in the countryside.

In Poland wayside chapels and crosses became popular all over the country in the 17th century because of Counter-Reformation and better life conditions in rural areas (Janicka-Krzywda, 1999, p. 7). The following century the presence of wayside crosses and chapels in Polish landscape arose almost to the national symbol and this was the reason why they were often destroyed during the Partition period and Hitler's occupation.

Contemporary memorial crosses are the continuation of the old tradition of expressing religion to the outer world. Christians believe the death on the cross was not the end of Jesus's life but led to his Resurrection on the third day and consequently to eternity. Every believer's life is perceived similarly. Thus, the cross is a sign of hope for the victory of life upon death, goodness over evil.

The material sign of the cross helped to maintain faith in hard times of political and religious oppression. They were also an important factor of forming national and Christian identity in Poland. What makes it different from the crosses erected in the Middle Ages and later is the material form, not the change of symbolism and the need of expression which has been the same throughout the centuries: faith, hope, love, and pain.

It should be assumed that the formation of any sacred space (here identified with religious landscape) develops under two main circumstances: on the one hand - the need to express faith and the possibility to do it - on the other hand. The former one is the internal factor and depends on the theology and the tradition of a particular denomination while the latter one (possibility) is closely related to politics, economy and social life.

One side of the mentioned factor forming the religious landscape – a possibility to do it – has changed much because of the civilization progress in construction industry. Contemporary crosses marking important events for a society are usually not wooden any more but made of steel and are much higher – maybe as high as possible? One should not forget that monumental crosses have been funded by a bigger group of citizens.

There has also been a different trend well observed in Gdańsk and all over the world for about 20-30 years. Petersson (2010) and Everett (2002) noticed spontaneous memorialisation referring to the placing of fresh flowers, lighted candles, religious symbols and photos at the sites of motor vehicle accidents and homicides. Zelinsky (2010, p. 275), describing American religious landscape, mentions that „with depressing frequency, one comes across small crosses, floral displays, photos, and inscriptions memorializing the family member who perished in an accident at that point in the highway”. Unlike monumental crosses built in Poland as collective enterprises with local governments' involvement those small memorial crosses are personal and mostly illegal.

An American folklorist (Everett, 2002, p. 14) states “roadside memorial markers offer a meeting place for communication, remembrance and reflection, separate from *everyday*”.

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refer to specific cult of John Paul II expressed for instance in the street naming and papal monuments which Czepczyński (2008, p. 168) defined as „John-Paul-the-Second-ization”.

Memorial crosses help people who unexpectedly lost a friend or a family member to cope with emotional shock, with intensive thoughts about the fatal place and the beloved person gone forever.

The possibility to make such memorials, especially with religious symbols, was stopped in Poland during the communist era. It does not mean there were no small roadside crosses but much fewer and they were removed more often than today. It seems people used to obey the rules because they were scared of the regime unwilling to any traces of religious faith in socialist society. The survey conducted recently in the U.S.A. proves the influence of regional Departments of Transportation politics on religious roadside landscape (Dickinson, Hoffmann, 2010). It can be concluded that possibility to express somebody's feelings by means of the cross in public space depends not only on economy (living standards, civilization progress) but on state politics as well.

### **Political and denominational changes in Gdańsk and Poland**

The first written document mentioning Gdańsk records the life of St Adalbert dating back to 997. The first sacral building in Gdańsk was probably a wooden chapel from around that year. The defensive and urban complex as well as a port started to form in Gdańsk in the second half of the 10th century. Gdańsk received civic rights in 1263. The first parish church was St. Nicholas's Church completed in 1190. The number of churches in the Old Town and its surroundings needs to be stressed: by the mid of 15<sup>th</sup> century eighteen Roman Catholic churches had been built. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century till 1945 the predominating denomination in Gdańsk was Protestantism, mostly Lutheranism. In 1871 the population of Gdańsk was composed of 69,7 per cent of Evangelic, 26,3 per cent of Catholic, 3 per cent of Jews and 0,4 per cent of Mennonites (Cieślak, 1998, p. 507). Earlier (between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century) and later (after World War II) most of the population was Roman Catholic. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the period of "golden age" of Gdańsk started. Gdańsk was one of the wealthiest and most significant cities in Europe. The religious freedom, tolerance and openness turned the city into a true melting pot of nationalities and denominations. Beside Lutherans and Mennonites, also the Jewish Community had opened their place of worship, the Grand Synagogue, built in the 1860s. In the late 18th century Gdansk was annexed to Prussia. For two short periods Gdańsk was a formally independent state as the Free City of Gdańsk (1807-1813, 1920-1939).

Many humanists conclude that the Polish Catholic Church has played an important role in Polish national identity throughout history. Three factors may account for this historical role, as Herbert (2001, p. 39) writes: "the disappearance of the Polish state, leaving the Catholic Church (and the Polish language) as central repositories of national identity throughout the nineteenth century, the continued denial of Polish independence under Soviet domination, and the virtual monopoly of the Roman Catholic Church on Polish religious life since 1945". Similarly Casanova (1994) claims that Church-nation identification occurred between 1795 and 1914 when the Roman Catholic Church was the only institution capable of infiltrating three Participants' borders.

After 1945 everything but the moral role of the Catholic Church changed in Poland: the population, politics and economy. World War II marked a change from a relatively plural religious situation to one in which a single church became dominant. In the period between the two World Wars besides Roman Catholics there were 12 per cent of Orthodox, 10 per cent of Greek-Catholics, 10 per cent of Jewish and 2,6 per cent of Protestant (Jackowski, Soljan, Bilka-Wodecka, 1999, p. 35). Thus, although historically Poland had a large Jewish population, after World War II, the border changes and the destruction of Polish Jews, Poland was left with a 95 per cent Roman Catholic population, with small Greek Catholic, Ortodox, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim minorities (Herbert, 2001, p. 14). Similarly, the denominational structure of Gdańsk changed. In the beginning of the 21st century there are 93,0 Catholics per 100 inhabitants in Gdańsk diocese (Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Poland, 2011, p. 207). This nearly homogenous society began to develop its own cultural landscape.

After 1945 there began a new chapter in the Polish history under the influence of socialist politics, which ended in 1989. For several decades following World War II the development of places of worship was restricted whereas the needs were increasing. The area of Gdansk expanded from 11 km<sup>2</sup> in 1945 to 262 km<sup>2</sup> in the seventies (over 20 times) and the population grew 4 times from 117900 to 458100 in 2005. Up to 1989 the state authorities following the communist ideology hampered or in many cases prevented the development of sacral architecture and conduct of any religious activity. After World War II the number of Roman Catholic parishes in Gdańsk grew from 17 in 1946 to 57 in 2005. Certain positive changes in the relations of the state and the Church in Poland took place after the 1970 events and after the strikes in the years 1980-1981.

Gdansk and neighboring Gdynia witnessed the tragedy of bloody events of December 1970, when shipyard workers took - on behalf of the whole nation - the rebellion against the government of the People's Republic of Poland.

In August 1980 Solidarity trade union was born preparing chain reaction changes in politics of other eastern European countries. It was Gdańsk that became the cradle of "Solidarność" which was to transform the map of Europe. In 2003 Boards with 21 postulates from August 1980, by a decision of the UNESCO, entered the list of World Heritage as a unique document, with exceptional social and humanitarian values, having influence on the history of Europe. Contemporary historians consider the "Gdansk August" of 1980 the breakthrough that triggered the process of decomposition of the post-war order on the Old Continent. The mass strikes staged at that time, led to signing the famous August Agreement at Gdańsk Shipyard. This formed a crack in the block that gradually led to the emergence of a new political map of Europe. Gdansk earned another image. It became the city the world will always associate with free trade unions, "Solidarity" and Lech Walesa, the winner of the Nobel peace prize and the first President of the III Republic of Poland.

Nowadays Gdansk is an important centre of maritime economy, international trade, culture, tourism and religious life. Because of the unique 20th century history of Gdańsk the phenomenon of memorial crosses, so common all over Poland, can be understood only when it is viewed from the historical perspective. The homogenous denominational structure of a very religious society and political conditions especially after the Great Transformation are the reasons of the explosion of the symbols of the cross in public space in Poland.

### **Monumental crosses**

Nearly 18 months of the Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity" activity (from August 1980 until Martial Law in December 1981) had enormous impact on Polish landscape. First monumental crosses in Poznań and Gdańsk, so numerous now in Poland, symbolise veto against the previous communist regime. They expressed hope the socialist system would collapse for good. On the other hand, those planted in the first years after the Great Transformation in 1989 were the sign of victory of the idea of freedom and joy after the end of the communist era. Crosses in Włocławek and Katowice are examples of such new monumental crosses built in the first half of the 1990s, too.

The Memorial of the Fallen Shipyard Workers in 1970 (Pomnik Poległych Stoczniovców 1970) was unveiled in December 1980 near the entrance to Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. It commemorates 42 or more people killed during the coastal cities events in December 1970. It was created in the aftermath of the Gdańsk Agreement and is the first monument to the victims of communist oppression to be erected in a communist country. The monument consists of the three steel 42-metre high crosses. Inscription in four languages explains contemporary multidimensional sign of the cross perceived not only as a symbol of faith but as a universal sign of memorialisation of the dead, the sign of hope for the alive and the sign of opposition against injustice („A token of everlasting remembrance of the slaughter victims. A warning to rulers that no social conflict in our country can be resolved by force. A sign of hope for fellow citizens that evil need not prevail”). Nowadays there is European Solidarity Centre under construction in front of the monument (fig. 1).

**Figure 1. The Memorial of the Fallen Shipyard Workers in 1970. Source: author`s archive**



The Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers expresses the idea of solidarity in a metaphorical and literal sense. It is a sign of solidarity with the people who died to help future generations live in a free state. Commemoration means approbation. The monument stands in front of the historical shipyard where Solidarity movement was observed during famous strikes in August 1980.

Monumental crosses in front of the shipyard in Gdańsk express also solidarity with the dead and with their political ideas. According to Webster`s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1990) solidarity means unity of a group or class that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards whereas identity is sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing, oneness. The Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers in 1970, informally called a solidarity monument or three crosses, shows the complex interplay of identity and solidarity.

There are also memorial crosses illustrating pure religious identity rather than national identity. So called millennium crosses come from the Great Jubilee in 2000 which was a major event in the Roman Catholic Church. Like other previous Jubilee years (counting from 1300), it was a celebration of the mercy of God, forgiveness of sins, thanksgiving for the Redemption in the name of Jesus Christ. Millennium crosses in Poland are usually erected on the hills of a village, a town or a city. Local governments and Catholic authority cooperated in these initiatives. They are often majestic constructions (fig. 2).



**Fig. 2. The millennium cross in Gdańsk. Source: Author`s archives**



The 16-metre-high millennium cross in Gdańsk was built on the top of the hill called Grodzisko or Gradowa which is the best viewpoint in the city. The cross towers over the city. It should be noted that both the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers in 1970 and the Millennium Cross in Grodzisko share same localisation characteristics. They have been erected in the centre of Gdańsk, in public space, on places of historical interest frequently visited by tourists. The former is visited in a mass because it symbolizes the Solidarity movement which enabled the victory of freedom to Poles. The latter and the newer one do not have any religion-statehood connotation. It is a representation of Christian identity and Christian tradition of celebrating the anniversary of Jesus`s birth. Both crosses-monuments are well-lit, which makes them visible from far even at night.

The practice of highlighting objects in the city from public money is always a clear sign that a building or a monument must be precious to inhabitants and worth remembrance despite darkness often hiding shapes and ornaments in night hours.

Not all inhabitants approve of fixing the sign of a cross out of places devoted to cult. As it was mentioned in the introduction, one can read on Trójmiasto.pl portal the collection of opinions on roadside crosses in public space. Opinions on spontaneous memorial crosses put beneath the article titled „Will Gdańsk fight against crosses?” (Moritz, 2011) express both disagreement and tolerance on the presence of religious symbols in public space.

Despite the fact the Internet survey deals with the problem of illegal roadside crosses, the discussion appeared afterwards went far beyond it. One of the Internet users suggested the problem of after-accident crosses may soon turn into fight against any representations of the cross. Here is one of 614 comments left on Trójmiasto.pl portal in which a person mentions the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers in 1970 composed of three crosses:

*„I wonder when I will hear the demand to remove crosses from the square in front of the shipyard. Is it a question of years or maybe months? In 1989 we did not defeat communism. We lost against its second incarnation”.*

On Trójmiasto.pl portal both sides of the conflict - people who protect various kinds of crosses in public space and opponents sometimes speak bluntly. Comments comprise the deformation of politicians` names, political parties and denominations as well as invectives of different sorts. Such forms of statements show that the subject arouses radical emotions in the society. This is evidence, as Nawratek (2005, p. 198) predicted, that ideological battlegrounds come into prominence nowadays all over the world.

Both monumental crosses prove pure religious (Christian) identity of a city. “Identity presumes a significant measure of similarity with one`s contemporaries but it also relates to what we have in common with earlier generations and those to come” as Schlesinger and Foret noticed (2007, p. 128). Monuments in Gdańsk acknowledging the Christian heritage can be also perceived as a visual answer of “the traditional problem of what could be a European identity and memory” (Schlesinger and Foret, 2007, p. 128). They are Polish voices of a debate on “Christianity and the idea of Europe”. Two mentioned monuments mirror religious hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church in post-war Gdańsk, too.

### **Roadside crosses**

In Gdańsk places of spontaneous memorialization are signed with small wooden or steel crosses (fifty-fifty) reminding cemetery crosses planted by graves. Moritz (2011) gives some examples of such commemoration by the city roads. There are two white crosses in the outskirts of Gdańsk in a place where two teenagers driving a scooter were killed in a car accident involving a drunk driver. People are leaving flowers and candles on or in the foot of such crosses. In Poland from time to time one can see a collection of a motor helmet by a cross like in Trakt św. Wojciecha St. memorializing a motocyclist who was killed in an accident. Above-mentioned crosses and a vast amount of others are illegal ones marking a personal tragedy.

There are always exceptions to a rule. A high cross and a board standing in Gdańsk-Kokoszki was erected after the bus accident in 1994. As many as 32 people were killed and 43 injured when a bus hit the tree. Some Internet users argue it is not fair that big tragedies and famous people have their monuments in public space whereas ordinary citizens must not. Does it mean we are not solidary to everyone?

What is the scale of the phenomenon of roadside crosses in Gdańsk agglomeration? Observations of two main roads made in 2012 prove the spontaneous memorial crosses have already become a part of the cityscape. There are 6 places marked with crosses (four single crosses, a group of two and even a collection of three) along S6 express road that bypasses the cities of Gdynia, Sopot and Gdańsk (nearly 40 km). Regional road no 468 is another important road in Gdańsk transportation system. It joins the centres of Gdynia, Sopot and Gdańsk (20 km). A driver can see four spots with crosses. One of them, erected in November 2011 near Gdańsk University Campus, is presented in fig. 3. Other memorial places consist of single crosses.



**Figure. 3. Memorial crosses in Grunwaldzka Alley in Gdańsk. Source: Author's archives**

After the analysis of some of 614 comments on memorial crosses in Gdańsk it is clear the discussion is an occasion to exchange opinions on morality, religious values, authorities, tolerance and even politics. I distinguished three main streams of the discussion focused on spatial, ideological (both political and religious facet) and cultural aspects of memorial crosses standing by the roads. They also reflect the kind of argumentation for or against crosses. Similarly Everett (2002, p. 14) noticed that roadside crosses have become an integral part of vernacular commemorative tradition that “involves the complex interplay of politics, culture and belief”. The Internet question asking whether such crosses should be removed or not bears fruit of answers in which contemporary social and ideological dispute on civil rights and public space access and its quality is visible. Opinions also illustrate the idea of solidarity and identity connected with the symbolism of the cross. The evidence of respectful behaviour of the society towards illegal memorial crosses is proved by cleanings undertaken in green belt in Gdańsk and other Polish cities. While according to season grass is mowed down or snow removed to keep traffic safe, memorial crosses are left as I have observed for 3 years. In July 2012 I also witnessed a respectful behaviour during the electrical works in Grunwaldzka Alley (fig. 3). Workers dug out two crosses and set them aside. On first days of September I noticed the crosses replanted half a meter away from the original place. Some statements in favour of crosses refer to the respect for families of victims, their means of expressing love and pain after the beloveds` death in accidents. One must be respectful for that way, people say, if it is helpful for others. Fighting against any crosses, including those illegally and spontaneously erected, Internet users say, is even „unworthy of us, Poles”.



Roadside crosses are undoubtedly a part of cultural identity for Poles. This is a conclusion drew from many Internet users` comments. Here is another of 614 comments left on Trójmiasto.pl portal:

„Roadside crosses have stood by road crossings for centuries. I do not know what is wrong with them? They are an element of our beautiful history and tradition, so why stop it?”

Nevertheless there is still a problem with small memorial crosses estimation. Not all the people see high roadside crosses and memorial crosses in the same way, as a part of „beautiful tradition”. Some people notice we should not be proud of them. The tolerance of crosses erected close to traffic lanes is a result of respect for such a form of mourning although the opinions on after-accident crosses are nearly equally divided: 52% votes in favour of the crosses and 48% votes against the crosses (Moritz, 2011). Some people compare such crosses to illegal advertisement, eyesore, improper religious symbols in public space. The other group argues that they are the best sign of accident prevention, a part of good tradition and even the citizens` right to express bereavement if somebody feels this.

### Conclusions

Religious landscapes reflect diversity, negotiation and usually mirror religious hegemony (Everett, 2002, p. 12). Polish cultural landscape bears evidence of the heavy influence of Catholicism which has become dominant since 1945. Case study of Gdańsk mirror contemporary sacralization processes taking place in Poland. As I mentioned for over 40 years the internal policy of the state affected religious life. Development of parish churches, wayside chapels and crosses, and undoubtedly monumental crosses, was hampered and waited for better times to come in the 1980s. The Great Transformation in 1989 enabled social needs to be expressed in public space. Erection of religious objects is a part of a democratic process the Republic of Poland has entered. Numerous memorial crosses erected in places of accidents as well as two monumental crosses in Gdańsk are a visible sign of Christian identity and solidarity with the dead and alive. Monumental crosses seem to continue a well fixed part of Polish tradition of erecting wayside crosses in meaningful places. Unlikely spontaneously erected memorial crosses mirror diversity and negotiation. They are ephemeral element of cityscape. Only for half of Internet users of local portal there is space for them and, in my opinion, for solidarity and identity they reflect.

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