

Controversial case: Can the Jesus statue from Swiebodzin shape perceptions about Poland?



Foto: Błażej Szydzisz

Great Britain has its own queen, whereas Spain has the king. Recently Poland has its own king – Christ the King, who has an impact on the image of its country, just like every monarch, regardless of whether it is wanted or not.

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From a perspective of surrounding landscape the giant Christ statue does not make such a huge impression

Swiebodzin is a small town that numbers 22 thousand residents and is situated in the southern-west of Poland. Although the etymology of its name suggests wealth, it features a variety of historic monuments and tourist attractions. Swiebodzin however decided to take its fate to its own hands.

When on the 6th of November 2010 building of Christ the King was completed, everything changed in the small town of Swiebodzin. Not only did the local and national media start talking about the Polish town, but also world mass media reported on the largest figure of Jesus in the world. However, not only did its size arouse media interest, but also the fact that the brand-new monument was similar in design to the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro which was recognized in 2007 as one of the seven wonders of the world.

Disparate rivalry

There are many differences between both monuments, and it is not only technical parameters of these figures (Table 1). The statue of Christ the Redeemer was constructed in the 1930s and the idea of its creation was to commemorate the 100 year centenary of independent Brazil. Famous sculptor Paul Landowski was responsible for the project and its realization, which was possible thanks to money from the Brazilian government.

Table 1. Polish-Brazilian rivalry for the largest statue of Christ in the world

Country	Poland	Brazil
City	Swiebodzin	Rio de Janeiro
Number of inhabitants	22 thou.	6 mln
Name of figure	Christ the King	Christ the Redeemer
Data of revealing	21.11.2010	12.10.1931
Initiator of the project	Priest Sylwester Zawadzki	Hector da Silva Costa
Sculptor	Mirosław Kazimierz Patecki	Paul Landowski
High of figure	33 m (+3 m metal crown of thorns)	30 m
Arms-span	25 m	23 m
High of elevation	16,5 m mound	7 m pedestal
Estimated cost	3 mln zł	3,5 mln \$

Source: compiled for this story

On the other hand, the statue in Swiebodzin, erected in November 2010, supposed to be an expression of Christ the King's care of the town, but paradoxically it was not acknowledged as an official patron saint of the city due to objection of Congregation for Divine Worship. The initiator of Polish Christ is local priest Sylwester Zawadzki, who thanks to his engagement in erection of other sacred buildings in Swiebodzin even gained a nickname 'priest the builder'. There is no detailed information about the sculptor of this statue, except the fact that he runs a small business in countryside Przybyszów. The construction itself was financed by generous worshippers from the town, but also thanks to donors from whole Poland and other countries. The mayor of town ensures that no public money was used and the contribution of Swiebodzin was only to give a ground for the building.



Photo: Błażej Szydzisz



Source: PAP/Lech Muszyński



Source: miziaforum.wordpress.com

Landscape around the Christ the King is not so attractive as in Brazilian Rio

Differences indicating the symbolic gap between these two statues did not distract foreign mass media from comparing Christ from Swiebodzin to this from Rio de Janeiro. Most frequently compared are the facts emphasized that the Polish figure of Christ is the largest in the world, but in the same time its rivalry with the Brazilian statue was mentioned. For example, popular in Italy, *Corriere della Serra* entitled one of its articles as: *Poland throws down the gauntlet to Rio de Janeiro: our Christ is the biggest in the world* (see Table 2 for other headlines).



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Source: Reuters

The statue of Christ the King - the grandiose dream of a local priest finally came to pass

that “rising over Polish cabbage plains” Jesus figure turns out to be enticement for tourists. They also notice that many residents in Swiebodzin believe that “it will put their town of 22,000 on the map for tourists and Roman Catholic pilgrims and bring in needed money to renovate the historic buildings in the tiny town center”.

Another unfortunate image of Poland may emerge from the person initiating this project. The local priest appears to play the role of manager and spokesman of this enterprise. For example, known for its liberal views, *The Guardian* (having the second largest online readership of any English-language newspaper in the world), concentrates on the activities of the priest, who is going to turn “the economically downtrodden town into a ‘second Czestochowa’ (a reference to Poland’s most popular pilgrimage site and home of the legendary Black Madonna shrine)”. Controversial opinions are presented on *The Guardian* website, which indicates that in Poland there are still a lot of embezzlements, illegal actions and activities inconsistent with real Christian spirit. Priest Zawadzki is accused of “paying workers derisory wages, expecting them to carry out the work for next to nothing as a sign of their faith”. What is more, the daily newspaper also mentions “bringing in inmates from the local prison to work on the project, under an agreement he allegedly hatched with the prison governor”. *The Guardian* reproaches the project for many problems connected with erecting the figure, such as a builder’s accident on a building-site or heart attack of priest-initiator, calling it as a ‘sign of God’s disapproval’. Nevertheless, priest Zawadzki assures in conservative French *Le Figaro*: “it is my life’s work (...) Europe needs such catechism like Christ”. Unfortunately, these statements and comments only intensify foreigners’ opinion of the fanatically religious image of Poland.

It seems that the unveiling of Christ the King figure became an opportunity to focus attention on Poland but not to overcome the stereotype of Poland as an underdeveloped country. What is more, it only strengthens it. ‘Polish Christ’ is situated atop a 16.5 metre mound made of rubble and gravel rising above the western Polish

What does the statue really say about Poland?

The erection of the Jesus figure in Swiebodzin attracted attention to Poland. Unfortunately, the context in which the media portrays this does not present Poland in a favorable light. It confirms rather the stereotypical perception about Poland. American *ABC News* ironically comments that local authorities hope

plains. In addition to this, a bad impression connected with the poor quality of this construction was emphasized by *The Guardian* claiming that “building experts have voiced concerns that the statue's foundations are not deep enough and may fall apart within 20 years”. ‘Polish king’ is erected on a field that was previously wasteland. Today it is surrounded by a hypermarket, petrol station and nearby roads crowded with tracks. In comparison to the statue of Christ Redeemer raised on a 700 metre Corcovado granite hill with a fabulous view of Rio de Janeiro, the importance of the Polish statue simply wanes.

Foreign mass media also takes notice of many controversies that the erection of this figure elicited in Poland. “The project has split Polish society with some expressing pride, others derision, and many Catholics calling for it to be abandoned”, we can read on *The Guardian's* site. Furthermore, the British tabloid the *Daily Mail* cites opinion of a 45-year-old Maciej Czerniewski, who runs a small store in the shopping center opposite the statue. He says he is “deeply embarrassed by it and accused the priest of megalomania. I would prefer to live in a normal country. We have bad roads, bad infrastructure but the biggest Jesus in the world”. Waldemar Roszczuk, editor of the local newspaper *Gazeta Swiebodzinska*, has even been leading a campaign against the structure, which has been compared to the type of communist-era icons that once commanded squares and public places – mentions *The Guardian*. He defined Christ the King as a “monster of a statue which has nothing to do with Christian teaching. It's making us a laughing stock in the whole country”. Such opinion is another argument why many Poles do not identify themselves with the meaning that the erection of Polish statue of Jesus brings.

As befits a country diagnosed by Wally Olins (nation branding specialist) as full of controversies, some residents in Swiebodzin are thrilled by the new business and according to the *Daily mail* “they hope it will bring once believers in this deeply Roman Catholic country”. As the newspaper reports, “they also hope that many Germans - who tend to be much more secular than Poles - will visit simply out of curiosity since the border with Germany is only 45 miles away”. In the same optimistic way, Dariusz Bekisz, the mayor of town, speaks his mind for American *ABC News* – “More people will visit Swiebodzin and leave their money. Some will come for spiritual reasons, others out of curiosity”. He also takes notice of the town's image, “I'm happy because this project will bring publicity to our town, not only in Poland but also from the global media. Other countries show a lot of interest”. But many Poles living abroad are not satisfied with such media buzz about the Jesus statue in Swiebodzin. For example, Kris on American forum describes this idea as comic, adding that he is ashamed of that as a Pole. He sums up the whole concept as “another good reason to become a laughing stock for the civilized world”.

Thus, it turns out that Wally Olins was right defining Poland as a country full of contrasts. “Always when I visit Poland I meet with these contradictions: ones are full of hope, the others full of fear” – this is the way Olins summed up a debate related to the promotion of Poland during last year’s Ad Days (advertisement festival) in Łódź. The case of Jesus from Swiebodzin only confirms such opinion about Poland. An example is the way *The Guardian’s* journalists portray the country. In one of the articles in April’s “New Europe” series, devoted Poland entirely, the case of Christ the King became a starting point to present the current image of the country. The title *World’s biggest statue of Christ symbolises church’s power in Poland* is unfortunately an explicit message sent to the world that modern day Poland is still a fervently Catholic and conservative country.

Table 2. WORLD’S MASS MEDIA ABOUT JESUS STATUE FROM SWIEBODZIN

COUNTRY	MEDIA	HEADING AND HEADLINE
France	Le Figaro www.lefigaro.fr	Poland: the tallest Christ in the world (Pologne: le plus haut Christ au monde)
France	Le Nouvel Observer tempsreel.nouvelobs.com	Giant Jesus statue constructed in Poland, the world’s tallest according to architects (Une statue géante du Christ construite en Pologne, la plus haute du monde selon ses créateurs)
France	Le Point www.lepoint.fr	In Poland the tallest statue of Jesus was inaugurated (La plus haute statue au monde de Jésus inaugurée en Pologne)
Germany	Die Welt www.welt.de	Poland erects huge Christ statue near a border (Polen bauen gewaltige Christus-Statue nahe Grenze)
Great Britain	BBC News www.bbc.co.uk	World’s tallest’ Jesus statue erected in Poland
Great Britain	Daily Mail www.dailymail.co.uk	One Almighty statue: Poles build 167ft Jesus Christ to rival Rio’s
Great Britain	Sky News news.sky.com	Heavens Above: Giant Jesus Finally Finished. A controversial statue of Jesus in Poland, which is said to be the world’s highest, has been completed after a series of delays.
Great Britain	Telegraph www.telegraph.co.uk	Poland to build world’s largest Jesus Christ statue
Italy	Corriere della Serra www.corriere.it	Poland challenge Rio de Janeiro: our Christ is the world’s tallest (La Polonia sfida Rio de Janeiro: Nostro il Cristo più grande del mondo)
Italy	La Repubblica www.repubblica.it	Christ statue the largest in the world (La statua di Cristo più grande del mondo)
Mexico	CNN Mexico mexico.cnn.com	Gigant statue of Jesus Christ in Poland surpass that from Brazil (Una estatua gigantesca de Jesucristo en Polonia supera a la de Brasil)
Spain	El Mundo www.elmundo.es	Christ the largest in the world (El Cristo más grande del mundo)
USA	ABC News abcnews.go.com	Giant Jesus Statue Rises Above Polish Countryside
USA	New York Daily News www.nydailynews.com	Polish town, Swiebodzin, erects world’s largest Jesus Christ statue-bigger than Rio de Janeiro’s
USA	USA Today www.usatoday.com	Giant Jesus statue completed in Polish town

Source: compiled for this story